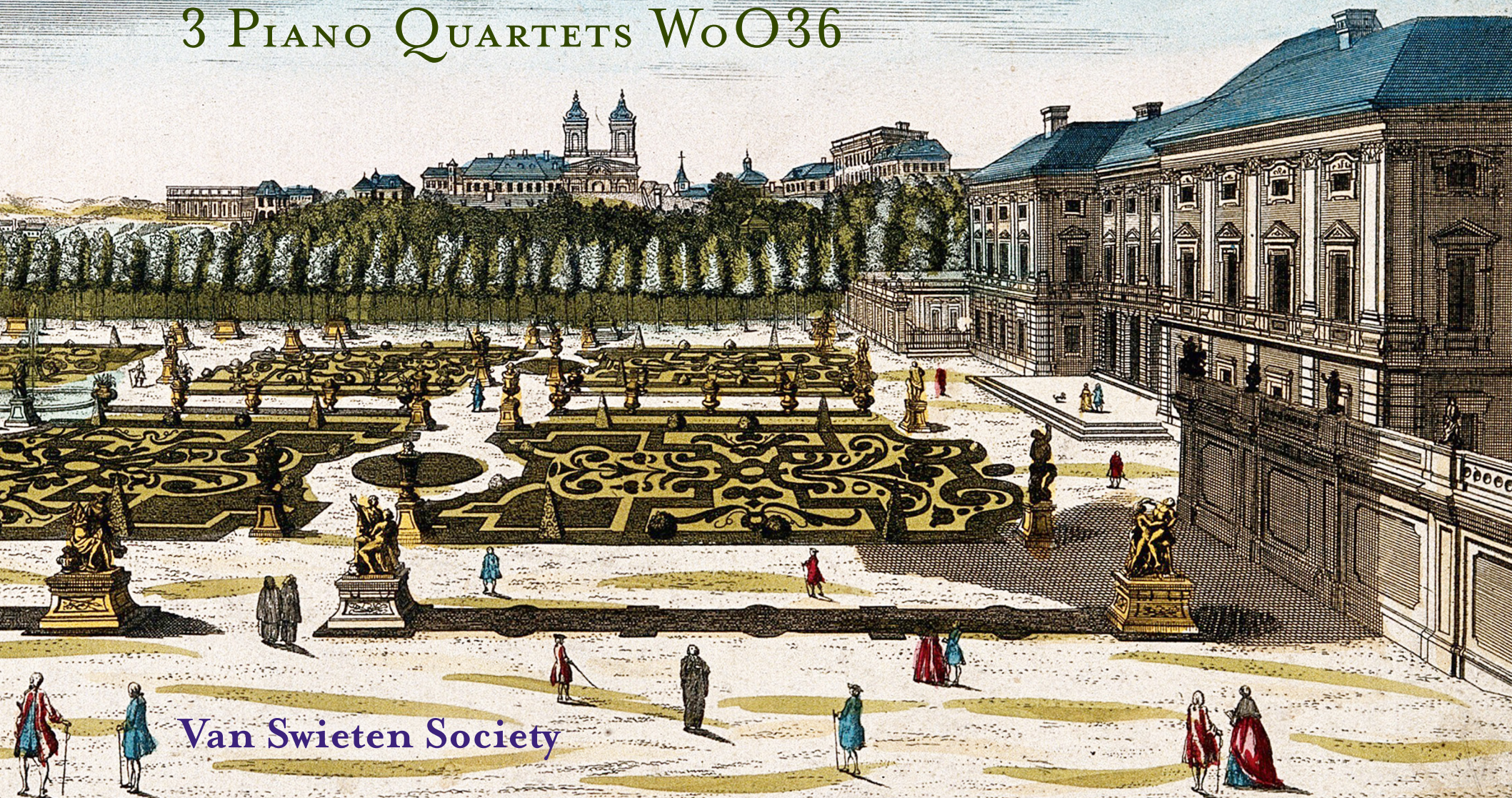


# BEETHOVEN

3 PIANO QUARTETS WoO36



Van Swieten Society



## Ludwig van Beethoven 1770-1827

### 3 Piano Quartets WoO36

#### Piano Quartet in C No.3

- |         |                        |      |
|---------|------------------------|------|
| 1. I.   | Allegro vivace         | 6'46 |
| 2. II.  | Adagio con espressione | 5'25 |
| 3. III. | Rondo: Allegro         | 3'37 |

#### Piano Quartet in E flat No.1

- |         |                                    |      |
|---------|------------------------------------|------|
| 4. I.   | Adagio assai                       | 8'01 |
| 5. II.  | Allegro con spirito                | 5'27 |
| 6. III. | Theme and variations:<br>Cantabile | 9'58 |

#### Piano Quartet in D No.2

- |         |                  |      |
|---------|------------------|------|
| 7. I.   | Allegro moderato | 7'48 |
| 8. II.  | Andante con moto | 8'05 |
| 9. III. | Rondo: Allegro   | 5'37 |

#### Van Swieten Society

Heleen Hulst *violin* · Elisabeth Smalt *viola*  
Diederik van Dijk *cello* · Bart van Oort *fortepiano*

### A Calling Card of Genius

In 1785 Mozart unleashed a veritable mania in the musical salons of Europe with his first piano quartet in G minor. There can be no doubt that this quartet inspired Beethoven to also write quartets for the unconventional instrumentation of piano trio with an added viola.

In 1779 Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) began taking composition lessons with Neefe, organist at the court of Elector Maximilian in Bonn. From 1781 onwards he became Neefe's organ assistant and already in 1783 emerged the first three piano sonatas. They became known as the 'Kurfürsten Sonates', dedicated as they were to the Elector Maximilian, who ensured the creation of a beautiful edition.

Like every musician in Europe Beethoven was well acquainted with Mozart's compositional works and was a great admirer of them. He performed Mozart's piano concertos with the court orchestra in Bonn and later played viola in performances of Mozart's operas. As the musicologist Lewis Lockwood puts it: "Just as Mozart had once told his father that he was 'soaked in music', so Beethoven was soaked in Mozart."

In the Spring of 1787 Beethoven made a journey to Vienna, paid for by the elector who had recognized and supported his talent, in order to receive instruction from Mozart. We can assume that he carried these unpublished quartets with him in his knapsack. Whether or not a lesson ever took place is uncertain; Mozart in fact spent part of the spring in Prague. Still, it remains probable that Beethoven did play for his idol and that Mozart on this occasion was moved to say to his friends: "mark that young man. He will make a name for himself in the world."

Why didn't Beethoven publish the quartets when he had returned to Vienna in 1791 and there was a rising demand for his output? First of all, his first publication needed to be a set of piano trios. Piano trios were the genre of the nobility; publication was made possible because they subscribed to, and also paid for the pieces in advance.

Furthermore, the quartets contain citations of, among others, Mozart. For instance, in the quartet in C Beethoven borrowed themes from Mozart's violin sonata K.296, also written in the key of C major. Beethoven's own continued appreciation of the quartets during his early Viennese years is evident from the fact that he reused some passages in his piano sonatas Op.2. One striking example is the theme of the slow movement of the first quartet in C, which returns to serve almost unchanged as theme to the middle movement of the first of his sonatas to be published in Vienna: the piano sonata in F, Op.2 No.1.

In Beethoven's time an 'opus' was a cohesive work of art. Haydn's string quartets Op.64 (the "Tost" Quartets) from 1790, open with a piece in the pure, transparent key of C major and close with a quartet in the symphonic key of D major. An almost psychological development takes place across the six quartets, which are surely meant to be heard as one cohesive opus. The same structural build-up of key signature and character are also found in Mozart's first published group of piano sonatas: K.279-284 from 1775. Beyond a comparable ordering of key signatures (C-F-Bb-Eb-G-D) and the steadily increasing technical demands of these sonatas, there also appears to be a dazzling display of compositional prowess, both with regards to keyboard technique as well as musical character.

Likewise, Beethoven's piano quartets, each one consisting of three movements, form an opus in three parts. In the original manuscript the ordering is completely in keeping with tradition: C – Eb – D. The open and pure sounding key of C major is, just as with Mozart and Haydn, the logical curtain-raiser of such a grand opus. This first quartet is a light-hearted and brilliant work with an airy and virtuosic last movement. Next, the darkly soulful quartet in E-flat is the true middle piece of the triptych. Its lyrical slow introduction, followed by a tempestuous Allegro in E-flat minor opens a door to Romanticism. The last movement with its devilish variations is technically speaking the heart of the three-part opus, which is then concluded by the almost symphonic quartet in D; D major being the key of great orchestral works

featuring trumpets and timpani. This last quartet's slow middle movement in F-sharp minor has strong recollections of the slow movement of Mozart's piano concerto in A, K.488, which Malcom Bilson once strikingly characterized as "too intimate to perform in public". It is possible that Beethoven was acquainted with this piano concerto, composed in the spring of 1786, and that he was perhaps deeply influenced by it. But also Haydn and Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach wrote their most poignant works in the key of F-sharp minor. When after Beethoven's death the quartets were published by Artaria in Vienna, they appeared for unknown reasons in the illogical sequence of E-flat, D, and C, an order unfortunately still in use today.

At a young age Beethoven was already a phenomenal pianist who explored the boundaries of existing piano technique, and in doing so extended them. The piano technique displayed in these works was unheard-of at the time, in particular where it applies to fingerings, pedal use, left hand technique, and sheer virtuosity. Beethoven was also already a good viola player before he joined the Bonn court orchestra as a violist in 1789. This helps to explain how the young prodigy succeeded in writing so assuredly and idiomatically for strings, with particularly striking viola parts.

The piano quartets are much more than three excellent compositions of a super talent: the opus is Beethoven's calling card, rich in its sampling of musical forms, characters, pianistic techniques, and new methods of combining strings; all of it full of unprecedented colourful expressivity.

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*Translation: Diederik van Dijk*



*Elisabeth Smalt, Heleen Hulst, Diederik van Dijk, Bart van Oort, Peter Arts*

**Heleen Hulst** is a much sought-after chamber musician, both as a violist and a violinist, and as much a specialist in contemporary music as a baroque performer. In recent years she frequently performed with the AskolSchönberg Ensemble, LUDWIG and the Orchestra of the 18th Century. Her broad interests also led her to collaborations with ZTHollandia, the Netherlands Dance Theater and Dansgroep Krisztina Châtel. With pianist Gerard Bouwhuis she forms a duo which concentrates on new music. In 2005 they founded the new music group Nieuw Amsterdams Peil. Heleen has been a core member of the Van Swieten Society since 2010.

**Elisabeth Smalt** works primarily as a chamber musician, in styles varying from period instrument performance to extremely new music. She is a member of Oxalys, Prisma String Trio, Scordatura, and recently joined the Van Swieten Society. She recorded solo and chamber works on more than fifty albums. Her special interest in authentic performance practice developed over the course of a long-term collaboration with fortepianist Riko Fukuda. Together with her and others she released recordings of nine piano quintets by the early 19th century composers Cramer, Limmer, Ries, Onslow, Hummel, Dussek, and Schubert on Brilliant Classics.

**Diederik van Dijk** divides his time mostly between chamber music and orchestral playing in a practice spanning four centuries of music history and crossing over into various genres. He is a core member of the Van Swieten Society, Combattimento and Canadian-based ensemble Dark by Five, and frequently engaged as principal cellist with the Nieuwe Philharmonie Utrecht. In recent years he has also performed with the Orchestra of the 18th Century, the Metropole Orchestra, Insomnio, Amsterdam Baroque Orchestra and the Pacific Baroque Orchestra.

**Bart van Oort** has lectured, taught masterclasses and performed all over the world. Since 1997 van Oort has made over fifty recordings of chamber music and solo repertoire. With the Van Swieten Society he released albums devoted to the works of Mendelssohn, Schubert, and Beethoven, as well as the *Complete Haydn Piano Trios* (10 albums). With Petra Somlai and seven other colleagues he is currently in the process of releasing the Complete Dussek Sonatas (10 albums). Bart van Oort teaches fortepiano and Historical Performance Practice at the Royal Conservatory in The Hague.