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RICHARD KOCI HERNANDEZ — MERCURY NEWS PHOTOGRAPHS

Violist Larry Dutton rehearses Beethoven's String Quartet in A minor, Opus 132 before Thursday's concert in Palo Alto.

music@menlo

# A grand finale

## COSMIC QUARTET COMBINES BEST OF HEAVEN AND EARTH

By Richard Scheinin  
*Mercury News*

It often is written that Beethoven's late string quartets are gateways to altered states of consciousness. When the Emerson String Quartet performed the visionary String Quartet in A minor, Opus 132 on Thursday in Palo Alto, it was easy to hear why: As its famous hymn of thanksgiving rose up, amid what sounded like celestial organ chords, cellist David Finckel played long sustained notes that seemed to chant "Om," as in a mantra.

So yes, this climactic concert of the Music-

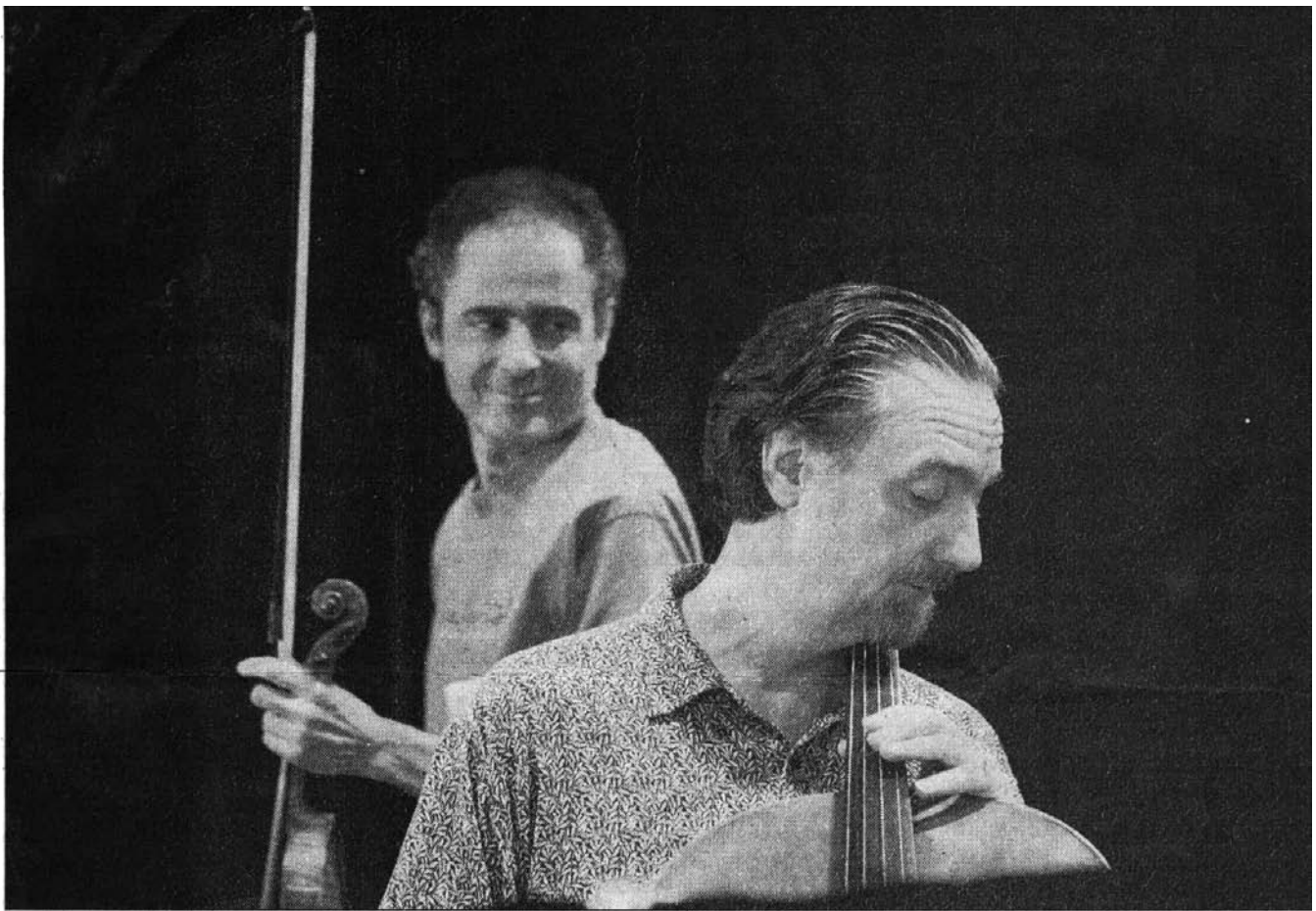
@Menlo festival — which began last month and now, sadly, has ended — had its cosmic aspect. Yet the really amazing thing about the Emerson's performance was how *earthy* the group made the late quartets sound.

This was music of instant communication, lifted by the rich, blended sound of the group, by its transmission of poor Beethoven's emotional condition in the final stages of his life, and by the hit tunes he somehow continued to write all the while: the melody of utter peace that precedes the hymn, the jubilantly pulsing waltz that comes after it.

Throughout the evening, the audience at sold-out St. Mark's Episcopal Church was treated to one great song after another, and then got to hear how the composer developed each one into a monumental statement.

The Emerson's seamless and seasoned performance almost made it possible to "see" Beethoven's methods: the interwiggings of thematic material, passed through the quartet; the riffing accompaniments to solo "arias"

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Cellist David Finkel, foreground, and violinist Philip Setzer of the Emerson String Quartet make Beethoven's late quartets sound not only ethereal but also earthy. RICHARD KOCI HERNANDEZ — MERCURY NEWS

## MUSIC | Meaning at Menlo

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by one player and then the next; the Bach-like commitment to fugue, with melodic passages unfurling and dropping, one after another, like folds of velvet into the listener's lap.

This remarkable performance, part of Menlo's two-week examination of Beethoven and his contemporaries, put some perspective on the festival, which seems securely established on the Bay Area music scene after just three seasons.

The Emerson is one of the world's eminent quartets, and its appearance was a milestone for Menlo. It also felt a little bit like we'd been set up: The Miró, Miami and St. Lawrence string quartets, important ensembles that performed earlier in the festival, ultimately couldn't stand up to the Emerson. You had to think that Finkel, who directs the festival with pianist Wu Han, his wife, slyly had saved the best for last.

### 'Grosse Fuge' included

In fact, the best really *was* saved for last: the "Grosse Fuge," which Beethoven composed as the finale to his Quartet in B-flat Major, Opus

130, and which one critic, after its premiere in 1826, described as "incomprehensible, like Chinese." The general lack of comprehension of the "Grand Fugue" led Beethoven to write an alternate finale for the B-flat Major; that ending often is performed to this day. The Emerson, however, performed the "Grosse Fuge" to wrap up the quartet with a punch.

The "Grosse Fuge" is still a strange piece: thickly textured, almost clunky, yet surging. Performed by the Emerson, the music felt as if it were being pushed out from the inside, from a hidden vortex.

How did Beethoven conceive such music, which remains stubbornly, almost perplexingly, modern? Its main theme, which gets altered and pummeled for 15 minutes, could be a punk-rock or free-jazz anthem; someone ought to score it for a quartet of screaming electric guitars. Even in the all-acoustic Emerson's hands, it seemed to be feeding back on itself. Big sonic collisions were happening, as if slabs of rock were crashing into each other.

### Pointing to the future

The "Grosse Fuge" pointed the way toward what became

the future. Beethoven's transcription of the piece for piano already had been performed Sunday by Gilbert Kalish and Wu Han. That concert, "Beethoven the Modernist," paired the "Grosse Fuge" with Charles Ives' "Concord Sonata," performed by Kalish, and the connections between those two pieces were obvious.

Beethoven had shown Ives how to be an individual, how to write fearlessly, traversing extreme ranges of emotional and also sonic territory; like Beethoven, Ives seemed capable of hewing music from granite slabs and then, gradually, stripping things back to make the music weightless and floating.

All in all, Menlo was an education. Listening to Beethoven, night after night, one could hear the wealth and variety of material and ideas in his compositions, along with his assimilation of folk influences (the alternate ending to the B-Major sounds like rousing klezmer).

Not to mention his precience: The Quartet in E flat Major, Opus 127, performed Tuesday by the St. Lawrence at St. Mark's, contains some short reiterative note patterns

that echo and re-echo and sound an awful lot like music by Steve Reich, the still-living minimalist composer. The syncopation found in the "Grosse Fuge" and other works points straight to ragtime and jazz.

Incredibly, the late quartets were written when Beethoven was deaf, not to mention impoverished, abandoned by friends, and sick as a dog. The A minor quartet's hymn of thanksgiving — officially known as "A Convalescent's Holy Song of Thanksgiving" — was written as he emerged from a devastating intestinal illness around 1825.

Performed by the Emerson with perfect pizzicato and judicious vibrato, the music rose with trembling chords, oh, so slowly — a tremendous act of control by the quartet, which seemed to be painting a picture of the composer: There he was on his bed, weeping with joy as the storm of sickness passed and he gathered new strength to go on living, at least for a while.