

minor major

The present recording features both one of the longest and one of the shortest quartets in the string quartet repertoire. There is no denying that Schubert's last string quartet is great in every sense of the word, but Beethoven's "Quartetto Serioso", although minor in size, is by no means dwarfed by it when it comes to sheer artistic quality; both quartets are indeed major works and a staple on the diet of any string quartet of merit. Even so, the concept of minor and major immediately springs to mind when contemplating putting these two completely different masterpieces on the same album. Duration apart, there is the obvious question of tonality: one work in F minor, the other in G major, which is simple enough and by itself justifies the album title. But things get more complicated the moment we subject the two works to a closer scrutiny.

- 1-4 Ludwig van Beethoven **Quartet no. 11 in F minor**
- 5-8 Franz Schubert **Quartet no. 15 in G major**

Oslo String Quartet

Recorded in DXD 24bit/352.8kHz

■ 5.1 DTS HD MA 24/192kHz ■ 9.1 Dolby Atmos 48kHz

■ 2.0 LPCM 24/192kHz ■ 9.1 Auro-3D 96kHz

+ mShuttle MP3 and MQA



2L¹³⁵

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For instance, in the first bars of Franz Schubert's **String Quartet no. 15 in G major** it takes only a matter of seconds before the serene opening major chord plunges into a turbulent G minor, stating what appears to be the main theme in an angular and slightly aggressive fashion. In fact, it is the very interplay between minor and major that constitutes the main idea of the whole movement, if not the whole quartet. The music is constantly thrown between major and minor, light and dark, quiet repose and stormy weather. Perhaps unlike Beethoven, Schubert does not consider it his mission to reconcile opposites or to resolve any conflict. He rather seeks to integrate them into the whole and to accept their differences. For instance, after the particularly dramatic development section very much in the minor mode, the now familiar opening bars reappear at what turns out to be the start of the recapitulation. But here everything is turned upon its head: a troubled minor chord morphs into a serene G major, after which the once angular and jagged motif is magically transformed into a gentle lullaby. Rather than representing a development of an idea, we experience two manifestations of the same idea, simultaneously coexisting in the composer's head.

Towards the end of the movement, the ever-present tonal conflict is summed up and distilled in the final dialogue between, on the one hand, the two violins trying to push down to minor, and, on the other, the viola and cello pulling things back up again. Major seems to come on top, as Schubert settles the matter with a rather classical gesture in G major. But the ambiguity lingers on, as we shall see.

It is quite interesting how we, in our western culture, almost take it for granted that the minor mode is the best vehicle for expressing sad emotions, while the major mode tends to convey happiness. But this has not always been the case. We do not have to go many centuries back in history before we realize that the interval of the third, which is the basis for the minor and major modes, did not exist at all, at least not in the minds of those – invariably working in an ecclesiastical setting – who recorded musical thoughts for posterity on scrolls or paper. The third was regarded as impure and dissonant, a sentiment that may seem somewhat alien to us now. But even today, the fact that the triad is not a universal phenomenon (it is foreign to pentatonic Chinese traditional music, for instance) makes it an interesting field of study.

The second movement is definitely in the minor mode, but is it sad? It is certainly very dramatic, and the experimenting with tonality is even more in evidence here, with the music wandering into some very strange and remote territories. The disturbing middle parts have been described as "the stuff of nightmare": the effect heightened by the use of eerie, sometimes stormy, tremolos, as well as occasional outbursts like lightning strokes in totally unrelated keys, and even passages of static, zombie-like indifference. The overall impression is neither especially sad nor happy – *spooky* is perhaps closer to the truth. But towards the end there are patches of blue sky amidst the dark clouds, and in the final bars the sun shines through, melting the ice, so to speak, thanks to the joy of the major triad.

The quicksilver third movement starts out in B minor, but here, too, the music too soon modulates through a series of remote keys, before returning home for a hefty conclusion. Then, almost by force, the cello halts the forward momentum, making way for a contrasting trio which provides a welcome relief by way of a gentle *Ländler* in G major. Except for a harmonic lift in the middle section, the tonality here is stable and inert, almost like a hurdy-gurdy. This allows the beautiful melody on top to soar with a lilting cadence, before it quite literally peters out and the whirlwind Scherzo proper starts once again.

The harmonic ambivalence of the first movement resurfaces when the perpetuum mobile finale sets out at a breakneck speed. Initially we are led to believe that the unison main theme is in minor, but after a couple of bars we realize that we have been fooled by an accented “blue note” in a predominantly major melody. Or have we? In any case, the highly virtuosic, tarantella-like horse ride of a movement slackens its pace only twice, and then for just a few moments. Here, in what arguably constitutes a second subject, a horn-like fanfare, serious but subdued, stalls the forward motion momentarily, only to give way to yet another horse ride. The exhaustive exploration of remote keys reaches a climax when a recurring modulatory passage for the fourth and most extended time winds down an endless harmonic ladder towards the abyss, only suddenly to land miraculously on its feet in the home key of G major, resuming its whimsical course as if nothing had happened. A pair of assertive final chords in G major rounds off an amazing journey, which ultimately ends up where it started.

By contrast, Ludwig van Beethoven's **String Quartet in F minor op. 95** exhibits little or no ambiguity regarding mood and tonality. It is an overwhelmingly sad, at times even desperate piece of music. It was composed during a period of intense emotional turmoil, fuelled by not just one, but two marriage proposal rejections. Although he very much wanted a family life, Beethoven never achieved a lasting relationship with a woman. This

might have been due in part to incompatible social status, as he often found himself in the social circles of his patrons, who were mostly members of the nobility. Another reason would certainly have been his increasingly idiosyncratic behaviour and lack of concern for his own appearance and personal hygiene.

Beethoven gave only a handful of his works titles, which might indicate that they were not given lightly. Hence, there should be no doubt about Beethoven's disposition when he names the quartet “Quartetto Serioso”, and in any case, any doubt would be quickly dispelled the moment the opening unison breaks out, brutally setting the stage for the next 24 minutes of music. A sudden momentary pause gives way to another angry statement, also followed by a pause. The opening gesture is repeated, but now a semitone higher and in major, emitting a faint shimmer of hope, but we soon realize that it is false hope, and we are once more drawn back into the gloom. Then suddenly, without warning, the tonality changes to the remote key of D flat major, and a gentle, but passionate melody is introduced. But, as with every other attempt at cantabile in this movement, it is soon brusquely interrupted by a new bout of nervous energy, ultimately making the movement one of the most compact and contrasting in Beethoven's output.

The second movement makes for a slight repose, but a repose filled with inward resignation. Even though the key is D major, the frequent inflections of minor in the melodic line lend a wistful air to the music. And then comes one of the most melancholy fugues ever set to paper, its winding chromaticism obscuring every sense of harmonic stability. The opening subject eventually returns, now more wistful than ever, and after a final reappearance of the fugue, building up to an ecstatic outpouring, the music gradually subsides, drying up into a couple of unison notes, bare boned, stripped of any hint of tonality. Then a subtly disturbing diminished chord keeps us in suspense for a short, foreboding moment.

Then, without a warning, the third movement marked “Vivace, ma serio” (Lively, but serious) bursts out. Angry and frustrated hammerings are part and parcel of the Scherzo proper, while the contrasting trio, interrupting twice, sports passages of gentle and heartfelt music, reminiscent of the second theme in the first movement. Finally, as if to hammer in the message, the third and last repeat of the main part is to be played faster and even fiercer than before, ending unceremoniously with a unison thump.

The growing feeling of being trapped in a state of despair is sustained as the last movement begins in the same F minor key as the previous movement. And while the music, at least initially, is less confrontational here, the many abrupt changes of character and tonality remind us of the compactness of the first movement. The emotional content, however, is even more poignant, and when we approach the end, the sense of resignation is almost complete. After a final cataclysm of grief, the music winds down to almost nothing, when, at first barely audibly, minor turns to major, and as a complete surprise a feathery light and seemingly carefree allegro rushes towards a triumphant conclusion. It is all over in a matter of seconds.

What to make of this? Is it a composer determined to go forward, notwithstanding the trouble he is facing, just the way he did in the Fifth Symphony? Or is he merely poking fun at it all? It is an enigma that will never be resolved, and it seems that Beethoven himself wanted it to stay that way, for as he confided to a friend: “The Quartet is written for a small circle of connoisseurs and is never to be performed in public.” It remained unpublished for six years.

At the time he wrote this somewhat self-revealing quartet, Beethoven himself was probably not aware of the fact that a transformation of his compositional style was in progress. It was a development that would eventually culminate, a decade later, in what is now called his late period. The quartet is still in the traditional four movements and adheres

to the classical distribution of movements. But the form is unusually compact, terse even, and transitions are largely absent in favour of abrupt shifts of character and tonality.

The duality of the “Janus face” springs to mind. Janus, in Roman mythology, was the god of beginnings, transitions and endings, among other things. He was usually depicted as having two faces, since he looked to the future and to the past. The Quartetto Serioso certainly also looks both to the past and to the future.

It may be argued that Schubert was also in a transitional phase at the time of the G major quartet; his compositional style had developed exponentially during the previous couple of years, and if he had not died in the middle of this transition, who knows where he would have ended up. But looking at the G major quartet, which was written in a creative frenzy over the course of only ten days, we can perhaps catch a glimpse of where he might have been going. The epic scope of the work and its instrumentation, which at times resembles a whole orchestra, seems to anticipate the symphonies of Bruckner. And symphonic stature was obviously what he was aiming at. He divulged in a letter that he wrote the quartet in order to “pave the way for the large symphony”, presumably referring to his last symphony in C major. On the other hand, the hint of atonality in the middle of the slow moment might, with a little stretch of the imagination, presage the world of the Second Viennese School of Schoenberg and his disciples. But Schubert’s love for the simple *Ländler* would not desert him, and ultimately he ended up Janus-faced like most other composers with a progressive mind, Beethoven among them.

Oslo String Quartet is widely recognized as one of the most versatile string quartets of our day. Since it was founded in 1991 it has established a reputation as an ensemble that unites high artistic standards with a degree of playfulness and an absolute integrity. The quartet's concerts and recordings have consistently received acclaim, both by the public and by critics. A strong attachment to the music of Beethoven has resulted in several performances of his complete string quartets, for example in the quartet's festival "The Beethoven Code" in 2006. Their programmes range from the classic string quartet repertoire to the works of contemporary composers, but also include music in other genres, and their unique versions of, for example, Peer Gynt and Tosca break with what is normally expected of a string quartet.

The quartet has played regularly in many important halls and festivals, such as the Wigmore Hall, Carnegie Hall, the Dortmund Internationales Streich Quartett Festival, the Risør Chamber Music Festival, the Oslo Quartet Series, the Orlando Festival and the Canary Islands Music Festival. Outside Norway, it is in Germany, Ireland, Sweden, Spain and Denmark that the quartet has given most concerts. The quartet is never happier than when playing in small rooms – rooms of the size for which chamber music was originally written – and such "house concerts" are the Oslo String Quartet's most important arena when sharing challenging programmes with its public.

The Oslo String Quartet plays on instruments loaned by Dextra Musica and the ensemble is supported by Arts Council Norway. The current members of the quartet are Geir Inge Lotsberg and Liv Hilde Klokk (violins), Are Sandbakken (viola) and Øystein Sonstad (cello).





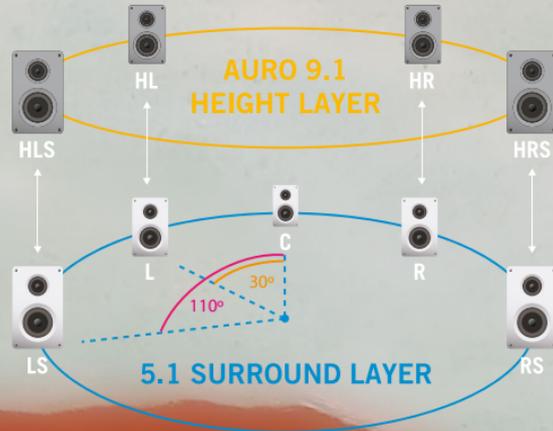


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2L (Lindberg Lyd) records in spacious acoustic venues; large concert halls, churches and cathedrals. This is actually where we can make the most intimate recordings. The qualities we seek in large rooms are not necessarily a big reverb, but openness due to the absence of close reflecting walls. Making an ambient and beautiful recording is the way of least resistance. Searching the fine edge between direct contact and openness; that's the real challenge! A really good recording should be able to bodily move the listener. This core quality of audio production is made by choosing the right venue for the repertoire, and balancing the image in the placement of microphones and musicians relative to each other in that venue. There is no method available today to reproduce the exact perception of attending a live performance. That leaves us with the art of illusion when it comes to recording music. As recording engineers and producers we need to do exactly the same as any good musician; interpret the music and the composer's intentions and adapt to the media where we perform.

Immersive audio is a completely new conception of the musical experience. Recorded music is no longer a matter of a fixed two-dimensional setting, but rather a three-dimensional enveloping situation. Stereo can be described as a flat canvas, while immersive audio is a sculpture that you can literally move around and relate to spatially; surrounded by music you can move about in the aural space and choose angles, vantage points and positions.

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3. Open the Internet browser of your computer and type in the IP address of your BD player. You will find this address in the setup menu of your Blu-ray Disc player.
4. Select booklet and audio files to download from the Blu-ray to your computer.



Blu-ray authoring **msm studio group**
Screen design and Blu-ray authoring **Michael Thomas Hoffmann**
Blu-ray producers **Morten Lindberg** and **Stefan Bock**

Recorded in Jar Church, Norway
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Recording Producer and Balance Engineer **MORTEN LINDBERG**
Recording Technician **BEATRICE JOHANNESSEN**

Editing **JØRN SIMENSTAD**
Mix and Mastering **MORTEN LINDBERG**

Artwork **EDVARD MUNCH "Rødt og hvitt" (1899-1900) Munch Museum**
Graphic Design and Session Photos **MORTEN LINDBERG**
Programme Notes **ØYSTEIN SONSTAD**

Executive Producers **JØRN SIMENSTAD** and **MORTEN LINDBERG**

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This recording was made by Lindberg Lyd AS with DPA microphones and HORUS converters to a PYRAMIX workstation on Ravenna AoIP. Digital eXtreme Definition is a professional audio format that brings analogue qualities in 24 bit at 352.8 kHz sampling rate.

Note on Low Frequency Effect channel: For SACD and FLAC audio files, all six channels (including the Lfe channel) are calibrated for equal playback levels. However, in the audio streams for the Blu-ray the Lfe channel is lowered by -10dB in the mastering process, anticipating a +10dB elevation in cinema-style home theatre playback.

minor major

Quartet no. 11 in F minor op. 95 Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

- 1 I Allegro con brio 4:30
- 2 II Allegretto ma non troppo 7:09
- 3 III Allegro assai vivace ma serioso. Più Allegro 4:41
- 4 IV Larghetto espressivo. Allegretto agitato. Allegro 4:53

Quartet no. 15 in G major D887 op. 161 Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

- 5 I Allegro molto moderato 14:44
- 6 II Andante un poco moto 11:18
- 7 III Scherzo allegro vivace - Trio allegretto 6:51
- 8 IV Allegro assai 10:25

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