About the Program

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750):
Fugue No. 16 in G Minor from The Well-Tempered Clavier, Book I, BWV 861 (arr. Förster)

Emanuel Aloys Förster (1748-1823) was an Austrian composer who came to Vienna about the same time as Mozart. Förster was a friend and colleague of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven, and Beethoven turned to him for criticism and advice when composing his first set of string quartets in 1798-1800. Förster composed primarily for piano and for chamber ensembles, and he wrote a number of pedagogical works for piano. He also made some unusual transcriptions, including an arrangement of Mozart's "Jupiter" Symphony for two pianos and an arrangement for string quartet of the complete Book I of Bach's The Well-Tempered Clavier.

The vigorous Fugue in G Minor, in four voices, is built a short and hard-edged subject. Full of a slashing energy, it drives without the slightest relaxation straight to its firm conclusion.

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847): String Quartet No. 2 in A minor, op. 13

Mendelssohn turned 18 early in 1827, a year that was important for many reasons. Already the composer of two masterpieces – the Octet (1825) and the Overture to a Midsummer Night's Dream (1826) – Mendelssohn spent the summer on a walking tour of the Harz Mountains in central Germany and in the fall entered the University of Berlin, where he attended Hegel's lectures. One other event from 1827 had a profound effect on the young composer: Beethoven died on March 26.

Mendelssohn never met Beethoven – he had grown up in northern German cities, far from Vienna where Beethoven lived the final 35 years of his life. But the young composer regarded Beethoven as a god. In the fall of 1827, only months after Beethoven's death, Mendelssohn wrote his String Quartet in A Minor. This quartet seems obsessed by the Beethoven quartets, both in theme-shape and musical gesture, and countless listeners have wondered about the significance of these many references.
The Quartet in A Minor opens with a slow introduction. This Adagio, which evokes memories of Beethoven's Quartet in A Minor, Opus 132, also quotes one of Mendelssohn's own early love-songs, “Ist es wahr?” and that song's principal three-note phrase figures importantly in the first movement. The music leaps ahead at the Allegro vivace, and Mendelssohn's instructions to the players indicate the spirit of this music: agitato and con fuoco. The second movement also begins with a slow introduction, an Adagio that has reminded some of the Cavatina movement of Beethoven's String Quartet in B-flat Major, Opus 130; the main body of the movement is fugal, based on a subject that appears to be derived from Beethoven's String Quartet in F Minor, Opus 95.

The charming Intermezzo is the one “non-Beethoven” movement in the quartet. In ABA form, it opens with a lovely violin melody over pizzicato accompaniment from the other voices; the center section (Allegro di molto) is one of Mendelssohn's fleet scherzos, and he combines the movement's principal themes as he brings it to a graceful close. The sonata-form finale opens with a stormy recitative for first violin that was clearly inspired by the recitative that prefaces the finale of Beethoven's String Quartet in E-flat Major, Opus 127. Not only does Mendelssohn evoke the memory of several Beethoven quartets in this finale, but at the very end he brings back quotations from this quartet's earlier movements: the fugue subject from the second movement is heard briefly, and the quartet ends with the heartfelt music that opened the first movement.

What are we to make of the many references to Beethoven's late quartets in this quartet by the teenaged Mendelssohn? Are they slavish imitation? The effort of a young man to take on the manner of an older master? An act of homage? There may be no satisfactory answers to these questions, but Mendelssohn's Quartet in A Minor – the work of an extremely talented young man still finding his way as a composer – is accomplished music in its own right: graceful, skillfully made, and finally very pleasing.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827): String Quartet No. 15 in A minor, op. 132

Russian Prince Nikolas Galitzin commissioned three string quartets from Beethoven in the fall of 1822 and in the process set in motion the final phase of the composer's creative life. Beethoven completed the first (Opus 127) in the winter of 1825 and began the Quartet in A Minor, but in April 1825 – while composing this music – Beethoven became so ill with an intestinal disorder that his doctor put him on a strict diet and suggested a move to the country. Only gradually did the composer regain his strength, moving to the resort town of Baden where he completed the quartet that July; it was first performed in September.

Each of the late quartets has a unique structure, and the structure of the Quartet in A Minor is one of the most striking of all. Its five movements form an arch. At the center is a stunning slow movement that lasts nearly half the length of the entire quartet. The powerful outer movements evolve out of classical forms (sonata-form and rondo), while the even-numbered movements, lighter in mood, also show some relation to earlier forms (minuet and march). This is a massive quartet – it lasts three-quarters of an hour – but the effect is of a powerful and expressive unity.

The opening movement is in a kind of sonata form, but this is the sonata form that Beethoven had evolved late in his career. Long gone is the clear structural progression of the Haydn-Mozart opening movement; instead Beethoven builds this movement around the contrast of two distinctly different themes. His marking for the movement – Assai sostenuto; Allegro – makes plain the contrast between themes at different tempos, and at the opening Beethoven alternates two principal themes: a slow cantus firmus opening and a steady march-like melody announced by the first violin.

The second movement, in ABA form, conforms outwardly to the classical minuet and trio. The opening of this movement bears a strong resemblance to the opening of the second movement of Mozart's Quartet in A Major, K.464: both make use of a rising unison answered by a dancing figure in the first violin. Beethoven treats this theme canonically, drawing a great deal from these limited means. The trio section brings a drone: the first violinist not only plays the theme high on the E-string but accompanies the melody with the open A.
The third movement (Molto adagio) has a remarkable heading: in the score Beethoven titles it “Hymn of Thanksgiving to the Godhead from an Invalid in the Lydian Mode,” a clear reflection of the serious illness he had just come through and of his gratitude for his recovery. This is a variation movement, and Beethoven lays out a long, slow opening section, full of heartfelt music. But suddenly the music switches to D major and leaps ahead brightly; Beethoven marks this section “Feeling New Strength.” These two sections alternate through this movement (the form is ABABA), and the opening section is so varied on each reappearance that it seems to take on an entirely different character each time: each section is distinct, and each is moving in its own way (Beethoven marks the third “With the greatest feeling”). This movement has seemed to some listeners the greatest music Beethoven ever wrote, and perhaps the problem of all who try to write about this music is precisely that it cannot be described in words and should be experienced simply as music.

After such a movement, some relief is necessary, and Beethoven provides an energetic little march, much in the manner of Haydn. But this suddenly breaks off, and the first violin soars into a recitative that leads directly into the last movement. There is a close kinship between this recitative and the recitative that launches the final movement of the Ninth Symphony, completed the year before. This connection is strengthened when one learns that Beethoven had originally intended to use the finale of this quartet as the last movement of the Ninth Symphony when that symphony was still planned as an all-instrumental composition. The finale of the quartet, a buoyant rondo, seems full of the same mood of transcendence and triumph that marks the Ninth Symphony, and Beethoven rounds off this most remarkable quartet with a Presto coda that drives this music to the ringing, final A-major chords.

*Program notes by Eric Bromberger*