



COMMUNICATION: REPORT

Modern Premiere of Franz Weiss's 'Razumovsky' Quartets

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Franz Weiss (1778–1830) is best known as the violist of the Schuppanzigh Quartet, the ensemble that premiered and popularized many of Beethoven's string quartets. But he was also a celebrated composer in his own right, one whose 'ingenious compositions, related to *Beethoven's* spirit, have long received the loudest and most deserved approval both at home and abroad' ('dessen geniale mit *Beethovens* Geist verwandte Compositionen im In- und Auslande längst die lauteste und gerechteste Anerkennung gefunden haben'). So wrote a Viennese critic in the *Allgemeine Theaterzeitung und Unterhaltungsblatt für Freunde der Kunst, Literatur und des geselligen Lebens* of 4 December 1828 (582). Fortunately, many of Weiss's compositions have survived, but most are preserved only in rare archival manuscripts or early nineteenth-century performing editions. As a result, his music remains unfamiliar to scholars, performers and audiences.

In the autumn of 2019 I began working on the first modern edition of Weiss's Op. 8, a set of two string quartets dedicated to Andrey Razumovsky, the Ukrainian-born Russian diplomat to whom Beethoven famously dedicated his Op. 59 quartets. As my edition neared completion in early 2022, I contacted the Toronto-based Eybler Quartet about a possible collaboration. Through a supreme stroke of luck, my email landed in the inbox of the group's violist, Patrick Jordan. Patrick proved to be as enthusiastic as I was to bring Weiss's quartets – almost certainly unheard since the 1820s – back to life. We set a date of 31 January 2023 for Op. 8's 'modern premiere' at the Pennsylvania State University.

Over the nine months that followed, the members of the Eybler Quartet were extremely generous with their time and expertise, playing through the edited parts, suggesting emendations, making and discussing recordings and more. We haggled over accidentals, debated slurs and ties and often struggled to reach a consensus about Weiss's intentions. The erratic nature of Op. 8's only surviving source – a set of parts printed by the Vienna firm S. A. Steiner in 1814 – posed a significant challenge. Ultimately, this collaborative effort enriched both my edition and (if I might say so) the ensemble's approach to Weiss's virtuosic but intricate quartets. It is our hope that this exciting concert will have served as a springboard for generating interest in this underappreciated contemporary of Beethoven and Schubert.

The concert was held in the School of Music's new recital hall, a 420-seat, acoustically superb venue. It was also live-streamed. I introduced Weiss and his quartets in a pre-concert lecture, after which the Eybler Quartet performed Op. 8 No. 1 in the first half and the longer Op. 8 No. 2 in the second half. The first quartet, in G major, opens with a cello drone on G and D, evoking a pastoral topic that provides a touchstone for the *Allegro ma non troppo*. But the first movement – like the rest of Op. 8 – is also replete with bravura passagework. Indeed, both quartets make considerable demands on the performers, especially the first violinist; in this movement, as elsewhere, violinist Julia Wedman led the charge with skill and aplomb. In the second movement – an E minor *Andante* with dance-like sections in the parallel major – cellist Margaret Gay stole the show through her sharply profiled bass lines and expressive, concerto-like solos. The Menuetto, the most modestly scaled movement in Op. 8, was delivered with elegance and grace. Full of harmonic surprises and irrepressible humour, the finale of Op. 8 No. 1 was the crowd-pleaser of the evening; violinist

Patricia Ahern's insistent semitone motive helped to ground the movement's many harmonic twists and turns.

The second quartet, in C minor – conceived on a scale so vast that it dwarfs even Beethoven's first 'Razumovsky' Quartet – opens with a tempestuous Allegro agitato that stood out during the performance for its proto-Schubertian harmonic juxtapositions and striking changes of texture, not to mention its innovative use of harmonics. The ensuing C major Adagio also made an impression through its orchestral tremolos, striking dynamic contrasts and suave, almost understated, counterpoint. The third movement, a through-composed Scherzo lasting 822 bars (with all repeats taken), is a feat of endurance; a particular highlight was violist Patrick Jordan's varied treatment of a repeated figure in the trio, which rather than merely accompanying the melody, gave it shape and direction. The immense double-rondo finale was played with power and panache, bringing the evening to a thrilling conclusion. (For a detailed discussion of these works see my chapter 'The Other "Razumovsky" Quartets: Franz Weiss's Op. 8 and the Formation of Vienna's *Kennerpublikum*', in *String Quartets in Beethoven's Europe*, ed. Nancy November (Boston: Academic Studies Press, 2022), 130–169.)

Throughout the performance, the Eybler Quartet's use of gut strings and minimal vibrato accentuated Weiss's innovative use of multiple stops, and the group's precise ensemble highlighted the music's many dramatic pauses and textural shifts. Audience members found the second quartet (which lasts approximately fifty-five minutes with all repeats taken) especially audacious, with many remarking afterwards on its length and complexity. While these challenging quartets would arguably best be programmed in separate evenings, the back-to-back performance was illuminating. The event's success was made possible by generous grants from the Penn State College of Arts and Architecture and the Maureen Carr Endowment for Music Theory and Musicology Research. The Eybler Quartet plans to record Op. 8 in 2023.

Mark Ferraguto is Associate Professor of Musicology at the Pennsylvania State University. He is the author of *Beethoven 1806* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019) as well as numerous articles and book chapters on the music of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century Europe. His edition of Franz Weiss's 'Razumovsky' Quartets was published by A-R Editions in 2023.