

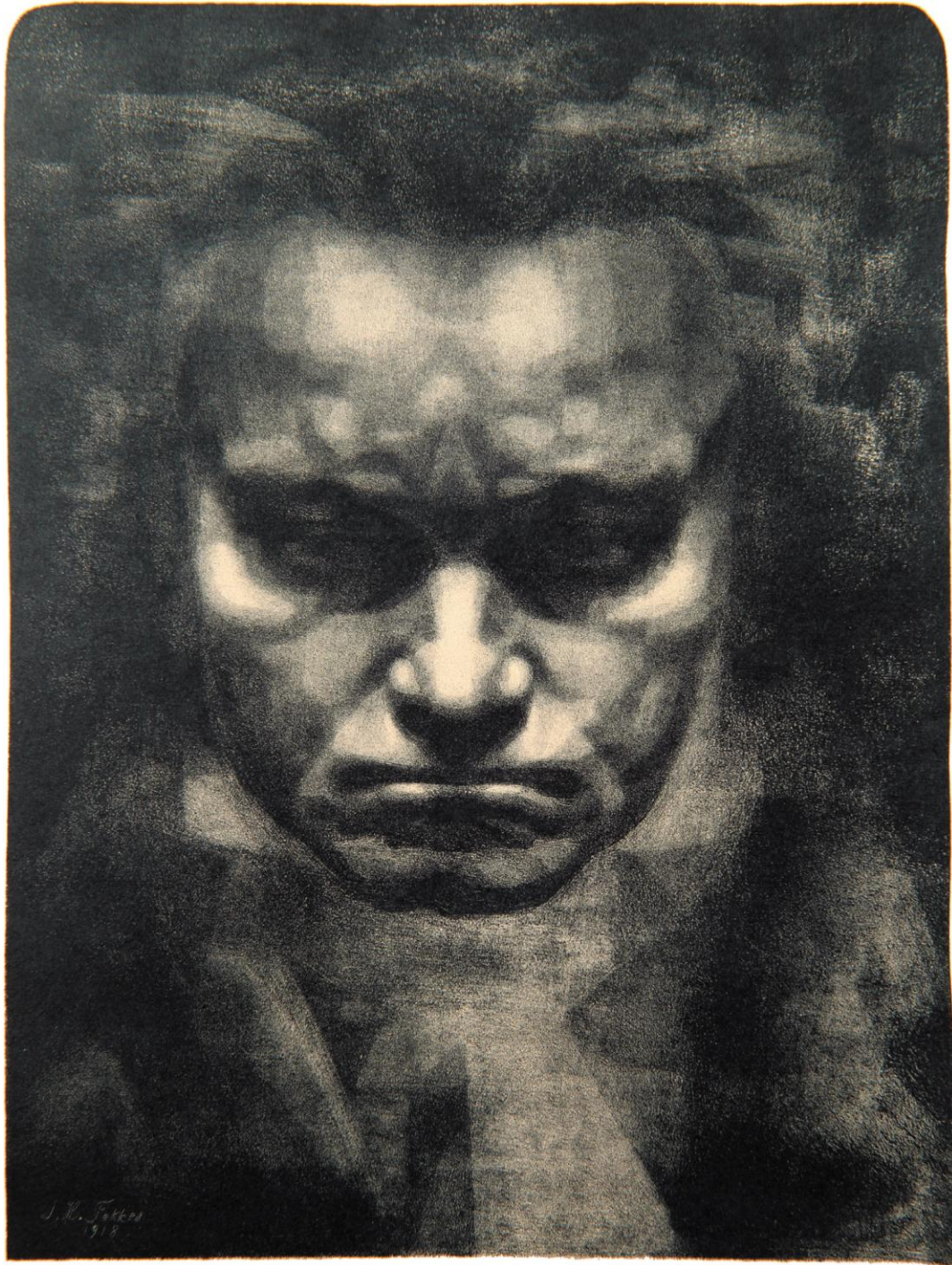
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‘There Is Only One Beethoven’

by [Lewis Lockwood](#)

[Beethoven for a Later Age: Living with the String Quartets](#)

by Edward Dusinberre
University of Chicago Press, 262 pp., \$30.00



San Diego Museum of Art

'Head of Beethoven'; lithograph by Johannes Hendricus Fekkes, 1918; from *The Art of Music*, the catalog of a recent exhibition at the San Diego Museum of Art, published by Yale University Press

Books written by or about performers of classical music tend to fall into predictable categories. One consists of biographies or autobiographies entirely centered on the individual's career development—the early beginnings, the emerging talent, the teachers, the obstacles that had to be overcome, at last the rise to prominence. A second and more interesting type consists of interviews or conversations with the still living artist, in which the interviewer ferrets out aspects of the personality and outlook of a major singer, instrumentalist, or conductor, in the best cases evoking answers and memories that help to frame the subject's career within the profession, ideally evoking insights on wider issues. A good example is David Blum's *Casals and the Art of Interpretation* (1977), based on interviews and notes taken during master classes and orchestral rehearsals in Casals's later years, abounding in comments on his interpretation of passages from the chamber music and orchestral literature.

A third type, rarer still, is composed of books written by well-known performers that are rich in insights on music from start to finish—the most recent examples that come to mind are the essays by the great pianist Alfred Brendel, which are less about his career than about his ways of interpreting a wide spectrum of works by composers such as Beethoven, Schubert, and Liszt. Brendel not only writes about how he plays and understands them but exhibits a broad knowledge of the critical and scholarly literature about the works under discussion. His “Notes on a Complete Recording of Beethoven's Piano Works” provides comments on recordings, on the virtues and defects of various critical editions, on performance markings, and much else.¹ Reading Brendel and hearing him become two complementary ways of appraising his qualities as both performer and musical intellectual.

The new book by Edward Dusinberre, first violinist of the Takács Quartet, is mainly in the first category, but aspires to be much more. As a result it is essentially two books in one. It is first of all an autobiography, in which the author reviews his first twenty-two years as leader of a well-known string quartet, with numerous sidelights on his personal and musical interactions with his colleagues over the years. The other aspect of the book, which is interleaved in each chapter with the biographical story, is a more nearly objective historical survey of Beethoven's life and career during the three periods of composition of his string quartets: the early works, the six of Op. 18, written around 1800; then the middle-period quartets of Ops. 59, 74, and 95 (1806–1810); finally, the late quartets that were virtually Beethoven's sole preoccupation in his last years, from 1824 to his death in 1827.

The book's title, *Beethoven for a Later Age*, derives from a remark attributed to Beethoven when a contemporary violinist was bewildered by the Razumovsky quartets of Op. 59 and told the composer that they “are not music.” To which Beethoven made the surprisingly temperate reply, “They are not for you, they are for a later age.”

The Takács Quartet was founded in Budapest in 1975 and took the name of its first leader, Gábor Takács-Nagy, who left the quartet in 1992 to return to Europe and make a career as a conductor. Two of its original members are still active in the quartet: Károly Schranz, second violinist, and the cellist András Fejér. The founding violist was Gábor Ormai, who died in 1994 and was replaced by Roger Tapping, who left in 2005 and was replaced by Geraldine Walther. The home of the quartet was and still is the University of Colorado at Boulder, to which the original

members in its first years moved at the invitation of Dénes Koromzay, the former violist of the great Hungarian Quartet, who had moved to Boulder in 1962. The Hungarian Quartet had been especially well known for its relationship to Béla Bartók; it began life in 1935 and was disbanded in 1972.

Dusinberre became the leader of the quartet when Gabor Takács-Nagy left. His tale begins with the young English violinist's arrival in Boulder to audition as prospective new quartet leader, the first non-Hungarian ever to be considered as a member. Not an easy prospect for "a twenty-four-year-old graduate student from the Juilliard School, with no prior professional string quartet experience," who was asked to play the last movement of Beethoven's C major Quartet Op. 59, no. 3. This formidable Allegro molto finale is not only the dynamic completion of its own four-movement quartet, it is also the vivid culmination of the whole Razumovsky cycle. Beginning with a four-voice fugato that then develops into a vast sonata form, it hurtles forward with furious energy from start to finish—Joseph Kerman refers to its "commanding ebullient power."

Dusinberre gives a striking description of how his own practicing of this movement took on an entirely new aspect when he played it for the first time with the other members of the quartet:

First violin passages that had seemed to convey a serious character in my practice room were transformed by the music around me.... Now I noticed the satirical nature of the accompaniment. Károly and Gábor bounced off András' beats, drawing attention to their flippant accompaniment by lifting their bows more than necessary after each note, seeming in their comic repetitive motion to mock the intensity of my part.

With Dusinberre's account of what it was like to play this movement with the three original Hungarian members, he launches the major contribution of his book in all that follows. In successive chapters he describes in detail what it feels like, from the inside, when a professional quartet grapples with the canon of the Beethoven quartets, in rehearsal and public performance. More vividly than in some similar accounts that I have read, he portrays the dynamics of ensemble playing, the physical and musical interactions of four experienced performers giving everything they have to produce a unified realization of a given work. From his first sessions with the Takács Quartet, he writes, "I was struck by how the body language and facial expressions of the Hungarians helped to convey the mood of the music."

In the digital age, readers of Dusinberre's descriptions of music-making can confirm and expand his portrait of the quartet's performing style, as I did, by visiting YouTube. Here we find a number of recent videos of the Takács Quartet playing movements by Beethoven and other composers and giving master classes. One of the most revealing of these videos is a TED talk given by the quartet at Vail in January 2015, in which Dusinberre describes their travels, rehearsals, and other details, and then focuses on the celebrated one-movement Scherzo of Beethoven's Quartet Op. 59, no. 1. He discusses this remarkable movement and the Takács then performs it, first excerpts, then the whole movement. The video adds substance and embodiment to the performing life that he depicts in this book, and its relevance is obvious even though this Scherzo is not among the movements he discusses in his chapters.

Dusinberre's narrative is filled with personal reflections, comments on his Hungarian (and later American) colleagues, how they work and live together as a touring ensemble, the making of recordings, and other aspects of the life of a professional ensemble. More revealing musically are his accounts of their approach to five different Beethoven quartets: Op. 18, no. 1; Op. 59, no. 2; Op. 127; Op. 132; and, finally, Op. 130, with its two alternative endings—the immense *Grosse Fuge*, the original finale of the work, which Beethoven then removed and published separately as his Op. 133; and its replacement, the so-called “little” finale, the opposite of the *Grosse Fuge* in its charm and grace. This second finale of Op. 130, often misunderstood and underrated, was the last completed composition that Beethoven wrote in his lifetime, one whose seeming simplicity masks its inner subtleties. In his comment on Op. 130, Dusinberre senses at least some of these:

While Beethoven's finale to Opus 130 was part of his larger experiment with endings, it also hinted at the emergence of a new compositional direction, one already explored in Opus 135. These are the only completed pieces of music that Beethoven left as evidence of an ambition to integrate lightness and weight, youthfulness and experience, comedy and tragedy, within more compact structures—all perhaps a response to the breadth and disorienting contrasts of some of his earlier works, including the *Grosse Fuge*.

The inward focus of Dusinberre's descriptions of rehearsing and performing individual Beethoven movements is a strength of his book. It gives the reader a personal sense of what quartet playing is really like, how much it demands, and how hard even the best players have to work to achieve a communal interpretation of a single phrase, a movement, an entire Beethoven quartet. Here he describes a performance in which the quartet falls out of sync:

The mishap occurred...during one of my first performances of Opus 59, no. 2. In the *Più presto*, a breakneck conclusion to an already lively final movement, the first violin played the same galloping rhythm as the other instruments but one bar later. At the moment when we were supposed to begin playing the rhythm together I played a two-note figure one time too many. Unsure whether to accommodate my waywardness or ignore it in the hopes that I would catch up, my flexible colleagues effected a lethal combination of the two, some forging ahead, others holding back, then pursuing the alternative option as atonal mayhem ensued. We lurched along, now intent merely on managing one final chord together. After anxious glances around the group András seized the initiative, an emphatic lifting of his bow followed by a ferocious downward nod signalling that whatever anyone else was planning to play, this would be his last note. Our final sounds were almost executed together—a mishmash of scrambled pitches faintly resembling the emphatic E minor chord written by Beethoven.

In another sense, however, the inwardness of Dusinberre's concentration on performance issues tends to isolate his observations from the larger world of historically informed criticism on Beethoven as a composer of quartets.

I felt this insularity in a number of his chapters, starting with his comments on the two extant versions of the F major quartet Op. 18, no. 1. For the six quartets of Op. 18, published in 1801, we do not possess any of Beethoven's autograph manuscripts, which might well have contained late-stage changes of musical content, small and large, of the kind that run rampant in so many of his later manuscripts, revisions that show his relentless self-criticism right to the end of his work

on a composition, no matter in what genre. But for this single quartet, Op. 18, no. 1, there survives by pure chance something else that is very rare, namely a complete early version of the entire work, all four movements, which has survived from the estate of its original possessor, Beethoven's close friend Carl Amenda.

In 1798 Beethoven had been commissioned by his patron Prince Joseph Lobkowitz to write six quartets. In accepting it he knew that he was crossing a frontier in his artistic development; he and his contemporaries were fully aware of the immense patrimony of Haydn and Mozart and of the high status of the string quartet as a category of music—"that noble genre," as it was later called by his contemporary Ignaz von Seyfried. Within a year Beethoven composed the D major quartet that became Op. 18, no. 3, then turned to the F major work that later became no. 1.

In June 1799 he sent the entire F major quartet, in a copyist's hand, to Carl Amenda as a parting gift for Amenda's departure for his native Courland (later Latvia). Two years later he wrote to Amenda to tell him that he had now made "some drastic alterations" in this quartet, and he told Amenda not to share his version with anyone—"for only now have I learned how to write quartets." But Amenda, who remained in Courland and lived until 1836, did not destroy this early version, and it surfaced decades later, thus giving the world the rare instance of a fully finished early version of a major work by Beethoven that can stand on its own but differs in many important ways from the final version.

Dusinberre comments on some aspects of the first and second versions, but does not do justice to many of the salient differences between the two. One such difference is the presence in the Amenda version of an entire C minor phrase in the first movement's exposition that Beethoven cut out in the final version, decisively changing the character of this part of the movement. Another occurs later in the first movement, where Beethoven rewrites the passage that comes directly after the recapitulation. Along with these structural changes we find many alterations of texture, and the entire quartet becomes more idiomatic.

Dusinberre makes no reference to any earlier studies of the work, the most important being the late Janet Levy's book-length comparison of the earlier and later versions of the first movement.² Nor does he mention the discussion of this quartet, its two versions and its surviving sketches, in the book on selected Beethoven quartets that I coauthored with the four members of the Juilliard String Quartet in 2008.³ Still, he gives his own impressions as a player, and they are valuable.



Süddeutsche Zeitung/Scherl/Bridgeman Images

Jean-Marie Mengue working on his sculpture of Beethoven in the Bois de Vincennes, Paris, 1927

While the narrative focus of Dusinberre's book gives it a highly personal stamp and strength, it stands apart from current commentary on the Beethoven quartets, their creative backgrounds, their sketches, and the many surviving autograph manuscript sources of the middle-period and late string quartets, some of them published in good facsimiles and many now available online. What makes these sources particularly important for performers is what they reveal of Beethoven's musical handwriting, his ways of grouping notes, his slurs, dynamics, and more. That Beethoven's highly idiosyncratic notation is rich in implications for performers has been well known for many years. This entire field has undergone vigorous growth over the past half-century as Beethoven scholarship and criticism have advanced as an international enterprise.

In recent decades the traditional no-man's-land that once separated music scholarship from the world of performance has been narrowed significantly, thanks to major efforts on both sides to bring the two dimensions of musical experience together. The Early Music movement showed

the way, and by now it is not news that the collaboration of excellent performers with seasoned scholars and critics can pay dividends in our musical life and in the growth of public understanding of the classics.

At the same time, and in its own vein, Dusinberre's book will stand on the shelves with those of other performers who have written about their experience in the rehearsal room and concert hall. I think of the publications by Arnold Steinhardt, the leader of the Guarneri Quartet from its formation in 1964 until it was disbanded in 2009. Besides his book on the Guarneri as an ensemble, *Indivisible by Four* (1998), Steinhardt published a more personal memoir with the title *Violin Dreams* (2006). Both explore what it meant for him to choose a career as a performer, with much to say about his struggles and triumphs. Prior to both was a book about the Guarneri Quartet, *The Art of Quartet Playing* (1986), edited by David Blum, in which Blum records conversations with all four of its members on what happens in rehearsal, on their individual perspectives on music, musical life, and quartet playing as a way of life—plus, at the end, a very long and valuable account of their ideas on the interpretation of Beethoven's C# Minor Quartet, Op. 131, with many music examples.

Dusinberre comments on Beethoven's life during the three periods of his quartet composition. Here he has read widely in the current biographical and critical literature, and it shows, despite occasional digressions that stray pretty far from his main subject, the quartets themselves. One such is the extended account of Count Andrey Kirillovitch Razumovsky's family background before he became the Russian ambassador to the Viennese court, a post he held from 1792 to 1807. As a passionate music lover who could play second violin in the quartet that he established and sponsored, Razumovsky gained enduring fame as dedicatee of the great Op. 59 quartets. By overtly inserting two Russian folksongs into these quartets (the finale of no. 1 and the Trio of the Scherzo of no. 2), Beethoven was paying homage to his Russian patron.

Still, it's clear from other evidence that Beethoven's attitude toward many of his patrons, members of the Viennese nobility, was marked not just by ambiguity but by poorly concealed contempt. By far his most generous supporter during his first years in Vienna was Prince Karl Lichnowsky, who paid the young pianist-composer an annuity until about 1806, gave him lodgings in his own mansion, helped him with performances and publications, and encouraged him to write quartets by giving him a set of Italian string instruments. Lichnowsky also put the young Beethoven in touch with the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, later his main quartet violinist and orchestral concertmaster. But in 1806 their relationship went to pieces when Beethoven visited the prince in his country house in Silesia.

When Lichnowsky asked him to play the piano for some visiting French officers, Beethoven refused, stormed out of the house, and found his way back to Vienna, where he is said to have smashed a bust of Lichnowsky. Tradition has it that Beethoven said or wrote to Lichnowsky as follows: "Prince, what you are, you are through an accident of birth. What I am, I am through myself. There have been and will be thousands of princes; there is only one Beethoven." And yet, despite this episode, it appears that Beethoven had second thoughts about him, and Dusinberre refers to Alan Tyson's discovery of a document showing that when Beethoven was preparing to publish his new and revolutionary string quartets of Op. 59, he was thinking about

changing the dedication from Razumovsky to Lichnowsky, along with some other changes of dedications.

Of course, as it turned out, he did not make the change. But this and much other evidence helps us understand Beethoven's powerfully conflicted feelings about his social status as an artist, by which he was forced to accept his financial dependence on his patrons but felt demeaned by having to do so. Only later in his life did he find an aristocratic patron, the Archduke Rudolph, brother of the Emperor, who gave him financial support and was also a first-class pianist, a talented composer, and for many years Beethoven's pupil in composition. About most of the patrons of his earlier years, the dedicatees of many of his publications, Beethoven summed up his feelings in a letter to his nephew Karl in 1825: "These so-called great lords do not like to see an artist who in any case is already their equal, in affluent circumstances...."

In writing about the late quartets Dusinberre draws on recent scholarship, and has even had some new translations made of passages from the "Conversation Books"—the mass of little sheets, bound together in booklets, in which Beethoven's visitors in his last years wrote down everything they had to say to the deaf composer. Preserved for the years from 1818 to 1826 and fully published in German but not yet in English, these one-way conversations are among the most revealing documents of daily life and current opinion that survive for any great artist. The complete English translation of the Conversation Books is now being prepared for publication by Theodore Albrecht.

Dusinberre opens his book with the Takács Quartet playing Op. 131; at the end he describes their working together on the three quartets commissioned by Prince Galitzin—Ops. 127, 132, and 130. These last chapters are among the most moving and personal, as he reflects on all he has learned and how he and the quartet have developed over more than twenty years of deep communal engagement with these incomparable works.

1. 1

Originally published in German in *Hi Fi Stereophonie* (May 1966), available in English translation in *Alfred Brendel on Music: Collected Essays* (A Cappella Books, 2001). [↵](#)

2. 2

Beethoven's Compositional Choices: The Two Versions of Opus 18, No. 1, First Movement (University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982). [↵](#)

3. 3

Inside Beethoven's Quartets: History, Interpretation, Performance (Harvard University Press, 2008). The book includes the Juilliard Quartet's annotated scores of the first movements of Op. 18 No. 1, Op. 59 No. 1, and Op. 130. [↵](#)