fff - even more extremely loud and vibrant than ff

fortissimo - extremely loud and vibrant
with even more special intensity and importance than ffmo and ff

ffmo - extremely loud and vibrant with more special intensity and importance than ff

ff - extremely loud and vibrant

forte - strong and more important and more featured than f and fo and for

for - strong and more important and more featured than f and fo

fo - strong and more important and more featured than f

f - strong

poco forte - less strong than f

mezzoforte - less strong than f or poco forte

mezzopiano - more than p but less that mf

p - soft like normal speaking volume

p/ - soft with emotional intensity

p// - soft with vibrant emotional intensity

pp - very soft

pp/ - very soft with emotional intensity

pp// - very soft with vibrant emotional intensity

ppm0 - very soft with vibrant emotional intensity
and a greater importance in the dramatic sequence

pianissimo - very soft with vibrant emotional intensity and an
even greater importance in the dramatic sequence than ppm0

ppp - extremely soft

ppp/- extremely soft with emotional intensity

ppp/// - extremely soft with vibrant emotional intensity
Brief guide to Beethoven Manuscript Expressive Marks and their notation in Editions by Nicholas Kitchen page 2

Long Line Staccato LLS - extreme energy in the initial articulation like PPa
Medium Line Staccato MLS - less energy in the initial articulation than LLS like Pa
Short Line Staccato SLS - less energy in the initial articulation than LLS or MLS, like Ta

Dot - most delicate in the energy of the initial articulation like ta

Staccato is basically short and detached but length can vary by context and Beethoven sometimes uses staccato to indicate some kind of energy that can happen in the middle of a long note showing that his understanding of the meaning of the staccato mark is more complicated

Diamond swell pair - a rise and then a fall in emotional intensity (usually volume also) felt as one event - "in one line"

Separated swell pair - a rise in emotional intensity (usually volume also) felt as one event followed by a fall in emotional intensity (usually volume also) felt as a second event

These swells seem to benefit from some amount of pulling back of the time at the wide part of the swell

Crescendo or diminuendo reinforcer - greater numbers during a time span in a certain part show that that part is featured in the crescendo or diminuendo

Beaming - the choice of how to beam notes together shows where Beethoven wanted to feel notes grouped in larger units and where he wanted to feel notes separated into smaller units.

Given that I hope to share here a unique perspective on the expression Beethoven aims for in Op. 132 that has come from myself and the Borromeo Quartet spending so much time with Beethoven's manuscripts, let me right away point you towards the manuscript!

Site for viewing the manuscript: https://digital.staatsbibliothek-berlin.de/werkansicht/?PPN=PPN749587156&PHYSID=PHYS_0001

Also, on the NEC webpage for this concert you will find an edition that I have made, a Manuscript Expressive Markings Edition (MEME) of Op. 132. In this edition you will see in a printed form all of the expression marks that are in the manuscript.

"Wood" is in the title of this commentary because of the Second Violinist of the Schuppanzigh String Quartet, Karl Holz. Holz is the German word for "wood", and Beethoven LOVED to make every pun he could in his dealings with Mr. "Wood" (I fear to think how "Kitchen" might have tickled his fancy!). Remember that Czerny said there was no occasion on which Beethoven did not make a pun! Of course, much more important than puns is the fact that Holz worked so closely with Beethoven on many things at the end of his life, and Holz was a person Beethoven had real trust and admiration for, and there are so many ways we can benefit from the records that exist resulting from their interactions. But in my note here, I wish to focus on one item resulting from that interaction, and that is the letter that Beethoven wrote to Holz on August 15, 1825. The letter was in response to Holz and Linke (the Cellist of the quartet) creating parts of Op. 132 from Beethoven's manuscript. I would love to highlight some general understandings that result from reading that letter, but also share with you a story of an unexpected discovery that sheds a wonderful light on Beethoven's inclination to unceasing variation on every scale, and in this case on the smallest and most subtle scale imaginable.

Every quartet brings all of the tools they have to the study of the Beethoven String Quartets, but our quartet, the Borromeo Quartet, has ended up using extensively a set of tools we never expected to have, and these are details from Beethoven's own manner of writing out the manuscripts of his works. He used a more extensive system of expressive markings when he notated the music himself and these marks have exactly the same form for the last 25 years of his life and they are present in the same form in the manuscripts of nearly all his most important works. These more detailed marks mean there are 20 different dynamics instead of the 9 or so we see in print, four types of staccato instead of one or two, and two types of expressive swell pairs instead of one. These items are all laid out in the first two pages of this document with our suggestions of how to respond to each expressive mark.

So, let's start at the beginning. Four mysterious slow notes in the Cello start the huge journey. The rest of us join in little by little, and soon the mystery is thrust aside by the Allegro. It feels all has changed but remarkably Beethoven never leaves behind the slow-moving notes, they just coexist in their old speed, underpinning the wonderfully varied Allegro. We are in the hallowed musical region of Beethoven's late string quartets. Now let's think further about the wonderfully mysterious opening of this quartet - assai sostenuto. In a printed score the Cello starts pianissimo "pp". Each of the other instruments enters "pp" as well, creating this spider-web of chromatic inter-relationships. There are basically two phrases, both the same "pp", that build tension and tumble into the Allegro. But are the two phrases the same dynamic? Let's look at the manuscript. You will see that Beethoven is already transforming the second phrase.
In our experience lines that Beethoven puts on the stems of "p", "pp", and "PPP" ask us to create a special glow of emotional intensity in what we play, a kind of shimmer in the case of pianissimo, and where there is one line the shimmer is more moderate, where there are two lines it is more luminous and vivid.

So, when we look at the first page of the manuscript (figure on the previous page) the Cello is not "pp", it is "ppp", and the instruments that join are "pp". There is an expressive surge marked by the diamond (m.4), and then the second phrase starts. In print this phrase is the same dynamic, a new voicing but all "pp". But in the manuscript, all four instruments are energetically asked to go to a new level of emotional intensity, with all four parts getting a vivid "ppp". This is a VERY different narrative landscape! We hope we will make a noticeable change of sound, adding shimmer at that second line! So, in what we have often thought of as a continuation, the manuscript markings are in fact setting up for us a new energy! This is marvelous, and this subtle process of unceasing variation is going to continue, showing itself on nearly every page of the manuscript!

There are so many examples possible to show, but let’s look at one that is very clear (and this one is shown in print). There is a slightly chaotic four bars where the quartet makes four jabs leaping around and then one smooth response, then four jabs, then a smooth response. What you see on the first jabs is four "p" marks. Then on the second, there is the subtle variation of progressing to "sfp". But what happens when these bars return in the movement?

Beethoven is not so interested in the jabs anymore and instead blankets an "ff" over the whole bar, both times. Small but very clear micro transformations!

One of the most thrilling moments of the movement is when the chromatic four note idea of the opening is played by the whole group starting in octaves, and this moment is the polar opposite of the delicate opening in “pp/" and “pp/”. In fact, all four instruments at this moment have Beethoven’s super marking for importance and intensity, "ffmo". There are five "ffmo" markings in the whole piece, this one in the first movement, and four in the last movement.

In a similar way, in Op. 127 there are only three "ffmo’s", and in Op. 130 in its original version there are exactly 2 and with the replaced last movement there are still 2. Beethoven then is showing us the highest and craggiest cliffs of the whole mountain range by painting them with this very rare and wonderful mark that asks for the highest intensity and importance in the fortissimo.

So, Beethoven creates this marvelous two-layered first movement, and then he takes layering to an outrageous extreme in what he creates in the second movement. Now the materials are fragments but he juggles them to create a musical kaleidoscope where each one is constantly joined with different combinations of the other materials, all expressing a gentle playfulness.

The middle section of the second movement is one of the most lovable moments in all of the String Quartet repertoire - a magical musette with a wicked rhythmic joking where no one quite knows where the beat is!

But this second movement also has a hidden challenge because of the amount of repetition that occurs in the main section. But once again, what looks repeating in the dynamics in print looks dramatically less repeating when the dynamics of the manuscript are seen.
I show you here one particularly wonderful moment where Cello and Viola expand the normal 4-eighth-note idea to be 8 and 9 notes! Instead of "ff", the quartet has the extra intensity of "for" and this is followed by the most playful "ppp/r". A little earlier the crescendo peak (m.21) is not an "f" but at the forte mark just below "for" that is "fo". How marvelous to have Beethoven guiding us directly in making subtle changes in what seems to repeat! But again, without the manuscript expressive markings, you will not see this!

And then we reach the middle movement of the 5-movement work and we enter a musical world like no other. Beethoven has made notes to himself to study the ancient church music, and now in this moment in his life where he has just recovered from an illness that threatened his life, he chooses chants as the basis for creating a "Holy Song of Thanks to the Divinity from one who has recovered, in the Lydian mode". The movement is 18 minutes long and is in 5 sections: Molto adagio; Andante "feeling new strength"; Molto adagio; Andante "feeling new strength"; Molto adagio. Just to appreciate the architecture, here are the FIVE sections in the middle of a FIVE-movement work, and even within the first two Molto adagio sections, Beethoven uses FIVE chant sections alternating with music made from peaceful leaps. Every type of music in this movement grows in complexity, so that the second Andante is more embellished than the first and the second Molto adagio creates a more embellished version of the leaping music that underpins all of the section. In the final Molto adagio, Beethoven synthesizes an even more embellished version of the leaping music with the chants. Besides being a gorgeous culminating texture for all that has built up in the movement, it happens to be an echo of the use of two time-layers in the first movement, though in the first movement it is achingly chromatic and in the Holy Song of Thanks it is perhaps the reverse of chromatic, being written in the stunningly open sounding Lydian Mode.

In this movement "for" and "fo" make a wonderful appearance right at the moment that the quartet launches into the "feeling new strength" Andante, and actually where these dynamics are used points to a feature Beethoven often calls attention to with special dynamics: the soaring single note. The First Violin holds onto an A on the e-string, one of the high notes that sopranos might sing (as they do with a very similar effect in the Ninth Symphony, by the way). The whole quartet alternates between forte and piano but the A holds through, flying above the quartet’s leaping figures. Beethoven gives a great special energy to this soaring note by marking it first "for" and two bars later "fo". It is a great feeling to try to make this energy come out!

And now I would like to tune into two sets of distinctions that we might say are "underneath the skin" of the score. The first is where pitches and durations have a repeating aspect, but Beethoven shows us that he has different ideas for what will happen on each note by notating individual figures with different internal structures. The second is external, in that it is slurring, but it is so subtle that it is easily overlooked. One of these tiny distinctions is shown in print and one is not. What we will look at is section three and section five in the enormous 18-minute Song of Thanks.

The movement starts with one Molto adagio section where the 5 chant/hymns alternate with imitative music where the quartet exchanges larger leaps. Now Beethoven takes the leaping music in between the hymns and causes this music to evolve and become more complex when it returns in the two Molto adagio sections. At the opening the leap is written with even quarter notes. In the second Molto adagio the first note shortens to one eighth and the second note lengthens to be worth three eighth-notes. It is in these three eighth-note holds that we see in print and in the manuscript the richness of Beethoven's inner imagination for what can be expected of a long note. When he uses the rhythmic hold-over dot to reach across the bar-line it seems he wants something seamlessly sustained, whereas when he actively marks the tie it seems he wants some new direction or activity in the second part of the note.
Where I have put the arrows, these are the first cases on this line where the notes could easily be marked with a single rhythmic notation or might be marked with a tie across the barline, but he chooses to use particular markings to show some process of alteration that he is imagining. We try to actively respond to each of these different endings.

In the third Molto adagio the note values accelerate one more level so that the long notes are embellished with sixteenth notes. Beethoven asks directly for a special emotional feeling by writing "mit inniger empfindung" but actually the detail of his vision goes a little further, and I was cued into this by a letter that Beethoven wrote to Mr. "Wood", Karl Holz.

This is a letter that tells us a lot! Working backward, how colorful it is in the letter to hear about Beethoven stomping and screaming about mistakes until he is hoarse (and let's do remember how much affection Beethoven had for Holz!). In this letter there are two sentences about staccato that say that dots and strokes must be totally distinct. And one of those sentences shows different lengths of staccato, what I call the long and medium staccato (the smaller ones are quite jumbled at the top of the page).

But the part I want to call your attention to is where he shows two sixteenth-notes and an eighth-note and he asks that it be distinct when the slur is over the first two notes and when it is over the three notes. When I first read this, I thought he must be referring to the first movement where this rhythm occurs just 21 times, but then I realized that there is only one place this particular rhythmic figure occurs in abundance, and that is in the last section of the Holy Song of Thanks. Here it appears 106 times! In printed editions the slur for this figure is quite uniformly a slur on the two sixteenth notes and a separation at the eighth. But noticing the letter, I looked more closely at the manuscript. Lo-and-behold, the fantastic subtle distinctions Beethoven refers to in the letter are in fact present in vivid detail. Now what I am talking about here is variation operating at a micro scale, but in fact it shows us as we play that Beethoven is once again carrying out a...
constant transformation of his ideas, basically steering clear of repetition and showing us subtle shapes in the sub-structure of his vision of the music. In the graphic here I have put the number “2” or “3” next to each instance of this rhythm and added a mark about clarity. A few seem hard to tell (?), a few a little sloppy (--) but quite a few are not hard to tell at all (!). Though it is challenging to deal with the (?) and (--) slurs, the important fact is that the (!) items make it clear what he was working with a plan of variety. And what seeing these variations causes for us is to see the spots he wants us to reach further in the phrasing, to smoothly reach for the next sonority and harmony. And let’s remember that Beethoven did sometimes make mistakes and omissions. We could easily read these variations as unintentional, but the letter and the way the figures look on the manuscript page says to me that this is not the case and that the distinctions are intentional and part of his working.

Now standing back from this movement we realize that Beethoven has crafted details in the second and third Molto adagio that are phenomenally subtle. The ones in the second Molto adagio did make it into print and the ones in the third Molto adagio did not, but all of them lead us to remind ourselves that whatever level of detail we think Beethoven is operating at, our estimate is probably too low. It is stunning that his imagination was in touch with the tiniest details of shaping. We will do our best to match what he asks!
After evoking the deepest feelings I know of in music in the third movement, Beethoven delights in breaking this mood by writing the prank-filled march that is the fourth movement, jumping around with surprise dynamics and general bumpishness. Cadenzas from the First Violin make the transition into the last movement, the Allegro appassionato. Here the chromatic angst of the first movement returns in darkly brilliant spinning music. The quartet calms down into a hushed searching music as anticipation builds for how the movement and the piece will conclude. We come out of the hush with a terrifying accelerando and then we race into the last Presto (marked, I might add, by "fo" in Violin 1!). Later in this Presto, Beethoven makes a curious demand. The notes have the mark "col punto d'arco" at the point of the bow.

It is very clear what he asks, but quartets do often decide they don't quite believe him! It is VERY INCONVENIENT, even bizarre, to play this stroke at this speed and dynamic at the point of the bow. You will hear many performances where it is just done in the more convenient part of the bow. It seems to me Beethoven wanted to create an overwhelming energy that outdid the appearance of the same figure just a few lines earlier. It is once again his choice not to repeat but rather to transform. There is actually one report of Beethoven rehearsing with the Schuppanzigh quartet which is quite amusing and shows Beethoven's energy and I think it refers to this spot in the music. Remember that he is spending hours rehearsing with the quartet even though he cannot hear - just using his eyes and inner ear to guess what is happening. The report is that at a certain moment Beethoven was insistent that the quartet was not responding to what he marked, so he grabbed one of the violins and vigorously demonstrated what he wanted. Beethoven was skilled as a string player, but in this case with his deafness the pitches which resulted were totally incompressible! My guess is that it is exactly this passage that is being referred to. So, when we play it tonight near the end of this magnificent work, we hope to give you comprehensible pitches, but we also hope to convey a little of the vigor of Beethoven showed with his own hands in the rehearsal, not to mention the variety of expression that he showed with his own hand in his manuscript.

How can we fathom what a gift Beethoven has given us with this piece and so many others. I guess the best answer we can make to his gift is to make our own gift and try to give some of the music's spirit to life, sharing it all together in a concert such as the one we are having right now.