

Terra String Quartet I

Harriet Langley violin

Amelia Dietrich violin

Chih-Ta Chen viola

Audrey Chen cello

Joseph Haydn (1732–1809)

String Quartet in B flat, Op.33 No.4 (1781) 17'

- i. Allegro moderato
- ii. Scherzo: Allegretto
- iii. Largo
- iv. Finale: Presto

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

String Quartet No.7 in F, Op.59 No.1 (1808) 42'

- i. Allegro
- ii. Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando
- iii. Adagio molto e mesto –
- iv. 'Thème Russe': Allegro

Terra String Quartet is a Britten Pears Young Artist for 2025/26, here for a two-week residency on the Chamber Music in Residence course.

Winner of the 2025 Naumburg Chamber Music Competition and prizewinner at the 2025 Bordeaux and Wigmore Hall International Quartet competitions, the Terra String Quartet is a vibrant young international ensemble based in New York City and composed of graduates of the Juilliard School, the New England Conservatory, Harvard University and the Curtis Institute of Music. Known for its sincere storytelling, commitment to artistic excellence and versatile approach to repertoire, the quartet strives to foster conversation and genuine human connection through its performances and pedagogy.

The quartet is the 2024–26 Fellowship Ensemble-in-Residence at the Yale School of Music, where it coaches undergraduate chamber music ensembles. As the 2024–25 Ernst Stiefel String Quartet-in-Residence at the Caramoor Center for Music and the Arts, the Terra curated unique programs centred around Britten's string quartets, including a commission by composer Juri Seo.

Haydn: String Quartet in B flat, Op.33 No.4

By the time he wrote his Op.33 quartets, Haydn had spent 20 years at the Esterházy palace in the service of Prince Nikolaus, who had exclusive rights to everything he composed there. In 1779, however, Haydn's contract was renegotiated and he was at last free not only to publish his work but also to accept commissions from elsewhere. One of the first of these came from Grand Duke Paul of Russia, who wanted some new quartets. Spotting a neat business opportunity, Haydn accepted the request and then – unbeknownst to the duke – also offered them to his publisher. There was an embarrassing moment when it seemed the works might appear in print before the duke had seen them, but the publisher agreed to delay their release and Haydn duly collected fees from both.

Thanks to his new contract, the six 'Russian' quartets were among the first works from his Esterházy years to find fame further afield. They were among Mozart's favourite Haydn compositions and inspired him to write his own 'Haydn' quartets as a tribute. The one performed today has unusual touches, the opening movement almost suggesting that it started without us and the following Scherzo being more of a courtly minuet. The heartfelt Largo provides the emotional core of the piece before a breathless Presto brings everything to a close.

Nowadays the quartet is usually listed as No.4 but in the original Viennese publication it appeared at the end, suggesting that Haydn considered his whirling, witty finale worthy of rounding off the whole set. It certainly raises a smile and takes us constantly by surprise, with its stop-start progress and its unexpected pizzicato ending. Twenty years earlier, the critics had berated Haydn for – as they put it – 'debasement of the art with comic fooling'. He clearly took no notice.

Beethoven: String Quartet No.7 in F, Op.59 No.1

Another 'Russian' quartet – this one commissioned from Beethoven by the Russian ambassador to Vienna, Count Razumovsky. In 1805 the count asked for three quartets, and in doing so, unwittingly triggered something best described as a quartet revolution. This was the start of Beethoven's so-called 'middle period', during which he freed himself from musical convention and struck out in a new direction, most notably with the publication that year of his radical Third Symphony, the 'Eroica'. Equally original was his approach to chamber music. In the 'early' quartets (Op.18) he had already begun to move away from the Classical model laid down by Haydn and Mozart: this new set took the process immeasurably further, with works that proved almost as demanding for listeners as for performers.

The F major quartet broke the mould from the start, the opening movement baffling its first audience with 'distracting' changes of direction, texture and mood. Next, instead of the traditional slow second movement, Beethoven writes a scherzo marked *sempre scherzando* – 'always joking' – a sentiment that evaded the original cellist, who was so infuriated by the repeated opening note that he initially refused to play it. On the sketches of the melancholy Adagio, Beethoven wrote 'a weeping willow or acacia tree on my brother's grave' – a cryptic phrase that remains unexplained: at the time, both of Beethoven's brothers were still alive. And the finale – fulfilling the terms of Count Razumovsky's commission – is built around a Russian folksong.

One contemporary review described the Razumovsky quartets as profound and well-crafted but 'not easily comprehended' and a violinist who saw them in manuscript questioned whether they were music at all. 'Oh,' replied Beethoven, 'they are not for you. They are for a later age.'

Catriona Chase © 2026