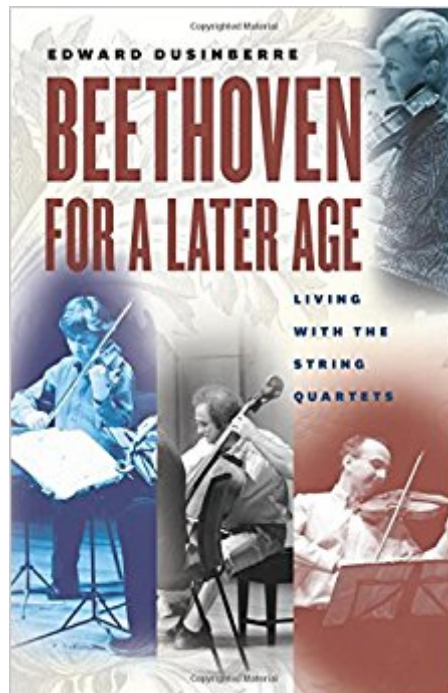




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# Beethoven For A Later Age: Living With The String Quartets



## Synopsis

Beethoven's sixteen string quartets are some of the most extraordinary and challenging pieces of music ever written. Originally composed and performed between 1798 and 1826, they have inspired artists of all kinds—not only musicians—and have been subject to endless reinterpretation. But what is it like to personally take up the challenge of these compositions, not only as a musician, but as a member of a quartet, where each player has ideas about style and expression? To answer this question, Edward Dusinberre, first violinist of the renowned Takács Quartet, offers a rare peek inside the workings of his ensemble, while providing an insightful history of the compositions and their performance. Founded in Hungary in 1975 and now based in Boulder, Colorado, the Takács is one of the world's preeminent string quartets, and performances of Beethoven have been at the center of their work together for over forty years. Using the history of both the Takács Quartet and the Beethoven quartets as a foundation, *Beethoven for a Later Age* provides a backstage look at the daily life of a quartet, showing the necessary creative tension between individual and group and how four people can at the same time forge a lasting artistic connection and enjoy making music together over decades. The key, Dusinberre reveals, to a quartet crafting its own sound is in balancing continuity with change and experimentation—a theme that lies at the heart of Beethoven's remarkable compositions. In an accessible style, suitable for novices and chamber music enthusiasts alike, Dusinberre illuminates the variety and contradictions of Beethoven's quartets, which were composed against the turbulent backdrop of the Napoleonic Wars and their aftermath, and he brings the technical aspects of the music to life. *Beethoven for a Later Age* vividly shows that creative engagement with Beethoven's radical and brilliant quartets continues to be as stimulating now as it was for its first performers and audiences. Musicians and music lovers will be intrigued by Dusinberre's exploration of the close collaboration at the heart of any great performance.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

“A richly detailed portrayal of the intimate workings of a great string quartet, in this case the magical Takács, as revealed to us through the recollections of its first violinist. A Fascinating certainly to someone working in another artistic realm entirely.” (Philip Roth)

“Dusinberre brilliantly spans Beethoven’s life, works, and the real issues of music making for his contemporaries into our time via the working process of a great modern quartet living with Beethoven’s creations in the twenty-first century. We are given intimate insight into the almost impossible-to-describe musical process of rehearsal and performance, the artistic and human interaction that links these modern musicians with their forebears and Beethoven himself. I’m struck by Dusinberre’s ability to take us inside the mind and spirit of a performer and struck by his understanding of Beethoven’s music and time. He brings us with him into our own epoch, and we note the remarkable parallels.” (Garrick Ohlsson, pianist)

“This singular memoir looks both into the mind of a string quartet player and into the collective mind of his ensemble. It’s a portrait not of science but of art: fluid, evolving, obsessed with the disciplined, elusive, ultimately impossible quest for something definitive, at the same time subject to the inspirations of the moment and the presence of the cougher in the second row. The book will be something between informative and revelatory to readers from musicians to music lovers.” (Jan Swafford, author of *Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph*)

“In this brief but beguiling book, Dusinberre . . . takes us inside the complexity of [Beethoven’s] masterpieces •elucidating the history of their creation and explaining, with the minimum of technicality, the challenges they pose to performers and audience. . . . The glimpse Dusinberre gives us of their working is fascinating.” (Telegraph)

“The book follows [Dusinberre’s] personal journey, while simultaneously threading through the parallel stories of Beethoven’s development as a composer, of the string quartet in general, and of early 19th-century culture and politics. Does all that seem a tall order? The narrative is potentially as complex as one of Beethoven’s

knotty four-part fugues in the late quartets, but 20 years' experience of playing chamber music has made Dusinberre adept at handling the interplay of multiple themes. Self-awareness and a sense of humour play their part. Sleight of hand makes the book entertaining and easy to digest. (Financial Times) "Full of insights. . . . Dusinberre's concluding musical commentary moulds past and present into a powerful and thought-provoking whole. (Independent) "Dusinberre is the lead violinist of the Takacs Quartet, one of the world's most highly regarded string ensembles, and he has written a fascinating book about the musical life of this group of players. Interwoven with that is the story of Beethoven's 16 string quartets, works of extraordinary power written over a quarter-century that moved the genre on from the earlier masters and are now regarded as the apogee of the chamber-music repertoire. (Economist) "In the course of a wonderful, engaging, and intimate book, the eager listener (even one like me, with no technical knowledge of music) is initiated into the mysteries of composing and playing some of the greatest music ever heard. The music, as a result, seems even greater and more mysterious than ever. (Geoff Dyer, author of *But Beautiful*) "Gathering up and reflecting on the work of his predecessors is not the least of Edward Dusinberre's achievements in a book unlike any other in its field, to be considered and enjoyed by anyone with more than a passing interest in Beethoven or quartet playing. (Gramophone) "At the heart of the book is Dusinberre and the quartet's internal challenge of bringing to life the music of Beethoven for modern ears. For those who have ever wondered what goes on behind the closed doors of a rehearsal, the book pulls back the veil and reveals some of the variables at play, including the very real presence of the composer, long dead, whose notes are on the page. What Dusinberre does best, though, is use the deeply emotional and personal music of Beethoven in a thoughtful juxtaposition with the progression of his own individual experiences as part of the notable string quartet. (Summit Daily) "Textured and witty." (Christian Century) "Goethe, a contemporary of Beethoven, described the string quartet as 'four rational people conversing with each other.' In this autobiographical book Dusinberre, leader of the Takacs Quartet, makes it sound very different—a 20-year struggle for perfection, full of tension and companionship, as the four players master Beethoven's great quartets. (Financial Times, *A Summer Book of the Year*) "A genial travelogue-cum-historical narrative. . . . In his book Dusinberre is a generous host, attempting to let in sunlight on a process and ritual usually hidden by clouds. (

(Australian Book Review) "In these elegant memoirs he reflects on a life spent in this small community, nourished and challenged by Beethoven's sixteen string quartets. . . . The book is most rewarding in the sections that tackle individual quartet movements, and I went back to the Takács recordings to listen again. It is a book that makes you want to return to the music •and that is its great success. (Literary Review) "This book is at once the author's memoir as longtime first violinist of the Takács String Quartet; a history of the composition of some of Beethoven's quartets; and a meditation on how those Beethoven quartets, their reception, and their influence have shaped the Takács Quartet (and, one presumes, various other performing quartets). . . . Dusiňberre's book may find greatest favor among string students, who will get a taste of how a major quartet operates, and chamber music lovers, who will get something like a backstage pass. . . . Recommended. (Choice) "The inward focus of Dusiňberre'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. . . . Dusiňberre'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. . . . [The] 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. (New York Review of Books)

Edward Dusiňberre has been the first violinist of Takács Quartet since 1993, and he is an artist-in-residence at the University of Colorado Boulder.

In this book Edward Dusiňberre provides tremendous insight into the mind of a musician and the life of a string quartet. In the film "A Late Quartet," Christopher Walken describes the extraordinary complexity of performing Beethoven's Opus 131 string quartet. Beethoven demanded that the entire piece - seven movements - be played without pause. Inevitably, Walken's character explains, the instruments fall out of tune, forcing each musician to adapt his/her own playing to the demands of the instruments and the playing of the other musicians. In the film, this is a powerful metaphor for life and Dusiňberre does a beautiful job of making the same point through his memoir/reflection. He describes the music he plays, and the people with whom he plays it, in loving detail. He shows a

remarkable awareness, often lacking in intensely creative people, of self-reflection and self-criticism. The lesson, or one of them, that he seems to have learned in his years with the Takacs Quartet is that life is a struggle between our own self-regard and our regard and affection for those closest to us - but a richly rewarding one if we approach it with the right spirit. I am not very knowledgeable about music technically. I can't read music and have a very difficult time following conversations or writing that focus on composition or technique, but I was still very much able to follow and enjoy Dusinberre's style (though doubtless I would have gotten even more out of it if knew more). This is an excellent book and I highly recommend it for anyone who is interested, as I am, in the life of the creative mind even if, and often especially because, I don't possess the same talents as the author. I would also recommend that anyone interested in this book watch "A Late Quartet" if they haven't.

To have the slightest interest in this book, you will have to be a string quartet addict. If you qualify, it is unique. Ed Dusinberre is first violinist of the Takacs Quartet, one of the world's elite groups. I am especially interested because I've had season tickets to the Takacs for a few decades. Enthusiast warning! During those decades, I've mused on many questions. Quartets work together more closely than spouses. How does this work out? What does it do to a quartet when a member needs to be replaced? How do they rehearse? What do they think about as they prepare something as monumental as a late Beethoven? Why do they not always play the Grosse Fugue together with its quartet? Dusinberre answers these and many more questions, in entertaining detail. If you'd like to know such things, this may be the only source out there, and it's a lively read.

I thoroughly enjoyed this book for its intimacy, which is one reason I love watching and listening to a string quartet in concert. I try as much as possible to sit close to the performers, and this book brought me even closer to these extraordinarily talented and accomplished musicians. The author cleverly intertwines his autobiographical perspective as first violinist of the Takacs Quartet with intriguing accounts of Beethoven's composition and early performances (and performers) of his string quartets. The book is filled with fascinating descriptions of people and events in Beethoven's life interspersed with deeply personal accounts of rehearsals and performances by the internationally renowned Takacs Quartet. My enjoyment was probably heightened by having seen the Takacs in performance but this book provides valuable insights into the interpretation of these compositions that all ensembles must struggle with. I highly recommend this book to all classical music lovers, even if they (like me) are not musicians themselves. It has added considerably to my appreciation and understanding of Beethoven's string quartets.

Having played string quartets professionally for almost a quarter of a century (Sequoia Quartet 1972-1987, Cleveland Quartet 1987-1995) I know the ins and outs of quartet playing, especially preparing and presenting the complete Beethoven Cycle. Ed Dusinger does a remarkable job of inviting the reader into the midst of a quartet rehearsal (for real!) and simultaneously sharing the fascinating history behind the life and works of Beethoven. Highly recommended.

An excellent and very readable description of the life of a professional musician and the dynamics of working in a quartet. Intertwined with this are prescient observations on Beethoven's life, and the structure of the late quartets. As a result of reading this book, I bought a copy of the scores, so that I can follow along as I listen. I also bought the Tzimas recordings of the late quartets to compare with my Guarneri Quartet set. This book really opens your ears!

Very enjoyable read! The author did a wonderful job weaving his experience as a violinist with biographical information about Beethoven, history during the time of the compositions, and the author's experience as a member of a chamber quartet. It was an entertaining, quick read. I'm now returning to the Beethoven string quartets and will listen to them anew with the author's notes and interpretations in mind. Although I am not a musician, I highly recommend this book.

I enjoyed this book immensely. Dusinger created something unique and wonderful, weaving together as he does his own personal narrative and his experience of performing the Beethoven quartets, along with the stories of Beethoven, the quartets, and the original performers of those works. Reading the book was somewhat slow going, as the musical content is so rich and dense, but it is well worth spending time with. I would say it's one of the best of its kind, but it is one of a kind. And very well written too!

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