

Nevada Chamber Music Festival 2024
"Opening Night with Clive Greensmith"
Saturday, December 28, 2024, 7:30 p.m.
Program notes by Chris Morrison

Ludwig van Beethoven: String Quartet No. 16 in F major, Op. 135
(1826, 25 minutes)

Beethoven hadn't composed a string quartet in around a dozen years before the request arrived from his friend Prince Galitzen in 1822 for "1, 2, or 3 quartets." Three years later, in late 1825, Beethoven followed through with the lengthy, complex Quartets Nos. 12-14, with the Quartet No. 15 arriving the following year. After those four large-scale quartets, Beethoven interestingly decided to, comparatively speaking, relax with the smaller, more conventional F major Quartet. Completed in under two months in late 1826, the String Quartet No. 16 was the last major work he completed (aside from the finale he wrote to replace the Grosse Fuge in the earlier String Quartet No. 13). It was given its premiere by the Schuppanzigh Quartet on March 23, 1828, not quite one year after Beethoven's death.

The first movement, marked *Allegretto*, is in a fairly traditional sonata-allegro form. Several brief themes, more like motifs, combine and recombine in elaborate ways, moving easily from tuneful, light-textured homophonic passages to more elaborate counterpoint, from more straightforwardly graceful ideas to some that are more elusive. The second movement *Vivace* is a quicksilver, frequently comic scherzo, with some tricky cross-rhythms and syncopation, in which the two violins, and the team of viola and cello, often seem to work in tandem, exchanging gestures with one another. At one point the solo violin leaps to the fore with a quirky, dancing solo that ascends, then drops back again.

The longest movement of the quartet is the third, another of Beethoven's heartfelt, lyrical adagios that were a mainstay of his late quartets – think of the Cavatina of the Quartet No. 13 and the "Hymn of Thanksgiving" of the Quartet No. 15. Led off by the viola, a lovely hymn emerges with simple step-like motion. Four variations on the theme follow, the second of which moves into darker, almost tragic territory. But then the hymn returns, almost as a wistful lullaby, led by the cello, joined in canonic imitation by the violin.

When Beethoven sent the manuscript of the Quartet No. 16 to his publisher, he included a short note: "Here, my dear friend, is my last quartet. It will be the last; and indeed it has given me much trouble. For I could not bring myself to compose the last movement. But as your letters were reminding me of it, in the end I decided to compose it. And that is the reason why I have written the motto: 'The difficult decision – Must it be? – It must be, it must be!'" The movement as a whole is headed "Der schwer gefaßte Entschluss" (The difficult decision). Under the slow opening chords, Beethoven wrote "Muss es sein?" (Must it be?). We also hear a portentous three-note "knock on the door" motif. But then comes the reply, as the music speeds to a vigorous *Allegro*, and Beethoven writes "Es muss sein!" (It must be!). Amid the high spirits and graceful charm, the question is asked one further, dramatic time before the brightly affirmative answer, as the work concludes with a whimsical *pizzicato* (plucked) passage and a final boisterous flourish.

Monica Houghton: *Epigram*
(2008, 7 minutes)

Monica (Niki) Houghton grew up in Reno. She earned A.B. and A.M. degrees from Harvard University, and an M.M. in Composition from the Cleveland Institute of Music, where she served on the faculty for several years before moving back to Nevada. Her works – inspired by nature, poetry, the visual arts, language, science and world events – have been performed by Nevada Chamber Opera, San Francisco Choral Artists, Tahoe Chamber Music Society, University Chamber Singers, and artists including Dmitri Atapine, Hyeyeon Park, and Albert Lee.

Houghton has written this about her work *Epigram*: "At the beginning of *Epigram* you will hear a three note motive closely related to Ludwig van Beethoven's famous 'muss es sein?' (must it be?) motto, the answer to which 'es muss sein' (it must be) formed the basis of the last movement of his last string quartet, Op. 135. This could be taken to be a serious metaphysical question, yet there is a tale told that Beethoven was in fact inspired by the most mundane of occurrences, namely a man who was trying to wriggle his way out of paying the composer his subscription fee! For this reason, I chose the title word which my dictionary defines as 'a terse, sage or witty, often paradoxical saying.'"

Franz Schubert: String Quintet in C major, D. 956
(1828, 50 minutes)

Schubert's final chamber work, the String Quintet, was completed just two months before his death, in a single month, September (and perhaps early October) of 1828, that also saw the composition of all three of his final piano sonatas – a staggering accomplishment in so brief a time. As with so much of his music, the Quintet was ignored for a long while, and wasn't given its first performance until November 17, 1850. Since then, it has come to be regarded as one of the greatest of all chamber works. Both Mozart and Beethoven, two of Schubert's favorite composers, had also written string quintets in the key of C major. But they added, as most composers have, a second viola to the standard string quartet. Schubert chose instead to add a second cello, inspired perhaps by the examples of Luigi Boccherini and Georges Onslow – giving the work a unique richness of texture.

The first movement is very large in scale, accounting for nearly 40% of the work's total length. It opens with a long crescendo on a C major chord, played by four members of the quartet minus the second cello. After a graceful but harmonically-ambiguous passage, he returns to that crescendo, but transformed, with a D minor chord this time and with the second cello added and the first violin removed. As the movement progresses, Martin Chusig writes, Schubert "presents his harmonies – rather than a memorable, well-contoured melody – without a regular rhythmic pulse," in music of great beauty. The music gains momentum, leading to a second theme, a nostalgia-tinged duet for the two cellos. That latter theme also opens the central development section, which moves through a remarkable diversity of keys, harmonies, and instrumental textures.

It is a testament to the sublime quality of the second movement that both author Thomas Mann and pianist Artur Schnabel expressed the wish to hear this music on their deathbeds. In a ternary ABA form, the Adagio opens and closes with magical, almost unearthly tranquility. The three inner instruments – the second violin, viola, and first cello – play a lovely, lyrical theme, with the two outer instruments – first violin and second cello – outlining them. In between, the music grows tumultuous and tormented, moving into the distant key of F minor. But after this temporary storm, transcendence returns.

The rollicking third movement Scherzo, almost orchestral in breadth, employs the low open strings of the instruments to create a rich sound. The energetic outer sections frame a more somber, restrained Trio, something of a chorale or hymn, introduced by the viola and second cello.

Alternating major and minor modes, the final movement has a lively Hungarian flavor. Once again Schubert features the cellos in duet, with their restrained line contrasted with the lively counterpoint from the higher instruments. What seems as though it might be a lighthearted coda, in true Schubertian style, is momentarily tinged by an allusion to the F minor section of the second movement. The tempo increases, and one is left with the feeling, as James M. Keller puts it, "that danger may lurk behind the trees even in the most pleasant of landscapes."