Ludwig van Beethoven
Born December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany.
Died March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria.

**Grosse Fuge for String Quartet**

The following is a transcript of the pre-concert lecture by Princeton University Professor and Beethoven scholar, Dr. Scott Burnham.

This *Grosse Fuge* is a justly famous, even infamous, movement for string quartet. It probably represents the furthest limb Beethoven ever went out on, and he went out on quite a few limbs. He was quite limber, I guess you could say. This movement is uncompromising to the extreme, enigmatic, and even its context is a kind of paradox, for it stands as part of the string quartet Opus 130, but it also stands apart from the string quartet Opus 130. As the original finale of that late quartet, the *Grosse Fuge* serves as the tumultuous seed to which the tributaries of all the preceding movements inexorably run. But an anxious publisher talked Beethoven into separating the *Grosse Fuge* from the rest of the quartet and publishing it separately, in a version for four-hand piano.

He was anxious about the difficulty of the piece, both in terms of – for the performers and for the listeners. Now, Beethoven’s last completed composition, before he passed away, was an alternative finale for the Opus 130 quartet, and it is in fact a masterly movement, much more in the scale of the rest of the quartet, but one that almost always disappoints, simply because it is not the *Grosse Fuge*.

When speaking of the *Grosse Fuge*, everyone always quotes Igor Stravinsky, who said that the *Grosse Fuge* was absolutely contemporary and would stay contemporary forever. And indeed, parts of it sound like 20th century music. It makes you aware of its counterpoint like no other fugue, namely by letting its polyphonic lines surge and collide in a way that suggests titanic forces. Like a multi-movement work in and of itself, the *Grosse Fuge* visits some very different places in its quarter of an hour. Several of these places are spelled out in quick succession in the work’s opening page, a page that Beethoven marked with the inscription Overture, Overture. We start with the muscular angularity of the fugue theme itself [humming theme]. And then we get a kind of mechanical manipulation; it goes into fast-forward [humming] and again [humming], and then we get a more kind of warm and humanized utterance.

You’ll hear these things in quick succession. The great Beethoven critic Joseph Kerman famously exclaimed that the first pages of *Grosse Fuge* hurls all the fugue’s thematic versions at the listener’s head like a handful of rocks, so maybe you’d better duck and cover, as we used to say in the era of the Cold War. Because something strange and unearthly this way comes: Beethoven’s grindingly ferocious, fractiously grandiose *Grosse Fuge*. Now it is a great pleasure for me to introduce four extraordinary musicians from your Chicago Symphony, including, on violins, Nathan Cole and Akiko Tarumoto, Max Raimi on viola and Kenneth Olson on cello.