

Humanities Seminars

The String Quartets of Beethoven

Dates and Time:

October 27 through November 17 (four Mondays)
1:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m.

Instructor:

Jay Rosenblatt
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Course Description:

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) was one of the great masters of the Classical and Romantic eras in music, and no genre summarizes his achievement better than the string quartet. In this course, we will examine his sixteen string quartets, spread evenly throughout his early, middle, and late style periods. The focus will be primarily on the music, beginning with the forms and techniques of the classical style that Beethoven inherited and tracing the tremendous changes he brought to music during this time.

In the first class session, I will survey Beethoven's career and music. Topics will include his training and musical background, his important contemporaries Joseph Haydn (1732–1809) and Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791), and the practical aspects of his profession — patronage and publishing. Musical considerations will cover the development of the quartet as a genre, the forms that were in common use, and the expectations of listeners and players. Class sessions two through four will be devoted to each style period — early, middle, and late. The first hour will be an overview of the quartets from that period, while the second hour will consider a single quartet in greater depth.

The class will be predominantly a lecture format, with plenty of opportunity for discussion as well as time for questions. Beethoven's music will be experienced predominantly through recordings, and Dr. Rosenblatt will also illustrate musical details at the keyboard (the ability to read music is not required).

Dr. Jay Rosenblatt is currently Associate Professor of Music History at the University of Arizona, where he has taught since 1995. He has led three Humanities Seminars, covering the operas of Verdi and Wagner, and the life and works of Franz Liszt. His scholarly research focuses on music of the nineteenth century, in particular, the music of Liszt.

Required Text:

Robert Winter and Robert Martin, *The Beethoven Quartet Companion* (University of California Press, 1995; also available as a Kindle edition).

Other Useful Books:

Elliot Forbes, *Thayer's Life of Beethoven* (Princeton University Press, 1991) — revised and updated edition of a classic nineteenth-century biography, with great detail on Beethoven's life.

Joseph Kerman, *The Beethoven Quartets* (W.W. Norton, 2013) — first published in 1966, one of the most detailed and insightful discussions of the quartets (musical knowledge is required).

Lewis Lockwood, *The Music and Life of Beethoven* (W.W. Norton, 2003; also available as a Kindle edition) — good scholarly biography with commentary on the music.

Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven*, 2nd rev. ed. (Schirmer Books, 2001; also available as a Kindle edition) — the finest one-volume biography of Beethoven.

Session One (October 27): Beethoven and the String Quartet.

Suggested reading: Brief biography of Beethoven (many good sources — Wikipedia is fine)
Winter and Martin, “Perspectives” (especially the essays by Kerman, Solomon, and Botstein)

Topics to be discussed:

- Haydn’s and Mozart’s Chamber Music
- Beethoven’s Patrons
- Publishing in the late 18th and early 19th centuries
- Public and Private Music
- Standard forms and practices (sonata form, rondo form, theme and variations, fugue)

Works to be discussed:

- String Trios, Op. 9

Session Two (November 3): First Stylistic Period.

Suggested reading: Winter and Martin, “The Early Quartets”

Topics to be discussed:

- Strategy in Beethoven’s first publications
- Musical Organization of Op. 18
- Why transcribe a piano sonata?

Work to be discussed:

- String Quartet in F Major, Op. 18, no. 1

Session Three (November 10): “Heroic” Period.

Suggested reading: Winter and Martin, “The Middle Quartets”

Topics to be discussed:

- Beethoven’s “New Style”
- Commissions
- Count Andreas Razumovsky
- Ignatz Schuppanzigh

Work to be discussed:

- String Quartet in F Major, Op. 59, no. 1

Session Four (November 17): Late Stylistic Period.

Suggested reading: Winter and Martin, “The Late Quartets”

Topics to be discussed:

- Transition to the Late Style
- Beethoven and His Nephew
- Characteristics of the Late Style
- Prince Nikolas Galitzin

Work to be discussed:

- String Quartet in C-sharp Minor, Op. 131