

Program Notes by John Largess

2020 Orcas Island Chamber Music Festival

The Complete Beethoven String Quartets

Miró Quartet

Week 4: **“The Genius, The Titan: Opus 130 and the Great Fugue”** Thursday, August 6, 2020

String Quartet No. 13 in B-flat Major, Op. 130
Große Fuge, Op. 133 (in B-flat Major)

“On the Edge of Understanding: Opus 131” Friday, August 7, 2020
String Quartet No. 14 in C-sharp minor, Op. 131

“Must it Be?” and the Final Movement Saturday, August 8, 2020
String Quartet No. 16 in F Major, Op. 135
String Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 130
VI. Finale: Allegro (original ending)

THE LATE QUARTETS: Opus 130 and Opus 133, Opus 131, Opus 135, and the Last Finale – The Last Years (1825-6)

The last two years of Beethoven’s life were almost completely given over to the writing of string quartets, and the monumental work Opus 130 represents almost the entire last half of the year 1825. Opus 130 is the last work of the set of three written for and dedicated to Prince Nikolai Galitzin, and this remarkable quartet represents the pinnacle of Beethoven’s Late Style dramatic language, and is perhaps the most enduringly popular of Beethoven’s Late Quartets. In its original form that has as its finale the “Grand Fugue,” later published as Opus 133, it is the longest of Beethoven’s quartets, and it can be said to represent the ultimate expansion of the string quartet to the possible limits of its scope. Instead of the expected four movements, Opus 130 has six. Indeed, this piece was a completely unprecedented work in its time, and remains truly inimitable in its depth and profundity by any compositions in any genre written by anyone since.

In other ways, too, Opus 130 is a very different work entirely: its wit and charm, and sheer variety of characters it contains remind me of watching an opera full of ever changing sets and costumes; the constant contrasts keep the listener entertained and guessing from beginning to end. Opus 130 contains Beethoven’s shortest movement of the cycle (II, Presto: 3 minutes), the longest movement (VI, the Grand Fugue: 20 minutes), two folk dances, his own avowed “favorite” slow movement, the Cavatina (an operatic aria), an overture, an intermezzo... What doesn’t this composition have up its sleeve? It even has TWO possible finales!

The story of its two finales does deserve special mention here. Beethoven’s original idea was to crown this third and final Galitzin quartet with a remarkable final movement: the “Große Fuge” or Grand Fugue. This ground-breaking movement is a 20 minute exploration of contrapuntal techniques, dissonance, and titanic emotional extremes, but it also thematically and emotionally ties together the various movements of Opus 130 that precede it. It was a revolutionary way to end a string quartet, and Beethoven was very satisfied with his achievement; he sent Galitzin a

copy of it in this form and made arrangements with the publishing house Artaria to have it published this way as well.

A year later, in March 1826, the quartet received its first live performance (though it was still yet to be published) by Beethoven's friends the Schuppanzigh Quartet – and although the piece generally was a success (the Presto and Alla danza tedesca were encored), the Grand Fugue completely mystified the audience, and from all reports, the performers, too, who struggled to play it accurately. This is no surprise, as this music sounds contemporary and is challenging to play even today – but the gossip about its difficulty and strangeness began to circulate around Vienna. Alarmed, Beethoven's publisher grew concerned that he wouldn't be able to sell the work with the Grand Fugue as finale, and enlisted Beethoven's friends to try to convince him to make a substitution. Artaria offered to pay Beethoven an additional fee and publish the Fugue separately if he would write a different (and easier to play) final movement. After five or six months of back and forth, and the strong persuasion of friends and the exchange of cash, Beethoven agreed to separate the Grand Fugue out as Opus 133, and set to work on writing another, lighter finale.

But this was already a year in the future! At the time of its completion in 1825, it is clear that there existed no doubt in Beethoven's mind as to the effectiveness of the Fugue as the finale of Opus 130; frankly, it is clear that composing a substitute ending was not his own idea at all. There is no denying that separating out the Fugue in 1826 as its own Opus 133 meant that it was hardly heard again in the century following Beethoven's death – and consequently, it was not until the 20th century that it was recognized as the masterpiece it truly is. In our chronologic cycle of Beethoven Quartets, the Miró Quartet chooses to present the Opus 130 quartet in its original daring form as conceived by Beethoven, with the Grand Fugue as its ending. In our humble opinion, to do otherwise only cheats the audience of the grandness and revolutionary quality of Beethoven's tremendous 1825 achievement, not only in the context of his time, but in the context of all time.

Despite finishing the three quartets of the Galitzin commission, Beethoven miraculously found he had not yet exhausted his ideas for the string quartet, and by the beginning of 1826 he had already begun on yet another one, the Opus 131, which was written from January to July of that year. Upon its completion, Beethoven considered the Opus 131 to be his greatest achievement in the quartet form: it is a work completely unified and uninterrupted, based on a single theme (the four notes it opens with might remind you once again of the opening of Opus 132). Its seven movements are played together without pause, and in fact, the movements are given numbers only and no true titles; each one is only a stage in the endless flow of the work. This string quartet is the longest uninterrupted piece that the Miró Quartet plays in our entire performing repertoire. When we play it, we are onstage without a pause in the playing for over 40 minutes, with barely a second to turn the pages until the end.

Opus 131 is often considered the apex of the Beethoven string quartet cycle, and it is, in fact, my own personal favorite quartet of the sixteen. No single word can sum up this ineffable work for me better than the word "Revelation." Like a mysterious vision of another universe, this work seems complete in and of itself, containing its own natural evolution, forces and laws, its own life and development. Like our own universe, its deepest meaning is hidden from us, yet at the same time everywhere evident; the keys to understanding its own unique life lie completely within itself and itself alone. To verbalize what Beethoven meant by this work is impossible, as the music itself says so much that is utterly beyond words. As a listener, you must give yourself completely to this piece and allow it to reveal its mysteries in its own time and in its own way. It makes no compromises and will not meet you halfway. Yet, what it has to share with you about

the very nature of existence is a priceless secret that cannot be apprehended this way in any other art form. It repays your investment of attention one hundred-fold, and as such is the very definition of "Art."

By August of 1826, the situation with Beethoven's nephew had reached its own desperate climax. Beethoven had forcibly wrested the guardianship of his nephew from his sister-in-law Johanna several years previously, after the untimely death of his brother. Beethoven had brought up this teenage boy to have the strongest antipathy to Karl's mother, but at the same time, the boy rebelled against the harsh strictness and even cruelty of his uncle, clearly feeling estranged from both. Now, at age eighteen, this young man was a simmering stew of resentment and anger, and his sanity had reached a breaking point. On August 5, Karl snapped: he pawned his watch, bought a pistol, and, having written a suicide note, climbed a hill and shot himself in the head. Unbelievably, he failed to kill himself, and, wounded with a bullet in his skull, he was taken by a stranger to his mother's house in Vienna, where his uncle found him. This is perhaps the most shocking incident of Beethoven's entire personal life, all the more so because he held himself emotionally responsible for this boy he thought of as his son. His last dream of family happiness lay in bloody ruins at his feet, and at long last, Beethoven was forced to see himself and his family in a harsh but mercilessly truthful light. It was time for Beethoven to let go.

For the next three months, Beethoven and Karl retired to the village of Gneixendorf in the Vienna countryside, to talk and to heal; it is a tentative time of reconciliation and rediscovery. As Karl's wounds scar and his hair grows back, arrangements are made to save him from the personal scandal created by his suicide attempt: he will leave Vienna and enlist in the military, an idea that he himself embraced with excitement. It is also during these suddenly quiet months of personal reflection that the last works of Beethoven's last year were written: the Opus 135 quartet and the replacement finale for the Opus 130 quartet. Perhaps unsurprisingly under the circumstances, both these pieces share a lightness and a sense of release that was not heard in the quartets of the previous year; one might even hear in them a return to a certain pastoral spirit and simplicity. Nonetheless, the slow movement of Opus 135 is weighty with a sense of farewell, perhaps both to his nephew and to his own dreams. The final movement of Opus 135, entitled *Muss es sein?* (Must it be?) is saturated with both deep pain and a giddy sense of final relief. To my ear, the replacement finale of Opus 130 shares far more stylistically with the Opus 135 quartet than with the year-old Opus 130 quartet, which it was meant to complete. The twinges of humor, the feeling of release, the playful acceptance, and the simplicity of this lone movement echo the final bars of *Es muss sein!* in its joyful mystery. There is even a sense of miraculous expectation that the two movements share...we are turning the final corner, and what is about to come next? The substitute finale of Opus 130 is a brilliant movement in its own right, and stands on its own as Beethoven's final composed work.

The emotional drain of these months was to prove the final straw that broke the camel's back as far as Beethoven's health was concerned. By December Beethoven was coughing up blood, having difficulty breathing, progressively less able to move, with swollen painful limbs and abdomen. It was clear to his doctors and friends that there was nothing to be done, and that years of poor physical health and emotional strain were coming to their inevitable climax. Each week that passed brought the composer greater weakness and greater physical suffering, and by March 26th, 1827, Beethoven at age 56 was dead.

As we review the final year of Beethoven's life, the final compositions of Beethoven's string quartet cycle, and the absolutely final compositions of this great man's creative output, it is impossible not to hear the tragic elements of this music in their sad context. Yes, these works mark the difficult end of a fellow human being's life, and yes, the thoughts and emotions that the

end of life provokes in each one of us are integral to the understanding of these pieces. Yet these works are so much more than ruminations on death and suffering. They are much more even than simple exhortations of hope in the face of death. Beethoven the man has much, much more to say about his own life than simple despair and hope. These final great pieces of music are the true explorations of a great human soul, one who suffered much, failed at much, and yet despite it all, achieved so much. As works of art they answer no questions, nor do they provide facile solutions to the many uncertainties our human lives pose. These pieces are, however, the triumphs of a flawed person like ourselves, who, despite shortcomings and great odds, lived his dream to its fulfillment. They are messages, created for us at a great cost, meant to provoke and to inspire every human to truly consider what is most challenging and mysterious about our own lives. They contain in total honesty the ultimate contradictions of human existence, and form a priceless mirror in art of our very selves: what we feel, what we are, and what we could be.

On behalf of Ludwig van Beethoven, thank you for coming on this great journey with us.