



Ignaz
PLEYEL

String Quintets,
Ben. 271–273

Pettman Ensemble



Ignaz Pleyel (1757–1831)

String Quintets, Ben. 271–273

Between the years 1785 and 1789, Ignaz Pleyel – Haydn’s former pupil and by now firmly established as one of the leading composers in Europe – composed no fewer than twelve string quintets. The origin of his comparatively short-lived interest in the string quintet remains a matter for conjecture, although he is unlikely to have encountered many works of this type during the five years spent as Haydn’s pupil. A number of Viennese composers had experimented in the 1760s with writing chamber works *a cinque* with either two violas or independent cello and basso lines, among them Leopold Hofmann, and both Florian Leopold Gassmann and Johann Baptist Vanhal published sets of string quintets in the early 1770s. Nonetheless, it seems unlikely that any of these works spurred Pleyel’s interest in composing string quintets, nor does it seem likely that at this time he would have encountered Michael Haydn’s two fine *Notturmi* of 1773 unless their composer sent copies of them to his illustrious elder brother. Pleyel’s introduction to the medium probably occurred after this period and the opportunity to begin composing quintets may not have arisen until around 1784–85. By this time the experienced and well-travelled composer would have had ample opportunity to observe the popularity of the medium in France and Italy through the works of Giuseppe Maria Cambini, Luigi Boccherini and others.

The first of Pleyel’s string quintets (*Benton 271–273*) appeared in print in 1785 but may have been composed before this date. What is not in doubt, however, is that a further group of quintets was issued in 1786, suggesting a surge of interest in the medium on Pleyel’s part in late 1785 or early 1786. It is probably no coincidence that around this time he also composed the first of his symphonies concertantes, another genre, like the quintet, that was more French than Viennese. When viewed in this context it seems reasonable to propose that the explanation for Pleyel’s sudden interest in composing string quintets is that it was part of his skilful adaptation to the musical milieu in which he was now working in Strasbourg.

Although the broad chronology of the string quintets is known, it is not possible to date a single work with absolute accuracy. We possess a convenient *terminus ante quem* for several groups of works, but this does not help us to establish a reliable composition sequence for individual works within these groups. Twelve string quintets by Pleyel were published for the first time between 1785 and 1789; one further work – the G minor quintet, *Benton 287* – remained unpublished during the composer’s lifetime. The many contemporary printed sources transmit these works in several forms: in sets of three, in pairs and as individual quintets. The extent to which Pleyel himself was involved in the initial compilation of the works into sets is unclear, but it seems likely that the publication of incomplete sets – and possibly the individual works – occurred without his knowledge or consent. The first set of three quintets includes two works that were composed by 1785 and a single work that cannot be dated before 1786; this was followed by two further sets of three quintets, each of which included one older work. These mixed groupings suggest that while Pleyel may not have initially conceived or composed the quintets in sets of three, he (or his publishers) gave careful consideration to the placement of individual works when it came to publishing them, ensuring that each set contained one minor-key work. The existence of a further minor-key quintet may indicate that Pleyel considered publishing a fourth set of three quintets made up of *Benton 287* and two other works, possibly drawn from *Benton 283–285*. The presence of two F major quintets in this particular grouping lends modest support to the idea that Pleyel did not predetermine the makeup of any of the sets or he would surely have avoided writing two works in the same key.

If we ignore the published groupings and concentrate instead on the chronological sequence of the works suggested by their publication dates, a number of tentative conclusions can be drawn:

- Pleyel’s interest in the medium was relatively short-lived and coincided almost exactly with the years he spent in Strasbourg before the French Revolution.
- His output of quintets was relatively modest and he was clearly not so enamoured of the medium (nor felt it financially worth his while) that he shifted his priorities away from the composition of symphonies, string quartets and piano trios in order to write more of them.
- The works are for the most part evenly distributed throughout this period as if Pleyel were responding to a steady if unspectacular demand for new works or a series of commissions.
- There is an unusual concentration of minor key works in the years 1785 to 1786.

It is the last of these points that is in many respects the most intriguing. Of the five string quintets composed between c.1785 and 1786 three are in minor keys. One of these works, *Benton 276*, only flirts with the minor mode, content to employ it in the gently melancholic opening *Andantino siciliano* but otherwise eschewing it in favour of its parallel major. The other two works, however, have their outer movements cast in the minor mode and revel in the darker tonal

possibilities this affords. These movements do not possess the driving intensity that characterises many of the minor-mode works of Haydn and Vaňhal from the 1760s and 1770s, but rather a stylised echo of it in which the notion of sociability, to borrow from W. Dean Sutcliffe, demands a 'gracious riposte' to counter the bold assertiveness typical of their opening gestures. The music is urbane and sophisticated rather than fiercely impassioned, but this should not be misconstrued as evidence of superficiality lest the same charge be levelled against many of Haydn's later minor-key works.

Why Pleyel chose to write three minor-key quintets in such close proximity is puzzling. One possible explanation is that he was building up a stock of minor-key works to include in future three-work sets. The existence of these works hints at a grand design in Pleyel's mind as early as 1785–86 to compose and publish twelve string quintets in four sets of three, a scheme he brought to fruition a couple of years later in the field of the string quartet with the publication of the twelve so-called '*Prussia*' *Quartets*, *Benton* 331–342. The outbreak of revolution in 1789 may account for the disruption of the final part of the series.

Pleyel had begun to move away from the tightly organised, motivically dense style of Haydn early in his professional career. The increasing emphasis on the concertante style in his string quartets invited a rethinking of the treatment of musical texture and Pleyel's solution was characteristically elegant. In these works he maintains the equality of the four instruments through their sharing in the presentation of important thematic material, but melodic lines are underpinned by transparent accompaniments that are rarely derived from motivic material. Textural variety and changes of colour are achieved primarily through the choice of solo instrument and the frequent deployment of instruments in pairs. When Pleyel turned his mind to the composition of string quintets, he adopted the same fundamental approach with the addition of the second viola enlarging the combinatorial possibilities available to him. Mozart owned a copy of at least one of these works, the *Quintet in E flat* (*Benton* 271), and was clearly struck by the musical possibilities afforded by the expanded ensemble. He drafted but did not complete a quintet movement in E flat and in April/May 1787 he composed the quintets in C major (*K. 515*) and G minor (*K. 516*) which rank among his finest chamber works. That the tonalities of the abandoned quintet and the two completed works are identical to those employed by Pleyel in his first set of quintets (*Benton* 271–273) suggests strongly that Mozart was familiar with all three works.

If Pleyel's first set of string quintets stimulated Mozart's professional interest, the same works also made a strong impression on his growing legion of admirers elsewhere and several editions appeared over the next few years. The success of these pieces lay not just in their high level of technical accomplishment, but in the variety and quality of the musical ideas upon which they are built. At times Pleyel is almost profligate in the way he introduces new and attractive ideas, even investing transition sections and codas alike with real musical interest. The pacing of the first movements is also carefully considered. While movements like the *Allegro spiritoso* from *Benton* 271 crackle with energy, they still contain passages in which Pleyel relaxes the tension and through repetition of phrases, more often than not subtly varied, creates a sense of leisurely expansiveness amidst the surrounding bustle. Its counterpart in *Benton* 272, the G minor quintet, is more concentrated in style, the stern opening motivic material repurposed in both transitional and secondary material. It also features prominently in the development section, but Pleyel disguises its return at the beginning of the recapitulation, amending its continuation to function as dominant preparation for the irruption of the secondary group.

The middle movements of the set are varied in style but place their primary emphasis on lyricism. After a powerful unison opening which also provides motivic material that is put to use elsewhere, the *Adagio* from *Benton* 273 is notable for the beautiful first violin cantilena reminiscent of a number of counterparts in Pleyel's early string quartets. By contrast, the G minor *Adagio* from *Benton* 271 contains ingenious representations of the theme with elegant filigree embellishments that unfold in the manner of a set of continuous variations that enhance its intrinsic lightness and grace. Its counterpart in *Benton* 272, by contrast, is generally denser in texture with frequent doubling of melodic lines in thirds and sixths.

Perhaps on account of its tonality, the G minor quintet alone has a finale cast in sonata form. It is a movement of considerable power and this is enhanced further by Pleyel's choice of 6/8 metre and *Presto* tempo marking which combine to give it a driving energy. If the tonality and choice of tempo evoke the spirit of *Sturm und Drang*, the movement lacks many of the other signifiers of the style familiar to us from Haydn's works although some of these are encountered in the finely wrought first movement. The other two quintets in the set have rondo finales. These follow the five-part pattern commonly encountered in French instrumental works of this period with the second episode cast in the minor mode with a contrasting middle section in the major. The success of rondo movements lies largely in the character of their opening themes and the finales to *Benton* 271 and 273 are classic exemplars of their kind. They are sprightly, good humoured and fizzing with life, and the movements that follow could not be more perfectly judged conclusions to these genial and highly accomplished works.

Pettman Ensemble



The Pettman Ensemble is a flexible touring group of musicians from New Zealand and Australia dedicated to performing chamber music from early classical repertoire to the music of today. Its core members are Michael Endres (piano), Uwe Grodd (flute), Curt Thompson (violin) and Edith Salzmänn (cello). New Zealand's and Australia's most talented young artists join the ensemble periodically to perform music for larger groups at festivals and in concerts. The Pettman Ensemble has performed extensively in New Zealand, Australia and across Europe and in recent years has toured the UK. Based on preparation time spent at the Pettman National Junior Academy, New Zealand's most successful music scholarship programme, the quartet gave performances at concert series at St John's Smith Square in London (which was critically acclaimed by the *Thoroughly Good Classical Music* blog) and the University of Glasgow, with Opera North in Beverley, for the Royal Over-Seas League in London and appeared on BBC Radio 3's *InTune*.

www.pnja.co.nz/pettman-ensemble

www.artaria.com

Sources

The sources upon which the editions used in this recording have been made are:

String Quintet in E flat major, Benton 271

Edited by Allan Badley – Artaria Editions AE468

London, The British Library – h.318.(4.):

Longman & Broderip, *Trois Quintettos, Op. 8*

String Quintet in G minor, Benton 272

Edited by Allan Badley – Artaria Editions AE469

London, The British Library – h.318.(4.):

Longman & Broderip, *Trois Quintettos, Op. 8*

String Quintet in C major, Benton 273

Edited by Allan Badley – Artaria Editions AE470

London, The British Library – h.318.(4.):

Longman & Broderip, *Trois Quintettos, Op. 8*



The name Pleyel is chiefly remembered today as a piano manufacturer, but the company's founding figure Ignaz Pleyel, a former pupil of Haydn, was one of the most acclaimed composers of the late 18th century. The success of Pleyel's finely wrought twelve *String Quintets*, the three of which heard on this album inspired Mozart to compose his own quintets in C major and G minor, lies in their well-paced balance between crackling energy and lyrical expansiveness. These highly accomplished works are sprightly, good humoured and filled with such an intrinsic lightness and grace that they are guaranteed to delight as much now as they did centuries ago.



Ignaz
PLEYEL
(1757–1831)

String Quintets, Ben. 271–273

**Quintet in C major,
Ben. 273 (1786)**

17:25

- 1** I. Moderato
- 2** II. Adagio
- 3** III. Rondo

9:47

1:53

5:45

**Quintet in G minor,
Ben. 272 (1785)**

17:49

- 7** I. Moderato
- 8** II. Andante grazioso
- 9** III. Presto

8:41

2:30

6:38

**Quintet in E flat major,
Ben. 271 (1785)**

20:40

- 4** I. Allegro spiritoso
- 5** II. Adagio
- 6** III. Rondo: Allegro

11:48

4:17

4:35

Pettman Ensemble

Curt Thompson, Oksana Murashova Thompson, Violin

Wenhong Luo, William Vyvyan Murray, Viola • Edith Salzmänn, Cello

Recorded: 18 **4–9** and 20 **1–3** May 2023 at the University of Melbourne, Australia
Producer: Stephen Snelleman • Engineers: Russell Thomson **1–3** **7–9**, Alexander Stinson **4–6**
Editor: Alexander Stinson • Booklet notes: Allan Badley • Publisher: Artaria Editions

Sponsored by the Pettman National Academy of Music

Cover: Lithograph of Ignaz Pleyel by an unknown artist

© & © 2026 Naxos Rights (Europe) Ltd • www.naxos.com