

# Osher Lifelong Learning Institute

## Intimate Beethoven: The String Quartets

### Practical information

Instructor: Alexandra Amati, PhD

Email: adamati@usfca.edu

Meetings happen on Zoom. Please make sure you are muted unless speaking, and feel free to use the chat feature to ask questions. I will monitor the chat as I can. I will sometimes share my screen to show the PowerPoint slides and will play sound from my computer. If you experience a lag, try turning off your camera. Everything works better from a computer than from a phone.

### Course Description

This course traces the stylistic evolution from the classical style to the romantic, through all the intermediate steps, as seen in Beethoven's String Quartets. The string quartet, as an intimate (as opposed to public) music genre, intended more for the pleasure of the performers than as a concert piece, reflects more closely the intimate thoughts and feelings of the composer and allows the players to express themselves in conversation with each other. The performers are the audience as well, and their amateur or professional appreciation of these compositions is the goal of the composer. Beethoven composed string quartets from the initial phases of his career—the almost classical Op. 18, to the very end of his life, when as a true Romantic he pushed all the boundaries and blurred all the lines formally and emotionally.

**Week 1:** introduction to the genre, a history in a nutshell, components and terminology, the classical quartet of Haydn and Mozart. Overview of Beethoven's sixteen string quartets and their compositional context. Quartets 1-6, Op. 18 (1798-1801). Repertoire: Quartet Op. 18 No. 1 first movement.

**Week 2:** Continuation of the conversation on motivic manipulation and development. Repertoire: Quartet Op. 18 No. 1 movements 2-4. Introduction to the motivic development of the last quartet.

**Week 3:** Formal and harmonic strategies in Op. 18. Song style and collaborative style, relative roles of the instruments. Disruption of style in Nos. 4-6. Repertoire Op. 18 No. 6.

**Week 4:** The middle period, expansion of form, the Razumovsky quartets Op. 59 (1806). New seriousness, drama, and symphonicism. Repertoire Op. 59 No. 1.

**Week 5:** The gateway into the late style—the Quartets op. 74 "The Harp" and op. 95 "Serioso" (1809-10). Repertoire Op. 95.

**Week 6:** The late string quartets, formal experimentation, thematic transformation, mature romanticism, Op. 127 through Op. 135 (completed few days before Beethoven's death). The "ABC" quartets Opp. 130, 131, 132. Repertoire Op. 131.

**Week 7:** More of the late string quartets, The great Op. 130 and the Grosse Fuge Op. 133.

**Week 8:** The end of the trajectory—quartets for another generation. The last quartet, Op. 135 (1826).

## Objectives of the Course

To familiarize students with the String Quartet as a classical and then romantic style of private music.

To analyze parts of most of the 16 String Quartets composed by Beethoven, tracing the evolution of the style of the composer.

To acquire vocabulary and concepts related to this genre.

To question and discuss the social context in which each work was created, the commissioner, and the performers.

## Essential bibliography

- Kerman, Joseph. *The Beethoven Quartets*. New York & London: W.W. Norton, 1966 (a contextualized study of each of the quartets, with lots of musical examples)
- Kinderman, William, ed. *The String Quartets of Beethoven*. Urbana, IL: Illinois University Press, 2006 (a collection of chapters by different scholars on aspects of style and sources of Beethoven's quartets)
- Lockwood, Lewis and the Juilliard String Quartet. *Inside Beethoven's Quartets: History, Performance, Interpretation*. Cambridge, MA & London: Harvard University Press, 2008 (a book with CD included including history as well as a detailed analysis and discussion of sources and interpretation of Op. 18 n. 1, Op. 59 n. 1, and Op. 130)
- Stowell, Robin, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to the String Quartet*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003 (a compendium of articles by different scholars on all aspects of the quartet's history, performance, and repertory)
- Winter, Robert and Robert Martin eds. *The Beethoven Quartet Companion*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1994

Lots and lots of information and material on the site of the Beethoven Center at San José State University "[Beethoven Gateway](https://www.sjsu.edu/beethoven/research/beethoven_gateway/)" ([https://www.sjsu.edu/beethoven/research/beethoven\\_gateway/](https://www.sjsu.edu/beethoven/research/beethoven_gateway/))

## Performances:

In class I will use the recordings of the Alban Berg Quartet and the Quartetto Italiano. Other outstanding performances exist, including the Juilliard Quartet.