

BOOK REVIEW

Nancy November, *Cultivating String Quartets in Beethoven's Vienna* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2017). x + 252 pp. £60.00.

Vienna's vibrant musical scene around 1800 remains a popular subject for academic study. As we are nearing the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth, several monographs dedicated to his chamber music have been appearing, drawing our attention to these important compositions.¹ Beethoven's time and place, and the culture that inspired his instrumental compositions, provide the general background also to this monograph. But the present work also sets itself apart. *Cultivating String Quartets in Beethoven's Vienna* is about the music that audiences exposed to Beethoven's string quartets would have heard, known and appreciated. Some of that music came from composers with whom today's concertgoers are generally unfamiliar, including Paul Wranitzky, Emanuel Aloys Förster, Adalbert Gyrowetz and Friedrich Ernst Fesca, all of whom are discussed in this book.

These non-canonical figures appear in 'snapshots' that attempt to break the tradition of writing 'grand narratives' (p. 21). By investigating lesser-known composers in relation to well-known ones – including Haydn, Beethoven and Schubert – November offers new insights on Viennese musical culture. As interpretive tools for the many repertoires under investigation she engages concepts anchored in the culture of the time, which are often overlooked, among them theatricality,² amateur music practices and mixed ensemble practices.

Although similar research topics have been investigated, November's book fills a gap. Vienna as a musical place has been featured in David Wyn Jones's two books *The Symphony in Beethoven's Vienna* (Cambridge, 2006) and *Music in Vienna 1700, 1800, 1900* (Woodbridge, 2016), but Jones's book was clearly focused on genre and on the musical metropolis Vienna through the centuries. Similarly, William Weber's recent work explores concert programming from Haydn to Brahms but is less occupied with Viennese musical culture at large and with those many Viennese instrumental music composers whose music was highly regarded by contemporaries but is today overshadowed by the giants.³

November's 2017 monograph includes an introduction, eight chapters, an epilogue and front and back matter. More than a dozen illustrations and two dozen musical examples illustrate her main points and arguments. The primary sources – most of them in German – are translated into English, with the original-language

¹ Marc D. Moskowitz and R. Larry Todd, *Beethoven's Cello: Five Revolutionary Sonatas and Their World* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2017); William Kinderman, ed., *The String Quartets of Beethoven* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2010); Angus Watson, *Beethoven's Chamber Music in Context* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 2010).

² Nancy November based a whole monograph on theatricality in 2013, which provides useful context for the present work; see her *Beethoven's Theatrical Quartets: Opp. 59, 74 and 95* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013).

³ William Weber, *The Great Transformation of Musical Taste: Concert Programming from Haydn to Brahms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

quotations retained in the footnotes.⁴ With these quotations November has made significant amounts of fascinating primary source material in German accessible to English scholars.

In Chapter 1, titled 'Defining Chamber Music in the Early Nineteenth Century', November discusses conceptions of chamber music around 1800 and contrasts them with modern usage and definitions. She argues that 'chamber music' meant something radically different in the early nineteenth century. Twenty-first-century definitions, according to November, highlight instrumentation and ensemble size. We understand the term as meaning 'instrumental music for two or more solo [obligato] parts ... comprising anything from duos to works for nine or ten players' (p. 7). This modern conception, however, excludes non-instrumental (vocal) music and instrumental works for a single soloist, such as the piano sonata, as well as *Harmoniemusik* (music for wind ensembles) (p. 7). November points out that the 'lingering connection of chamber music with private performance' contributed to the genre's 'ideological and sociological charge' (p. 9). In short, November's first chapter makes us aware of what we have lost in our modern understanding of chamber music.

Chapter 1 also raises the question of gender: 'String chamber music in the early nineteenth century can fairly be described as music that was largely written by and for men, and written about by men' (p. 17). November's reasoning is compelling. She invites us to consider politics, specifically the 'Metternich system with its strict surveillance and censorship of male group activities' (p. 17). By performing in string quartets, men could enjoy socializing and leisurely pursuits in ways 'that would not attract the suspicion of the authorities as potential incubators of political uprising' (p. 17). The concept of genius is another important aspect that contributed to the male dominance, as November writes. Both in the German-speaking musical landscape, which prioritized 'score-based works requiring "deep listening"', and in the 'performance-centred' French approach to performance, the concept of male genius played a significant role (p. 18).

Chapter 2, 'Celebrating Haydn, Cultivating Opera', outlines the sphere of the string quartet after Haydn. November approaches the chapter from a cultural angle, proposing that opera exerted a strong influence on composers of instrumental music. Dedicated to breaking the canonical vs. non-canonical divide, November brings Haydn and Beethoven together with non-canonical composers Wranitzky, Förster and Gyrowetz. Wranitzky, who was occasionally compared to Haydn in the press, belonged to the sphere of the theatre. Indeed, November points out that around 1800 composing theatrical music was the goal of most composers living in Vienna, and this can be attributed to the highly flourishing Viennese theatre culture with its five theatres. Taking the 'theatrical' as an aesthetic marker of Wranitzky's music, November brings up musical parameters such as dynamics, accents, colours and instrumental effects that 'break down the fourth wall' (p. 37). Her analytical and interpretive discussion of Wranitzky's and Gyrowetz's chamber music in light of theatrical markers is convincing, given the cultural context preoccupied with opera and theatre, but sometimes seems repetitive and occasionally insufficiently supported, given the absence of textual components in the music.

⁴ Most of the translations are fine, but some German passages contain small errors, which a native German speaker could have helped to avoid. For example, the plural of *Harmonistück* is not *Harmonistückchen* but *Harmonistücke*.

Gyrowetz – a highly prolific composer of 45 string quartets – became second Kapellmeister at the Vienna Hoftheater in 1804. November points to specific ‘theatrical’ markers in Gyrowetz’s music, including the ‘understated ending’ (op. 44, 1803, final set), ‘small-scale gestures’, ‘piquant use of accents’, ‘rhetorical unisons’, ‘fermatas’, as well as ‘trills’ and ‘articulation’, all of which helped focusing the attention on ‘the act of performance’, thereby overturning listeners’ expectations (pp. 58–9). According to November, ‘savvy composers recognized that the real chance for fame, and moreover financial stability, lay in theatrical composition’ (pp. 58–9). In sum, Wranitzky’s career move – becoming director of the Hoftheater in 1792 – and Gyrowetz’s step to becoming second Kapellmeister at the Hoftheater in 1804 and (unsuccessful) petition to the Hoftheater in 1807 – all point to the same interest in the theatre and operatic stage (pp. 58–9).

Chapter 3, ‘Selling String Quartets in Beethoven’s Vienna’, investigates the role of the string quartet in Beethoven’s Vienna from the angle of Johann Traeg’s important music catalogue (1799), which lists all the items that were available for purchase at the time. Traeg’s catalogue not only played an important role in forming the emerging canon, it also showed the dominance of the string quartet over the symphony in Vienna. The section ‘Arrangements: The Popularity of Opera’ shows the unexpected genre-transgressing tendencies of the quartet. As Traeg’s catalogue shows, the string quartet appears as the most popular medium for arrangements. Many arrangements were made of Italian opera, particularly *opera buffa*. November notes that just as *opera buffa* provided pleasure, playing arrangements of *opera buffa* for string quartet gave performers the opportunity to experience the genre’s attractions. November argues that for performers of arrangements of operas, there was the pleasure of ‘playing out’ the ‘various roles’ (p. 70). This section points out how an opera-loving public took advantage of arrangements and demanded them for home use. November’s efforts in filtering out all quartet music from the many diverse genres advertised in the catalogue – including the vast category of arrangements – adds decisively to the breadth of evidence in the book.

The chapter section titled ‘The Fate of the Symphony’ seemed, to this reviewer, slightly anachronistic at first. November does not mean the much-discussed ‘post-Beethovenian’ fate of the symphony, but the ‘reluctance of publishers [around 1800] to issue symphonies’. This reluctance confirms the popularity of the quartet, which was viewed as a popular and flexible genre. This chapter successfully shows the string quartet’s presence in a body of works – arrangements – where it is not expected. The rest of the chapter further explicates the popularity and flexibility of the medium. A case in point are the ‘works for two violins, viola, and cello’ that were ‘composed or arranged and marketed to connoisseurs and to amateurs of the string quartet, but also to opera, ballet, and symphony fans’. Thus, November returns to her previous observation: Viennese publishers were well aware of the diversity of the Viennese theatrical landscape and its opera-loving audiences (p. 90).

Lastly, November dives into a discussion of other Viennese publishers around 1800, providing an overview of Hoffmeister, Artaria and Kozeluch. The end of the chapter brings title pages and other marketing strategies to bear on the string quartet. Marketing strategies included using the French language; providing elaborate and decorative design (even after 1800); and relying on symbolism to underline the genre’s emerging status. Unlike what previous scholarship had suggested (that ‘the more ornate title pages of nineteenth-century music are found mainly in sheet music of songs and dances, and that few publishers of “serious music”

indulged in decoration'), November is able to prove that 'elaborate title pages, including those with custom-designed vignettes, were certainly typical of the canonical editions: they were designed to lend weight to these publications, encouraging the buyer to see them as "timeless" documents – monuments to great composers and their work' (p. 81).

One minor point of criticism concerns the section 'Mixed Chamber Music' in Chapter 3. Whereas for this reviewer 'mixed' chamber music refers to chamber music of winds and strings, November associates a number of other genres with 'mixed' chamber music: piano trios, non-quartet chamber music for strings, and works for winds alone. This reader would have briefly treated piano trio, non-chamber music for strings and works for winds alone as separate categories. Nevertheless, this chapter is strong, and the evidence from and interpretation of Traeg's catalogue is compelling.

Chapter 4, 'Locating String Quartets in Beethoven's Vienna', presents a discussion of chamber music in various settings, both 'private' and 'public'. Quartet performance flourished in early nineteenth-century salon culture and in public concert series. November particularly singles out the importance of Count Nikolaus Zmeskall von Domanovecz (1759–1833) for the genre. Domanovecz was an official in the Hungarian Court Chancellery and a friend of Beethoven.

Chapter 5, titled 'Early Nineteenth-Century Performance and Criticism', begins with a section entitled 'Early Nineteenth-Century Music Reviews in Vienna', a practice that gained momentum with the Schuppanzigh quartet subscription concerts. November's investigation of the 'String Quartet and the "Work" Concept' shows that critics of the time increasingly valorized performers who 'stepped back' selflessly, and highlighted 'fidelity to the score' in order to let the composer 'speak'. The section 'Quartet Performers in Beethoven's Vienna' returns to the important point of the dominance of men. Most quartet performers, as could be expected in this period, were men (p. 133). Of 200 virtuosos and amateurs listed in 'Virtuosen und Dilettanten von Wien' only a third were women. The most influential violinists in the early nineteenth century Vienna were Ignaz Schuppanzigh, Joseph Mayseder and Joseph Böhm (p. 135). Most of Böhm's students – including Heinrich Wilhelm Ernst, Joseph Joachim and Hellmesberger Jr – were passionate string quartet leaders. Not only performers, but also critics significantly influenced the formation of the canon, via their preference for Austro-German over French music (p. 137).

Chapter 6 links the string quartet genre and its representative composers in 'Beethoven's Vienna' to three subsections, including 'Sociability' (p. 148), 'Showmanship' (p. 156), and 'Study' (p. 167), showing an emerging change in aesthetics. Around 1827, a retrospective division or hierarchy had formed, which was documented around 1880 by Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl, who distinguished between three types of quartet aficionado. This hierarchy showed the effects of the Beethoven myth on musical life. The aesthetic category, which November calls 'study', and which incorporated music associated to a mind-related discourse (diametrically opposed to showmanship and sociability), increasingly took hold after Beethoven's death.

Especially noteworthy in this discussion of hierarchies is that not only Beethoven, but also composers lesser-known today, such as Fesca, appear in contemporary criticism as part of the third, mind-related discourse. November points out that markers of the 'study' aesthetic included harmonic richness, chromaticism in all voices, occasional enharmonic shifts, contrapuntal work and thematic work (p. 169). Using her earlier strategy in bringing composers together who are today

held apart but whom critics in 'Beethoven's Vienna' sometimes associated with one another, November takes Fesca's Quartet op. 12 and offers a compare-and-contrast analysis with Beethoven's op. 95. Among the similarities noted by contemporaries were fast and abrupt modulation and relatedness in 'spirit' (p. 173–5).

Chapter 7, 'The String Quartet and the Listener', takes into account a concept that has often been left out of musicological historiography: listening. November begins with a section titled: 'Did they Listen in the Early Nineteenth Century?' She explains that 'scholars who study listening practices are united in the view that the nineteenth century witnessed a fundamental change in the character of listening – it is agreed that, during this era and especially in the latter period of the century, a culture of silent, reverent listening arose' (p. 177). Although November's point that 'factors such as location, genre, and repertoire strongly influenced the kinds of listening practiced, and indeed the kinds of listeners involved' is reasonable, this reviewer found this section too general and not sufficiently supported. But November does make clear that string quartet performance demanded a special attentive listener. Especially convincing was November's argument that 'already in the work of German artists of the early nineteenth century' the string quartet was 'constructed and used by some as a symbol, an emblem of "serious music" by which means one could show how one should ideally listen'. The evidence provided ranges from a pencil sketch by Friedrich Gauer mann ('Schubert als Zuhörer bei einer Quartettproduktion im Musiksalon von Johann Steiger v. Arnstein') to literary works such as *Kreisleriana* (1810–1814) by E.T.A. Hoffmann (p. 191).

Chapter 8 is titled 'Schubert's Song, Beethoven's Theatricality' and offers discussions of the two giant composers in relation to their residence in Vienna, before bringing them together in a section 'Schubert Meets Beethoven: Song in their Late Quartets' and ending with 'Beethoven's Theatricality'. Regarding Beethoven's and Schubert's Vienna, it is fascinating to see the differences. Beethoven was associated with 'canon formation', while Schubert, whose music was so little performed, was not. November is careful to point out 'problematically simple historical constructs', including that Schubert worked in Beethoven's 'shadow' and that Beethoven's 'autonomous' works were 'cut off from the context of their composition' (p. 198–9). But the two composers certainly shared some similarities, including a 'restrictive socio-political climate and a rage for song, opera, and theatre', which also left traces on both composers' chamber compositions, as November shows. After all, Beethoven and Schubert share 'aesthetics of the Biedermeierzeit, with its new cultivation of intimacy on one hand and a sense of disruption and disillusionment on the other' (p. 199). Although they only met once, 'and generally moved in quite different circles', November is able to show their shared context, in which 'vocality' was a 'common denominator', as evidenced in Schubert's and Beethoven's late quartets. In addition, November argues for a tendency of paradoxical juxtaposition in both, but 'these juxtapositions are much more extreme and frequent in late Beethoven quartets in which songfulness often seems to be curtailed or overturned by what follows' (p. 216). The last section elaborates on the 'highly theatrical' quality in Beethoven's late quartets, investigated also in November's previous monograph. Here November presents A.B. Marx's intriguing account of the contemporary German poet, dramatist, and writer Heinrich von Kleist (1777–1811). Marx observed for the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* in 1828 that Beethoven's 'Op. 132 could be compared' to the works of Kleist 'in

terms of its multi-level, almost over-stimulated sources of meaning, feeling, and narrative' (pp. 219–20).

Before summarizing the points in her epilogue, a brief overall assessment is in order. November's book is important because it opens the reader's eyes to a universe of little known music, performances, repertoires, people, events and reviews. In addition to the minor points of criticism already mentioned, this reader sometimes struggled with the occasionally dense prose. But on the whole this reviewer gained significant knowledge from reading this monograph and strongly recommends it to students, music lovers, and also to experts on this area.

In her epilogue, 'Constructing Viennese Chamber Music' November draws conclusions. She concludes that on the one hand chamber music in Beethoven's era was still considered 'chamber music in the eighteenth-century sense: music essentially for and often by performers, which is flexible (possibly originating from or giving rise to arrangement) and "open" (to excision or repetition, for example)' (p. 222). From this angle the genre underlined and promoted primarily 'entertainment and sociability in private settings'. But the quartet also had another important feature, which developed during the time of Beethoven's Vienna. It became not only 'increasingly ... distinct' and 'elevated', but also increasingly 'closed' with regard to requiring 'detailed study and attention'. In short, the genre became attached to, and represented by 'the composer's score'. As November posits, the latter, more idealized view of the quartet 'emerged in Beethoven's era', a process much supported by music criticism. Whereas virtuosic music resembling the *quatours brillants* was pushed aside, a canon emerged around the music of Haydn, Beethoven, Fesca, Romberg and Spohr – in other words, Austro-German composers (p. 223).

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doi: 10.1017/S1479409819000430

First published online 30 September 2019