

Program Notes by John Largess

2020 Orcas Island Chamber Music Festival

The Complete Beethoven String Quartets

Miró Quartet

Week 3: “Napoleon, Vienna, and a Crisis of Creativity” Thursday, July 30, 2020

String Quartet No. 10 in E-flat Major, Op. 74, Harp

String Quartet No. 11 in F minor, Op. 95, *Serioso*

“Out of the Desert: the Late Quartets” Friday, July 31, 2020

String Quartet No. 12 in E-flat Major, Op. 127

“Touched by Death, Touched by God” Saturday, August 1, 2020

String Quartet No. 15 in A minor, Op. 132

FROM MIDDLE to LATE: Opus 74, Opus 95, Opus 127, and Opus 132 – Beethoven in Transition

These pieces cross the greatest time span of Beethoven’s life of any in our cycle. They are perhaps the most diverse pieces of the cycle stylistically, and definitely represent the most difficult and challenging years personally that Beethoven was to experience in his lifetime. Perhaps this can be viewed as the “mid-life crisis pieces.” They all also represent a gradual inward turning of the composer’s focus away from “impressive” music for the public, toward expressing his unique inner personal vision.

The year 1809 marked an important change in Beethoven’s life: he was awarded a perpetual annuity by three wealthy patrons (Archduke Rudolf, Princes Lichky and Lobkowitz), so he would no longer have to live month-to-month solely off his commissions. In a very real sense, he had “arrived.” His status as the leading Viennese composer of his day had already been firmly established in the European cultural scene, and now, as he neared forty, Beethoven had hopes for a calmer life; he even began looking seriously for a wife. The fair hopes of this year were quickly dashed by the invasion of Vienna by the French that May, and the destruction and hardship they brought with them. Beethoven reportedly spent much of the bombardment with his head wrapped in a pillow in his brother’s cellar to protect what remained of his hearing. His no longer robust general health was shaken by the experience, and once it was all over and Vienna fell, he wrote absolutely no music for the next three months. When he did begin writing again, it was with the familiar and intimate form of the string quartet, in the form of Opus 74, “the Harp.” This piece can be seen as an attempt to return to normalcy, the recapturing of a happy dream; the form and length are very similar to the three Opus 59s of a few years previous, yet the general mood is more warm and gentle than those more heroic pieces. Beethoven no longer had something to prove, but, for the first time, his goal was rather to attempt to bring into being a dream for something better into our harsh world. Grace and playfulness (especially the harp-like plucked arpeggios of the first movement) rule the day, and a new intimacy of expression is felt. Perhaps the scars of the bombardment can be heard in the explosive scherzo,

but even this tempestuousness melts quickly into the playful, almost tongue-in-cheek theme and variations finale.

Though he planned to follow the Opus 74 with at least one other quartet (sketches for a never-written C Major quartet exist), life, full of publishers and business as usual, got in his way, and it wasn't until 1810 that he settled down seriously to write the next quartet in F minor.

The Opus 95 quartet, subtitled "Serioso," is one of the best known of all Beethoven's quartets, and truly it encapsulates the stereotyped personality of his middle-aged years that we most associate with the composer today. Terse (it is one of the shortest quartets), shocking, angry, unpredictable, impetuous, and dramatic are all words that could describe the wild-haired man himself as well as this music. Gone is the dream world of Opus 74; in its place is raw emotion. Each movement is very short, almost compressed – so much coming through in such very little time. The drama of the first movement, the mystic song of the second, the heroic anger of the third, and the pleading anxiety of the last all whirl by at breakneck speed. The fact that the last movement ends with some of the swiftest and most exhilarating music ever written for quartet seems in seconds to whisk the listener off his feet and into the air in a way only the middle-aged Master could accomplish.

Beethoven was clear in his letters that Opus 95 was "written for a small circle of connoisseurs, and never meant to be heard by the general public." Indeed, though complete, Beethoven did not even pursue publishing the work until a few years later, in 1816.

If Opus 74 represents Beethoven the idealist and Opus 95 represents Beethoven the expressionist, Opus 127 represents the fusion of these two poles: in the late quartets, the mature composer has become the Master of The Expressive Ideal.

It wasn't until twelve years after the completion of Opus 95 that Beethoven returned to the quartet genre. Much of these twelve years are what is commonly termed Beethoven's "dry" period, in which he barely wrote anything at all. Unsuccessful in finding a wife, and with an annuity rapidly diminishing in value through post-war inflation, he was emotionally embroiled in money troubles, his brother's death, a failed lawsuit with his sister-in-law, and continued conflict with his nephew and ward, Karl. Despite earlier career success, by age 50, the grueling trials of real life had caught up to him with a vengeance. To top it off, the new tastes of the Viennese public had moved on to the frothy music of Italian bel canto opera, and held little new interest in his brand of serious Germanic expression. Worst of all, he seemed to have nothing more to say musically in any case. Though still revered, perhaps the grizzled old composer was all written out. In this context, it is even more astonishing that Beethoven could seemingly rebound overnight almost out of nowhere, creating in the last years of his life some of the greatest, most inspiring and monumental works of art music of all time: the *Missa Solemnis*, the Ninth Symphony, and the Late Quartets.

In 1822, a young Russian Prince and chamber music fan named Nikolas Galitsin first brought up the idea of a new set of quartets to the famous yet completely deaf Beethoven, promising to pay handsomely for three new ones. Busy as Beethoven suddenly was with the Ninth Symphony, the first sketches for a quartet weren't even begun until 1824. Nonetheless, the work progressed quickly and was ready for a public performance and publication later that year.

In a way, the Opus 127 quartet in E-flat parallels the earlier Opus 74 quartet in E-flat: it too is the capturing of the form of a dream, yet now on an unprecedented scale of grandeur. The work

was truly something entirely new and unheard of as a quartet at that time: it can be viewed almost as an inspirational symphony in scope, but with an uttermost intimacy of expression unparalleled by any other music yet written by anybody. The quartet has a majesty and glory, and even a mysterious strangeness about it that is truly otherworldly. It is a glimpse into the mind of a visionary, or rather a visionary's glimpse into the mind of God. It is the experience of a man's spirit dancing on the edge of the beyond.

Opus 127 was the last quartet to be published in Beethoven's lifetime, and so, rather confusingly, the opus numbers of the Late Quartets that follow it as we have them today do not represent the order in which they were composed, but rather the order that they were posthumously published (by several different publishing companies). In order to bring to life more vividly the flow of Beethoven's creative experience during the last two years before his death, all the quartets as we continue through the cycle will be presented in the order in which Beethoven composed them, not in the order of the opus numbers.

The A minor Quartet Opus 132 was written during the first five months of 1825, closely following the completion of Opus 127 in December 1824. During most of these months, Beethoven was seriously and dangerously ill, suffering from an intestinal inflammatory disease that alarmed both the patient and his doctor. To make matters worse, the extremely stressful family situation involving Beethoven's 18-year-old ward, Karl, was also coming to an explosive head during this time: these ten months were full of personal confrontations, recriminations, mutual personal threats, and outright rebellions (by both uncle and nephew). The high pitch of Beethoven's personal emotions, the rollercoaster of his physical health, and his morbid premonitions of death were strangely balanced by the sheer positive success the composer was receiving after the premiere of the Ninth Symphony the previous year and the resulting flood of new business offers, as well as the remarkable feeling of almost limitless creative power and inspiration he was experiencing in the afterglow. In such a context, it's no wonder that these two quartets cover the tremendous emotional ground that they do, but it's even more astonishing that under such circumstances they could be so quickly written and coherently organized.

Opus 132 opens with a four-note germ motif in the cello, immediately and eerily echoed in each of the other three parts. Pay close attention to these four notes: a half-step up, a leap, half-step down. This simple yet ominous theme forms the backbone of the entire quartet, and it is hidden like strands of DNA inside every tune and melody of each of the five movements to come. In fact, Beethoven was so taken with the possibilities of these four notes that they form not only the basis for this quartet, but also the basis (in slightly varied form) for Opus 130 and 133, and even 131!

The drama and struggle, the joy and the sorrow of the Opus 132 quartet clearly speak for themselves from beginning to end and need no verbal explanation of their "story," but special mention must be made of the movement labeled "Holy Song of Thanks from a Convalescent to the Godhead (in the Lydian Mode)." In this slow movement, Beethoven chooses to set a fragment of Gregorian plainchant that would have been familiar to every Catholic churchgoer of the time: *Veni Creator Spiritus* (Come Holy Spirit Creator), and using the primitive sound of the ancient Lydian church mode, he weaves three variation sections that float ethereally through space, evoking transcendent visions of God's very presence. In between each of these sections, we return to earth in two passages labeled *Neue Kraft fühlend* (Feeling new strength), in which Beethoven captures a remarkable feeling of musical exhilaration, as if feeling the sun on your

face and the fresh breeze on your skin for the first time after months sick in bed. It is an astonishing movement, one that never ceases to move me to tears.