

The period from 1750 to 1880 was a significant one in the history of the string quartet, just as it was in the history of British watercolors. It was in the mid-eighteenth century that the practice of including a keyboard instrument, the *continuo*, in every string ensemble was gradually dropped, making way for a new style of writing for those ensembles. That style was marked by an increased prominence of the viola and cello parts and by a balance between sections in which the voices move contrapuntally and sections in which they move chordally. The first great innovator in four-part writing for strings was Haydn, who was already using the title *Quartet* in the works he published as Opus 1. Later in his career Haydn looked back on his *Quartets, Opus 9*, which he wrote between 1769 and 1770, as being his first true string quartets. His *Quartets, Opus 20*, which date from 1772, are among his best known works in this genre, and they display a musical maturity and freedom of form which one expects to find only in music of later periods. *Opus 20, No. 5* is remarkable for its contrasts, from the eloquent sadness of the *Allegro moderato* to the strength of the *Menuetto* to the beautiful melodiousness of the *Adagio*. The *Finale* is a fugue which communicates a sense of restrained urgency.

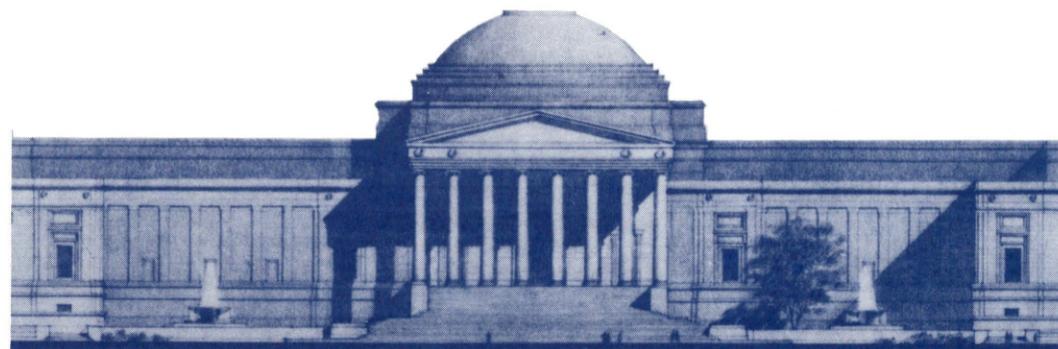
In order to find significant string quartets originating from the British Isles, one must look beyond the period 1750-1880. A real flowering of compositions in this genre did not take place there until the twentieth century, when composers such as Britten, Vaughan Williams, and Michael Tippett made their contributions to the quartet repertoire. Although not as famous as those three Englishmen, Kenneth Leighton has received numerous prizes for his compositions and has been appointed to teaching posts both at Oxford and at Edinburgh University. The *Seven Variations* have the nature of an epitaph or elegy, having been commissioned as a memorial to the mother of the artist Maurice de Sausmarez.

Beethoven learned the craft of string quartet writing from Haydn and expanded the medium throughout his career, culminating in works which defy comparison. The quartets of Opus 59 belong to Beethoven's middle period, which was ushered in by the famous *Eroica* Symphony. This was the period in which he expanded and transformed virtually every musical form he had inherited, earning him a reputation among his contemporaries as a relentless iconoclast. Some examples of this iconoclasm in the *Quartet in E Minor* include the early occurrence of changes in tonality in its first movement, the inclusion of explosive climaxes in the second movement, which normally functions as a movement of quiet repose, the five-part structure of the *Allegretto*, which Beethoven's audience would have anticipated as a three-part *scherzo*, and the surprise created by beginning the final movement in the "wrong" key—C major, which requires some subtle modulation to get back to the "home" key—E minor.

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