



# Beethoven

The String Quartets

DAVID VERNON

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**BEETHOVEN**

The String Quartets

DAVID VERNON

CD



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To

Dianne 'Donnie' Bret Harte

*in love and admiration*

*'Y algo golpeaba en mi alma,  
fiebre o alas perdidas...'*

Pablo Neruda, *Memorial de Isla Negra*

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*Edinburgh, September 2023*

## *Introduction*

# **The Interstellar Confessional**

**W**hen, in 1977, the two Voyager spacecraft were launched on their respective interstellar journeys, they each included on board a golden record intended to communicate, to any extraterrestrial life that finds it, the diversity and culture of Earth. Along with pictures of bridges and sand dunes, dolphins and DNA, human bodies and celestial bodies, recordings of greetings in world languages and the sounds of frogs and crickets, the musical choices the toe-tapping rocket scientists included have become famous: among many others, Bach's *Brandenburg* Concerto No.2, Chuck Berry's 'Johnny B. Goode', Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and the Javanese gamelan song 'Puspawarna'. But the last track the aliens will hear on their cosmic record players is the Cavatina from Beethoven's op.130 string quartet.

Beethoven, on learning his music had been selected for such an enterprise, would doubtless have been proud of his achievement (while also hustling for royalties). A composer of astonishing variety, writing in virtually every available genre, he knew the power and potential of his music: symphonies that radically altered and developed their medium; piano sonatas that exploited his own titanic gifts as a player while simultaneously foreseeing whole generations of new keyboard composition. But the music Beethoven was proudest of, and to which he returned across his career – though most especially at its very end – was his string quartets.

These sixteen works belong in any group of humanity's wonders and triumphs – with Shakespeare's sonnets and Rembrandt's self-portraits, the pyramids and the Taj Mahal, penicillin, movable type and the internet. In range, influence, beauty, freshness, function, form, sovereignty and profundity, these marvels of chamber music endure as the apex of their art. They are portals of wisdom, arenas of debate, journeys of discovery. They are tutors in exquisiteness, devils of disorder, prophets of peculiarity. And they are networks of invention and catalogues of pain, exhibiting the infinite artistic potential of our species while also proclaiming our distinctive, vulnerable place in the universe.

Across their huge span, Beethoven's string quartets display a complex mixture of energy and ennui, wit and melancholy, uncertainty and conviction. They pose questions, evade answers, dispute orthodoxies, contest inevitability. They interrogate the meaning of perfection. They force us to leap back in amazement as well as frown at their weirdness, shaking our heads at the mysteries and difficulties within: their disintegrations, fluxes and fusions, all of which repeatedly challenge meaning and sense. Understanding the quartets has thus often taken second place behind enjoying or respecting them.



String quartets, by the time Beethoven came to write them at the end of the 1790s, were seen as the pinnacle of chamber music. They were not just the decisive examination of a composer's skills but an outlet for their deepest feelings, loftiest thoughts and most complex ideas. Through the second half of the eighteenth century, composers of quartets – and the connoisseurs who lapped them up – had entered into a musical arms race which had refined the medium, much like the evolutionary battle which produced the elaborate feathers and convoluted songs of birds of paradise. And, as with the development of those avian marvels, it was a brutal game, but the results were superb, with Haydn and Mozart the undisputed sovereigns of the sport.

Joseph Haydn (1732–1809) had reinvented the genre from its casual and haphazard beginnings and is now known – for good reason – as the 'Father of the String Quartet'. Intermittent examples of divertimenti for two violins, viola and cello had been written in

Vienna by people like Georg Christoph Wagenseil (1715–1777) and Ignaz Holzbauer (1711–1783), and orchestral compositions were sometimes performed with one string player to a part. But it was Haydn who saw the full potential of the string quartet as a genre, cultivating it from sporadic beginnings to become a medium for the most refined and exacting musical discourse.

Haydn formalized and crystalized the two violins / viola / cello arrangement, the four-movement plan, and the increasing democratization of the voices. Where before violins tended to have mere accompaniment from below, now all the instruments conversed, in dialogue and disagreement, offering a witty and expressive interplay. Themes became closely developed and intertwined, frequently with a modest employment of counterpoint. First violin parts tended to be the most demanding, but little by little equivalent complexity was bestowed to all the voices. Beethoven would go further, but Haydn considerably established this egalitarian network.

The demands of the string quartet genre – its classical lineage, its small group of comparable instruments – appealed to both Beethoven's appreciation of the past and his aptitude for innovation, even rebellion, amid prescription or restriction. Far from the enriched, almost bloated galaxy of the symphony or the socio-dramatic forces of opera and concerto, within the limits of this formal, intellectual and relatively private medium, Beethoven was compelled to create vivid, dynamic and compassionate works of art, by turns stubborn and superhuman.

String quartets sanction composers to weave mazes of exquisite musical subtlety, but they leave no room for error, exposing flaws and inadequacy with a ruthless, punishing cruelty. In terms of texture, the similarity of the four instruments – two violins, viola, cello – requires far more management and skill than, say, a chamber composition for solo piano or for piano and other instruments, which can exploit colouristic effects or essential differences in sound to conceal any slacking in the strength of musical line and logic. String quartets don't allow this: they demand a toweringly high-level combination of both, with any blemish in musical argument or linear development mercilessly unmasked. There is nowhere to hide.

In many ways, symphonies are as malevolently challenging to construct and manage as string quartets; it's just that their respective difficulties are different. Compared to string



quartets, the more multicoloured, multi-voiced worlds of symphonies allow for even greater concealing cosmetics – though, of course, larger forms bring their own problems of orchestral organization and instrumental administration as composers try to steer big ships with complex mechanics. Yet the particular demands of the string quartet have stimulated some of the finest compositions from the greatest and most ambitious musical minds, the challenges of the form directly motivating genius to raise its game, to create rather than to compromise. And, in the string quartet, once a composer has steadied the nerves and set forth, they invariably find that the apparent limitations of the genre afford unexpected opportunities – of emotional intricacy, intellectual sophistication and shrewd drama.

As we will see throughout this book, classical sonata form<sup>1</sup> and the Western key system offer theatrical contrast and conflict, division and resolution (as well as scope for daring reduction, expansion or variation). These frameworks combine with the physical confines of the string quartet, which provides a pleasing range of agreeable, close-knit sounds that can be beautifully blended, as well as offering sufficient lines to put together an argument and sustain a dialogue, without room for superfluous verbiage or wanton elaboration. Drama and philosophy can happily meet, marry and breed in the string quartet, making it almost the ideal medium for Beethoven's predilection for both.

Beethoven's quartets pay due and careful attention to the lessons of musical custom and logic, but they also mock and tease their teachers, seizing vast new territories for tonality and texture, shape and sound, with often alarming implications for prevailing norms. They commandeer the form, redirecting its journey, occasionally jolting the passengers, but eventually convincing almost everyone – creator, player, listener and commentator – that the new destination was worth the hassle and terror.



By the end of his life, Beethoven chose to focus almost exclusively on this medium, for the most part abandoning or relinquishing other forms to concentrate on what we now know as the late quartets – works which T. S. Eliot would call ‘the fruit of reconciliation and relief after immense suffering.’ Through grit, hard work and sheer determination of will,

Beethoven overcame the torments inflicted upon his body and employed the string quartet for perhaps his most original, insightful compositions. In these later pieces, variety becomes king: prayers are offered alongside play, anarchic absurdity giving way to or interrupting the most heartfelt songs of emancipation. Nonchalant diversions can suddenly turn to a whimpering revelation, or the stern logic of structure is overhauled by the burden of emotional honesty. The late quartets perplexed many. And still do, for here Beethoven is at his most imaginative and demanding, perceiving music far, far into the future – not into just the next century, but the next dimension.

As we will discover, the late quartets are the music of a man, a human being, who has stared out across the abyss, known true fear, suffered deep physical and emotional pain, but come through – sometimes with a wry smile, sometimes with laughter that turns to tears, but always enduring. It is the music of a man who knows what matters and what doesn't, what is important and what is trivial. It is the music of a man who has made peace with the world, with his body, with his god, with his heart. And the quartets pass on some of that healing to us, every time we listen, if we allow their magic to work on us.

This book's three sections will follow the traditional, practical separation of Beethoven's quartets into early, middle and late periods, but we must be careful not to see this compartmentalization as being either entirely linear and straightforward or hermetically sealed. Approaches, tendencies, methods and ideas often overlap or intersect between Beethoven's artistic phases. To take only one example from the many available, the engagement of complex counterpoint is a feature not just of the extreme, unconventional late works, as is often assumed: it has a flamboyant, rebellious role in the early quartets as well as a crucial responsibility in the passionate, often heartbreaking dramas of the middle period.

Beethoven's quartets did not develop smoothly, as if from a classically proportioned da Vinci – *Vitruvian Man* for four stringed instruments – to a modernist Picasso, all angles, mood and menace. Not only do the earliest quartets have twitching, subversive distortions, but the concluding ones contain expansive glances back to older musical practices and archaic modes of expression. Time, form and era in Beethoven can be both meaningless and fluid, fighting against the partitions of genre, history or biography. His quartets help define Classicism and push it over into Romanticism, as well as anticipate Modernism, while also

revisiting the Baroque. Correspondingly, the convenient divisions we have imposed on his life and work can mislead, misrepresent – sometimes even making ‘early’ a negative shorthand for ‘simple’ and ‘late’ mean nothing but ‘difficult.’

Often the reverse is true. Usually, it is claimed, we see Beethoven, in his three stylistic periods, first learning his craft; second, asserting his individualism; and third, retreating into self-examination. But he was always learning and relearning his trade, right to the end, with new techniques and teachings from the past (especially the works of Bach and Handel) to entrust to the future. He was always locating and proclaiming his uniqueness and independence. And he was able to be both disputatious and meditative from his earliest works in the genre, which show a remarkable maturity and refinement: this was not someone learning the basics but a composer who was already a master craftsman. Moreover, Beethoven was always a restless artist, keen to acquire and absorb his inheritance, then adapt and advance where he felt it insufficient for his own creative requirements.

The stark novelty and heavenly reach of his late style is extraordinary and groundbreaking (polyphony teeming, movements proliferating, moods shifting), but strangeness, experimentation and originality are fairly continuous traits throughout Beethoven’s string quartets, the taxing musical genre in which he created many of his first and all of his final masterpieces. This book will see the late quartets as representing the summit of his attainments as a composer, but it will also recognize the iconoclast and crusader he was from the very beginning of his career.



Beethoven’s quartets seem, metaphorically speaking, both to contain Newtonian classical mechanics and to anticipate Einstein’s perilous relativity – in addition to knowing that the two theories are not in conflict but are interconnected and ever-developing ways of understanding the workings of the cosmos. If Newton’s foundational laws of motion are (very loosely) analogous to Haydn’s achievements in codifying musical form, and Einstein’s relativity is comparable to the upheavals of Wagner, then Beethoven’s quartets contain elements of both: his works display his mastery of Haydn’s principles, while the chromatic

anxieties of the *Große Fuge* would not be out of place in *Tristan und Isolde*. Beethoven understands the processes and models of classical sonata form, how keys and quartets are determined, structured – how they move methodically in time and space. But he also knows about deflection and interruption, dilation and contraction, the unfixed momentum and unfamiliar placement of notes and sounds.<sup>2</sup>

If these analogies and images seem colourful or coerced, engineered or unnecessary, we perhaps need to (re)consider Beethoven's quartets in this way because of their intensely abstract nature. This intangible, non-representable aspect is part and parcel of their breadth, depth and wonder, of course, but it is also a decisive factor which has prevented many of us from fully appreciating the quartets, however much we might acknowledge or adore them.<sup>3</sup>

At the centre of our admiration (and perhaps some of our bafflement too) should lie Beethoven's humanity. Not unlike da Vinci's blending of art with mathematics and science, Beethoven's work for string quartet is, however dialectical and intellectual, also immensely personal, exploring the suffering and loneliness of our species, in both its corporeal and spiritual aspects. Beethoven is an artist and an architect – as well as an astronomer and an adventurer, a pioneer gazing at the stars as he stomps across the fields. But he is above all a human being. This he shares with us all. And it is this which has allowed his music, and particularly his string quartets, to have their enormous power over generations of listeners, connecting joy with joy and pain with pain across the centuries.

Beethoven's quartets have most often been characterized as philosophical discussions, working out their own musico-analytical disputations, and there can be no doubting the calibre of their rational inquiries or metaphysical speculations. But we also should regard them as theatrical performances, closet dramas, mischievous puzzles, navigational charts, prison diaries, rough jokes, grumpy hangovers, sacred homilies, seditious pamphlets, grotesque cartoons, mystery stories, love letters, poems, travelogues, journals – as well as, especially in the later work, confessions.

As humans, we need to confess, but we need to conceal, too, to make our feelings and admissions oblique, obscure, different. Creativity is about confession and communication, but it is also about camouflage and disguise, and it is the chasm – however slim or wide – between the two which generates the wonder, mystery and texture of art. Artists smuggle

their confessions, their private traumas and dreams, to us across the abyss of being via their words, their images, their music. The release of these revelations provides a measure of emancipation to the writer, the painter, the composer – but, crucially, it affords us, the recipients and inheritors of art, cathartic gratification as well, as we navigate our own way through depression, anxiety or unbridled joy. He didn't know Darwin, Hubble or Hawking, but Beethoven was aware that being alive – being a thinking, feeling human being on a lump of rock spinning through the cosmos – is a very strange thing indeed. And it is to be celebrated and explored.

In his sixteen string quartets, Beethoven confessed his soul's deepest desires, its rawest pain and its bleakest memories and conditions. But he also wrote brilliant jokes, sarcastic asides and ironic ornaments. He performed miraculous stunts, and he guillotined charms which had outstayed their welcome. He investigated the meaning and significance of colour, gesture, shape and speed; the value of independence, cooperation and fellowship; the benefit of novelty and convention, orthodoxy and originality.

And he accomplished all this – all this advancement and modernization, drama and beauty, subtlety and intimacy – as he voyaged ever further into chaos and silence. His domestic life became progressively shambolic, and eventually, he was unable to hear anything but the oddest, most frightening sounds: monstrous, bewildering noises straight from hell. What Beethoven attained in his life in general, and his string quartets in particular, both delineates and defies the limits of human achievement.

Neural networks, labyrinths of love and loss, explorations of form and feeling – the almost infinite number of connections and possibilities that lie within Beethoven's string quartets (as well as ways of interpreting them) provoke comparisons with the near-limitless potential number of moves in chess. And, like chess, Beethoven's music is a war as well as a game, abstract strategies competing in a complex series of tactical manoeuvres, from opening gambits to energetic endgames, plus checkmates or stalemates. With Beethoven, we need to be aware of his belligerence, his determination, his resolve, together with his rough humour, his subtle sport, his playful ingenuity.

There is violence and pain in this music, in these sixteen quartets, but there is also generosity, reconciliation and release, along with innumerable pleasures and countless

diversions – for mind and body, heart and soul.

This book hopes to capture and explore just a few of these miraculous facets.

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- 1 'Sonata form' was the recognized system – both powerful and very supple – for organizing musical material, in use since the mid-eighteenth century (and still employed today), for symphonies, string quartets, piano sonatas, and most other musical genres. It has essentially three stages: (1) exposition (first and second theme sections); (2) development; (3) recapitulation (usually followed by a coda postscript, which can be very long and manipulative, especially in Beethoven) – though these basic phases have been imaginatively twisted and exploited over the centuries in fascinating and highly creative ways.
- 2 Just as new theories were needed to explain the very fast (special relativity), the very massive (general relativity), and the very small (quantum mechanics), Wagner required a new musico-dramatic language to fully express the ideas and emotions he desired. But Newton, and Haydn, remain revolutionaries, and we should be cautious about forgetting this even if their accomplishments were standardized and later built upon.
- 3 We might also remember that Ferdinand Ries, the composer's friend, pupil and secretary, was always keen to mention Beethoven's use of 'psychological language' when he was teaching – and Beethoven's best-known student, Carl Czerny, frequently talked about the characteristics of Beethoven's music in terms of colour, image and mood.

PART ONE

THE EARLY QUARTETS

## *Chapter One*

### **Respect & Rebellion: *Op.18***

**T**he extraordinary power, scope and originality of Beethoven's late string quartets has tended to eclipse his earliest essays in the genre. The final quartets' solar intensity – presenting music of unequalled depth, density and philosophical reach – can obscure the lunar wonder of the op.18 set, works which have their own significant gravitational pull, their own phases and variety, their own special place in musico-cultural history. They orbit and rotate, changing their appearance depending on how and when we view them: as part of the waning classical period, as portents of the coming Romantic era, or even as distant illuminations of much more modern music many decades in the future.

These six marvellous pieces do two opposing things very well – and simultaneously. They show Beethoven's respect for, and commitment to, the colossal achievements of Haydn and Mozart in the genre; yet they also show his rebellious side, his refusal to entirely acquiesce to tradition and custom through subtly extending the form and introducing his own quirks and modifications. That he was able to do both concurrently is a mark of Beethoven's gifts: as a scholar of his art, as a musical craftsman, and as a revolutionary force set to take the string quartet to places of emotional and intellectual expression unimagined even by his immense predecessors.

For all this brilliance, musical and performance history has habitually inclined to forget



some of the energy, muscle and startling creativity of op.18. Too often they are denied a position on the concert platform – or as our choice for private listening – in place of the later sensations. This is regrettable, though entirely understandable. It is a phenomenon which occurs across many cultural spheres: when an artist's later work is so universally agreed upon to be great, it can sometimes overshadow – or worse, belittle – earlier achievements. But lateness does not always equal greatness, just as early does not always mean uncomplicated or unsophisticated. Chronological markers should not automatically entail value judgements. We should appraise art on its own merits, being cautious about making assumptions regarding quality because of its placement in either history or the career of its creator.<sup>4</sup>

Few composers have had their careers as sharply placed into time-based categories as Beethoven. We tend to learn about the 'early', 'middle' and 'late' periods almost as soon as we can hum the opening bars to the Fifth Symphony (or have *Für Elise* as an irritating earworm). But any use of such labels – with Beethoven, or anyone else – should be only a practical guide, tending to be illustrative, not qualitative. 'Early' in Beethoven cannot be a disapproving synonym for 'simple' or 'conventional' (or 'worse'), but merely a sequential tag. We ought not to regard Beethoven as ever having been conventional or simple: he was always doing something challenging and original. The subtle power of Beethoven's first quartets is sometimes less obvious than it is in his later achievements, but they can be all the more potent for that.

It is often suggested – somewhat dismissively – that Beethoven's op.18 quartets, a set of six written between 1798 and 1800 and published in 1801, sound 'like Haydn or Mozart'. If we've just been listening to the late quartets or even any of the op.59 (*Razumovsky*) set, this is bound to be the case. But that is disingenuous. Aside from the inherent prejudice and ignorance habitually at work here about Haydn's or Mozart's achievements (denying or overlooking their own elaborate and futuristic art), if you think op.18 sounds like Haydn or Mozart, programme your preferred sound machine – or invite your local string quartet – to play a Beethoven movement in the middle of a Haydn quartet. The results won't be pretty.

There is very little of Beethoven's op.18 that would sit comfortably or credibly into a quartet by Haydn or Mozart, even those movements deliberately modelled on or paying

homage to particular works from those composers. The op.18 quartets understandably sound more Haydnesque or Mozartian in relation to Beethoven's (and others') subsequent developments, but to simply reject them as throwbacks or regressions is to fundamentally misunderstand both Beethoven's attainments and his very clear intentions in op.18 – as well as the highly sophisticated earlier works of his Viennese antecedents.

If some of Beethoven's other pieces from this period – like the *Pathétique* piano sonata (1799), with its scowling, exposed opening chords, or the disorientating dissonance which begins the First Symphony (1800) – sound more antagonistically radical, more insistently new and fresh, this is as much to do with the subtler and more sedate nature of the string quartet form rather than any less revolutionary commitment to aesthetic progression.

It is also, partly, about love and respect. In the op.18 quartets, Beethoven displays both an affectionate regard for eighteenth-century paradigms and progenitors, and a healthy youthful desire to flee the musical nest and set up on his own, whatever the consequences. These aspects are not in contradiction: indeed, they are only natural, and function to make the early quartets simultaneously a celebration of a tradition and a point of departure for journeys more openly novel and exhilarating. It is not that Beethoven found Haydn and Mozart, the supreme exponents of the Viennese classical string quartet, boring or out of date. Rather, whatever the German's reverence and fondness for the Austrians' examples (as well as his own desire to prove to himself and others he could do what they did), he knew that certain facets of their models would need to be adapted or extended for his own emotional, intellectual and creative objectives.

Devising his own particular (and peculiar) vocabulary with which to speak in his unique voice obviously took time. But in op.18 we already notice endless methods and devices that reveal Beethoven's unique musical personality, one so different from the equally inimitable Haydn and Mozart. What staggers about these six string quartets is the way in which they are able to at once absolutely define and cautiously extend the classical form, simultaneously demonstrating their admiration for, mastery of and attachment to Haydn or Mozart while also proclaiming their quiet independence. Beethoven was a confident artist, full of the assurance of both relative youth and absolute genius, but he was also intelligent and humble enough to recognize his position in musical history and development – even as he drastically

began to alter its course.



Beethoven is both too well known and wholly unknowable, but biography – and through it, a deeper understanding of the art – is possible, and potentially beneficial. In this book, each chapter will contain a relevant background to locate the quartets in their appropriate historical and biographical context: to remind us of the tough, exciting times in which Beethoven lived, politically as well as musically, and to explore the enormous internal and external pressures he faced, personally and professionally.

Ludwig van Beethoven was baptized in Bonn on 17 December 1770 (he was probably born the day before, though no documentary proof of this is known to exist). Hegel and Wordsworth had been born earlier in the year; Bach and Handel had been dead for twenty and eleven years respectively. Haydn and Mozart were thirty-eight and fourteen. Napoleon Bonaparte was sixteen months old.

The room into which Beethoven entered the world is beautifully preserved, in the Beethoven-Haus museum on Bonngasse. A stark and simple space, with white walls and wooden floors, the room sits squashed on the top floor, its ceiling so low you can hardly stand up properly in it. A raised bust of the composer rests in the centre, accompanied by a bouquet of flowers, and to loiter in this quiet place, where one of the foremost forces of global art and humanity took his first breaths, is an act of considerable wonder, as we imagine what the infant would go on to achieve. The house was no palace, but it was no slum either. Modest and unassuming, it was a perfectly middle-class dwelling with a baroque stone facade, shuttered windows and enough internal space to avoid mind-numbing overcrowding.

Like Bach and Mozart before him, Beethoven was blessed – or was it cursed? – to be born into a musical family on a musical street. His grandfather, also a Ludwig van Beethoven (1712–1773), was a Flemish singer and music director – as well as an occasional property developer, moneylender and wine merchant, the last a professional activity which seems to have bestowed a destructive affiliation with the demon drink on his wife, son and grandson.

The music-making side of this patriarch's life was more fruitful; he (eventually) rose to become kapellmeister for Archbishop-Elector of Cologne Maximilian Friedrich von Königsegg-Rothenfels – an individual who would also feature significantly in our Ludwig's career, becoming his first employer and the dedicatee of the bold, precocious *Electoral Sonatas* for piano of 1782–83.

Although he was only three when his grandfather died, Beethoven maintained a lifelong affection and admiration for him. Every time he moved house during his years in Vienna – an activity which was near constant – Beethoven would himself carry a large portrait of his grandfather, hurrying ahead to award it a place of honour in his new home. A talisman and a treasure, this painting, made by Amelius Radoux shortly before its subject died, shows us a big man, beautiful and erudite, with a broad forehead, rosy cheeks, jowls that are fleshy and friendly, and a serious but imperceptibly mischievous demeanour.

He also holds a score, Pergolesi's opera *La serva padrona* (1733), lying open at an aria he himself had once sung. Just before his death, the intermittent businessman, court employee and once-famous singer was, understandably, reasserting himself for posterity as an artist – which he was. But more than anything, Ludwig van Beethoven, grand-père, was a survivor, overcoming the vicissitudes of his musical and mercantile lives by a certain fortitude of spirit and virtuosity of character. Yet the two, music and commerce, were linked, since it was the freedom of his art that saved him, protected him, from the chaos of the rest of his life.

It is easy to see how a grandson might harbour an enduring esteem for such a figure – not least when that grandson's own father was such a mess. Johann van Beethoven (c.1740–1792) was an abusive alcoholic who regularly beat his son. A mediocre jobbing musician, teaching, singing and playing the violin, he noticed the fame and fortune Leopold Mozart had extracted from his offspring and sought to replicate that success with his own child when the young Ludwig showed signs of immense musical talent on the piano. Johann would lock his boy in the cellar, berating him if he played poorly, or drag him out of bed to practice all night. By his teens, Beethoven was supporting the family through his playing, and in 1789, at eighteen, shortly after his mother, Maria, had died, he even had to obtain a court order against his father to ensure half the parent's pay went to food and rent rather than the cork and bottle.

When Johann himself died at Christmas 1792, his son had just left for Vienna. The father's spirit had perhaps given up on enduring further, just as his body finally succumbed to the ravages inflicted upon it (the local politicians joked that, on his death, the loss of alcohol revenue was dangerously undermining the exchequer). More seriously, we can comprehend how growing up under such a figure – a violent drunk and inadequate – would affect a sensitive and ambitious young man like Beethoven, driving him forward not only to escape but to succeed.

It doesn't require vast psychological insight to see the young Ludwig utilizing the initial terror, hatred and confusion he must have felt and channelling it into an outlet, a diversion, a medium through and in which he could rise above the wretched failings of his father and attain (what he perceived as) the respectful, pre-eminent status of his grandfather. That Beethoven himself would, in later age, become habitually obnoxious and too fond of drink, though neither to anything like the extent of his father, reveals its own sad story of man handing on misery to man, the cycle repeating.

But this lay in the future. For all the horrors of his childhood, Beethoven did receive a good musical education. The second born of seven children, only three of which survived infancy, Ludwig received his first music lessons from his father, followed by other local teachers, including an insomniac pianist who liked to coach in the middle of the night, hauling the young Beethoven from his slumbers for impromptu tutelage in keyboard technique. Even as Johann lied about his boy's age, in order to market him as an emergent wunderkind, a new Mozart, his promotional activities largely failed in financial terms, though they helped foster Beethoven's talents, showcasing the pianistic flair and improvisation skills which would serve him so well as he established himself later on.

By the 1780s, more important lessons in composition were underway, and in March 1783, Beethoven's first published work appeared: a set of keyboard variations, eventually allotted not an opus number but a WoO number,<sup>5</sup> WoO 63. Known as the *Variations on a March by Dressler*, they run for some seven or so minutes. It would be easy to read too much into them, identifying the base camps or nursery slopes of the mountain ranges Beethoven would create. But portents are there.

The *Dressler Variations* are charming, innocuous, fairly conventional, yet there is also a

defiant charisma to their quality, the sound of a voice that will be independent, fierce, resourceful and strong. Forceful demands from the notes pair with intoxicating spells, the pianist as hypnotist as well as impresario and show-off. The opening *maestoso*, Dressler's stately theme, is itself almost frighteningly Beethovenian, anticipating not only the dynamics of the early sonatas but even some of the ferocious burdens of piano writing's true Everest: the *Hammerklavier* of 1818. Following the presentation of the subject, Beethoven embellishes his source with wit, adventure and brilliance, a boy waggishly exhibiting his dexterous digits and the formidable brain powering them. Yet the young composer has respect too. He knows the value of the heritage he is literally taking on and expanding, whatever the games he plays.

Variations and a funeral march are two forms which will recur throughout his musical career. And Beethoven's *Dressler Variations* are also in C minor, that soon-to-be personal stamp of tempestuous angst and emblem of exertions against fate. Indeed, the *Dressler* sequence is not arbitrary, an anarchic series of impish divergences. It has a plan. However alike some of the nine variations are, there is a journey built into the structure of the work, a pattern of pain which leads somewhere. Struggle is not for its own sake, self-pitying self-advertisement, but is a functional aspect of existence, an activating agent to prevail over destiny and distress. Other composers had suffered and overcome, of course, but the particular stresses and sorrows of his own life lend Beethoven's musical trials and triumphs an acutely poignant air, even from his first published work.



Born into the later stages of the Age of Enlightenment as it began to more rapidly destabilize into the Age of Revolution, Beethoven was a boy of ten when Kant produced the first edition of *Critique of Pure Reason*, that foundational text of modern philosophy, and eighteen when the Bastille was stormed. Political, social and intellectual change were interlinked, and Beethoven's own contribution to upheaval and development – whatever its vast, multifaceted and independent reach – needs also to be properly regarded inside the intense milieu within which he created his art.

Earlier music had had its own revolutions, of course – just as Kant had built on the empiricists Locke and Hume, or Robespierre et al. learned from the outlook of Rousseau and Voltaire (as well as, more widely, from the outcome of the American War of Independence). Beethoven's predecessors certainly had their own musical insurgencies. To not see Haydn or Mozart as radical is to fundamentally misunderstand their art (and Mozart was the first truly freelance composer, exchanging the shackles of patronage to write for the people – or at least for himself). Yet Beethoven would be more profoundly concerned with not only raising the autonomous status of the artist but also seeing music as a vital element of social transformation, as Wagner would do in the next century. The artist would be both aloof from his age and deeply allied to it, remoteness and intimacy fused.

Through the 1780s, Beethoven had been developing his skills as both a composer and a pianist, becoming especially known for his proficiency in Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, as well as working as an occasional (and irritable) music tutor and playing viola in the Bonn court orchestra, where he was exposed to the operas of Gluck and Mozart. (Beethoven had likely met Mozart in Vienna during a short trip there in 1787, and he had encountered Haydn on several occasions by the time he settled in Vienna in the autumn of 1792.)

Working somewhat cantankerously under Haydn's sporadic direction, Beethoven also studied rigorous, old-fashioned counterpoint under Johann Albrechtsberger. These lessons, however dull the pedagogue, helped Beethoven become a significant modern master of the technique very early on in his career, putting his (literally) old-school learning to important, if subtle, subversive use – especially in his op.18 quartets. More dynamic studies also began with Ignaz Schuppanzigh, a violinist who would become not only a friend but leader of the world's first truly professional string quartet – the Schuppanzigh Quartet – which would premiere many of Beethoven's works in the genre.

Beyond the classroom, virtuosic private events began to establish Beethoven's name as a pianist, as he performed his own material and that of his forebears in the secluded salons of the nobility. This rough Rhinelander, with his left-wing politics and coarse manner, was courted by the politest of polite society, the cream of the Viennese cake, so that by 1794 he was the hottest talent in town, protégé of powerful patrons, an idolized entertainer for the rich and a swaggering artist to boot. In little over a year in the city, he had gone from

common or garden virtuoso (Vienna swarmed with them) to a rare find, not only a valuable species but something unique and entirely irreplaceable.

At the end of March 1795, a public unveiling took place, a three-day festival of his skills, beginning on the twenty-ninth with his own C major piano concerto. A few days before the concert, a friend visited Beethoven to see how rehearsals were going in the Burgtheater: the composer was frantically writing the last movement to the concerto, passing the still-wet pages of the score to musicians sitting in the hall, who were busy copying out the instrumental parts. Beethoven was also suffering from a nasty stomach upset (a lifelong affliction), so that work on the concerto's complex seven-part rondo finale was constantly interrupted by furious bouts of vomiting. The next day, this same friend, Franz Wegeler, witnessed a final run-through of the C major concerto in Beethoven's apartment with reduced orchestra. Finding his piano was slightly out of tune, Beethoven simply improvised his solo part in C-sharp major. Genius tends to find a way.

The concert itself was an unqualified triumph. Two days later, on the thirty-first, this public debut closed with Mozart's moody D minor concerto (K.466), including the new wizard Beethoven's own windswept and charismatic cadenzas. He had astonished a city wearily accustomed to musical glamour. Though Beethoven would understandably hold his own early C major piano concerto<sup>6</sup> in slightly lower regard than his other, more radical, early works, seeing it as a frivolous toy for player exhibition and public consumption, it was a vital vehicle in gaining recognition and experience. It was a firework, not a bomb, designed to appeal rather than to revolutionize. But Beethoven had arrived, sonic pyrotechnics and all.

Later in 1795, he took the important step of publishing his 'opus one' – for a composer an essential, daunting public statement of advent and purpose. Far from being his first circulated work (as we saw, the *Dressler Variations* hold this distinction), the publication of op.1, a set of three trios for piano, violin and cello, marked the transition from dazzling young pianist to more mature composer – though Beethoven would neither see the distinction between pianist and composer nor call a halt to the performing. Crucially, however, Beethoven not only saw these trios as holding a substantial enough bearing to merit the designation 'opus one', to properly announce his work to a much wider public and invite critical scrutiny, but he also knew their marketable potential: he published them for



income as much as recognition. (And, indeed, they were a great success, generating enough profit to underwrite a year's living expenses.)

Performance and publication continued. Over the next few years, as the century played itself out, piano sonatas, cello sonatas and violin sonatas, as well as string trios (violin, viola and cello) appeared with a regular, unnerving degree of consistency and brilliance. This last genre, the string trio, allowed Beethoven to dip his toes into the challenging, hazardous waters of chamber writing for strings, but without subjecting himself (either internally or externally) to the imposing critical legacy of Haydn's and Mozart's sizeable oceans of work in the string quartet form. Even – and especially – Beethoven knew patience and pragmatism. Don't tackle the deep end before you've learned to swim. But Beethoven being Beethoven, that plunge was not far away – and the depth would also be an excellent catalyst to learning fast.



Like Haydn and Mozart before him, and like very few composers since, Beethoven planned (and realized) a sustained confrontation with all genres of music – not just sacred, stage, chamber and orchestral works but a variety of forms within those broader categories as well. Eventually, the opp.109–111 and *Hammerklavier* sonatas, *Diabelli Variations*, *Choral Symphony* and *Missa solennis* would represent the penultimate subjugations of this campaign, claiming unthinkable, uncharted new terrain for their forms, before the even further final reach of the late string quartets, which seem to take musical advancement and annexation far beyond any merely terrestrial dimensions.

But even in his early years, Beethoven made several vital, initial incursions across a range of genres. As we have said, many of his preliminary works, and especially his piano sonatas, were explosive, progressive pieces. Given his supreme skills at the keyboard, the piano sonata above all was a medium in which Beethoven could move with unrivalled dexterity and ease, bending and extending the form in ways he knew his fingers could handle. This could later then be emulated and maintained in the more demanding larger forms of quartet writing and symphonic music.

Listening to the sequence of early piano sonatas – opp.2, 7, 10, 13 and 14 – written in the mid-to-late 1790s, prior to the First Symphony (1800) or op.18 quartets (1801), we can sense Beethoven's ambition swelling as his grasp is more than met by his reach. We can hear as musical problems are presented, confronted and (at least conditionally) resolved. This was something Beethoven could more easily do at the piano than elsewhere, half collating his improvisations – with just a little reining in of their more extreme extemporizing dynamics – into works fit for publication.

Along with the piano sonatas, the other genres of Beethoven's pre-op.18 works (the op.1 piano trios, the op.5 cello sonatas, and various violin sonatas and string trios) shared something that the string quartet did not. Although both Haydn and Mozart had written countless exquisite and often very important examples in most of these forms, their finest, most groundbreaking achievements lay elsewhere: for Haydn, in the symphony and string quartet; for Mozart, the piano concerto, opera, string quartet and quintet. Beethoven could thus work in piano sonatas or string trios, cello or violin sonatas, knowing he was not doing so in the full glare of Haydn's and Mozart's most scorching suns: their quartets. Even titans like Beethoven need their own space and shade to nurture and grow their talents.<sup>7</sup>

Everything is relative (to a degree), and this is not to denigrate Mozart's and Haydn's piano sonatas or trios – which are truly significant, striking works. But it allows us to more easily comprehend both Beethoven's initial reluctance to commit to the string quartet and his outpouring of works for other chamber forms. For all his ability and instinct, Beethoven was never composing in a void, never so self-assured he felt he could conquer anything, immediately, alone. He fed on the works of those around him, allowing their innovations and developing traditions to nourish and sustain him, while letting the more important aspects build his own musical flesh. Beethoven's humility and patience are sometimes forgotten amid the heroism and defiance, especially of his later years, but they were important early traits which made him bide his time: waiting, learning, doing. (Lest we forget, op.18 are scarcely the creation of a very young man – especially by the standards of his time.)

There is also the fact that, as Haydn and Mozart had shown, the string quartet was a fiendishly difficult form to write for. It took minds of their stature to create, evolve and refine it. Mozart's *Haydn* and *Prussian* Quartets were breathless attainments, showing him as the

medium's true heir, full of not only melodic gifts and an astounding formal sophistication but a limitless emotional range: from expansive, hospitable bubbles to taut, disquieting corners of despair. After Mozart's death, in the 1790s, Haydn was still creating some of his most powerful string quartets, culminating in the *Erdödy* six of op.76 (1797) and the *Lobkowitz* pair, op.77 (1799), works which radiate wit, wisdom and the deliberate audacities of ripe old age.

It was amid these final achievements from the form's father that Beethoven began his six op.18 quartets. He worked with a scrupulous attention, pouring his knowledge, education and craftsmanship into them, while also being – at times – painfully aware he was in some measure learning on the job, as all artists must.

We might pause to consider the burden on Beethoven, as a promising but unproven (at the highest echelon) composer in the great city of Haydn and Mozart, despite his success as a pianist. Indeed, that very success probably loaded more pressure on him to prove himself beyond the keyboard. And more than this: his string quartets would be heard (and adjudicated, however courteously) by the very man who had systemized and honed the genre, turning it into the absolute zenith of chamber music.

Haydn, as we've said, was even still churning out masterpieces himself. As he composed op.18, Beethoven must have felt now and then like he was playing Federer at Wimbledon on the eve of King Roger's retirement. That legendary Swiss might have been nearing the end of his career, and he might not have been everything he once was, but he was still capable of astonishing, top-level tennis. Pressure then. But excitement, too, as Beethoven took on the champ, showing the world he could play on all surfaces – and that he not just had an aggressive baseline game but was capable of huge court coverage and an array of delicate drop shots too.



The op.18 quartets are a riveting, resilient, highly engaging (and engaged) sequence of very convincing works, more complex, subtle and significant than they are often given credit for, judged as they too frequently are only against the peerless triumphs of the later quartets.

Each is meticulously woven by threads of keys, rhythms, melodies which function effectively together to create fine colours, shapes, images as well as patterns of feeling and configurations of thought. Ideas come and go, sometimes elaborated in an investigative manner, sometimes playfully discarded.

None of these quartets are insipid or weak, but if the ideas – despite (or even because of) their exquisite workmanship – sometimes seem a little underdeveloped, this is for the most part due to the relatively conventional box they came in rather than any failure connected with Beethoven's imagination. And sometimes, their perceived shortcomings are actually down to our own lack of vision and our own warped perspectives.

Seen from the stately summits of op.127 or op.132, op.18 might seem like mere hills. But this is the wrong analogy and the wrong point of view. In op.18 Beethoven was showing Vienna that he could build a racing car as sleek, elegant and efficient as those of Haydn and Mozart, not one that could go the fastest or furthest. And he achieved this, while also including some subtle – and some not so subtle – features that meant his later models would one day outshine and outperform theirs: in horsepower, aerodynamics, agility, endurance – as well as, though this is more subjective and less tangible, beauty.

For the time being, Beethoven was more interested in being contemporary – though not fashionable – than being visionary. The op.18 set show him as a master of the quartet, not an apprentice, and the equal of his forebears in the genre. Yes, he had learned on the job, but the end results show no sign of the struggle. And while the language of the quartets might primarily be Haydn's, the accent is Beethoven's: discreet yet distinctive.

In terms of exterior form, Beethoven did not develop the string quartet with the same bewildering speed and elasticity as the piano sonata until much later, so that the external features of Beethoven's op.18 feel fairly conventional, or at least classical – as their composer intended them to be. Shape, structure and movements are less flexible in the early quartets when compared to the early sonatas, where the virtuoso pianist experiments in a lively fashion which approaches improvisation (which was, after all, one of the sources of Beethoven's inspiration). Spasms and outbursts, jerks and jolts, leaps and elisions, hasty reductions and leisurely enlargements are a constant feature of the early piano sonatas. They display a more consistent kind of anxious, daring luminosity and mercurial panache that

figures less obviously and less frequently in op.18 (though when it does, it is fascinating) but which will come to haunt and characterize the late quartets.

This is not to say that op.18 are lacklustre, unadventurous works. Far from it. It is just that their revolutions are more elusive and understated. In basic design, op.18 assuredly matched the formal models of Haydn and Mozart, as Beethoven had meant them to. But Beethoven, the abrasive genius of the next generation, also inaugurated a quiet revolution within the tone, fabric and expressive possibility, both intellectually and emotionally, of the quartet, as he was also doing in the symphony.<sup>2</sup>

In many of their interior textural and methodological features, Beethoven's op.18 quartets meet the challenge of Haydn's colossal edifice simply by a brazen, urbane avoidance, by here and there employing an older style of almost pedantic and scholarly counterpoint – canons, fugues, and so on – to fit alongside the smooth techniques of the classical age. Here the young(ish) pretender utilized antiquated forms to forge a future away from the more effortless, almost superficially facile and comedic, classical style of Haydn.

Confronting not only the father of the form but its greatest exponent, still unsurpassed even by the triumphs of Mozart, seemed to force Beethoven to look back in order to move forward. It is here that much of op.18's rebellion and progress takes place, with subtle internal shifts and nuances, time and again generated by archaic contrapuntal practices often so obsolete as to feel shockingly fresh when redeployed.



The op.18 quartets could only have originated from late eighteenth-century Vienna. But they could only have been written by Beethoven too. It was a fertile soil, but the fruit it yielded was unique. Beethoven was happy to pay his respects to his teachers, and to acquire their proficiency, while also limbering up for his own storming of their civilized fortress. To begin with, however, in op.18, he organized a subtle campaign of internal reorganization and sly propaganda, before later launching an even more direct attack on the citadel itself, eventually turning out outlandish quartets with five, six or even seven movements, as well as with multiple other disruptions and expansions to the architectural paradigms of the Ancien

Régime.

While maintaining a classical design – four movements and the principles of sonata form largely upheld, though always finding new ways to exploit and explore exposition-development-recapitulation – Beethoven promoted a new, more democratic texture to his op.18 quartets, putting the principles of ‘liberté, égalité, fraternité’ into chamber music practice. One of the principal developments of Haydn’s string quartets, effectively reinventing the genre, was the essentially equal treatment of the four instruments (famously characterized by Goethe as ‘four rational people conversing’). But, as we will see, the four voices of Beethoven’s op.18 speak with an individual independence far louder than those of any of his predecessors. This internal redistribution of wealth was a subtle shift, more indirect than a radical change to the overall model itself. But it had a powerful, lasting, effect. It influenced how players communicated and asserted themselves within their group, as well as how string quartet works spoke to each other, down the centuries.

Some of this progressive, egalitarian quality was connected to Beethoven’s petition to the past. The personal autonomy granted to the four separate string voices was, in part, achieved – ironically, as we’ve seen – via retrograde counterpoint techniques. These were crafty, devious little tools of misinformation and control, seditious pamphlets wafting on the breeze through the ordered gardens of the classical quartet form, with its suave, graceful conjunction of melodies and lines. The goals of these cunning, apparently passé devices would ultimately be realized only in the extraordinary textures and designs of the late quartets, but their message was clear from the outset: ruffling feathers and agitating change by employing old-fashioned counterpoint techniques in startling new contexts. Such appeals for revolution naturally met with sniggers and condescension from those empowered by the status quo, but Beethoven knew both that change started small and that he was the one capable of bringing wholesale reform about.

The experiments and inventions in counterpoint Beethoven lay down in op.18 look back to exercises from the classroom and even further to the ancient masters. But they also anticipate the remarkably expansive constructions of the *Razumovsky* Quartets – the vast fugato in the F major’s first movement; the spine-tingling canons on the E minor’s so-called Russian theme; the ferocious, semi-rigorous fugal finale which closes the C major and the set

– as well as Beethoven’s concluding mania for such techniques, taken to extraordinary lengths in the Große Fuge and op.131.

Haydn, of course, had ended three (Nos.2, 5 and 6) of his groundbreaking op.20 quartets (1772)<sup>2</sup> with stringently fugal finales, which were then imaginatively reproduced by Mozart.<sup>10</sup> But Haydn’s striking, almost self-consciously severe, exercises in antiquated techniques had been placed neatly at the end of quartets and sounded so strict as to be faintly humorous. Moreover, excepting these witty conclusions, the more agile, more chic and refined polyphony of Haydn’s high classical style, smooth and shiny, was by now his principal contrapuntal practice, where the prevailing aesthetic was one aspiring towards the broader moral, social and structural principles of the Enlightenment.

With Beethoven, the key was that his ancient fugal writing existed *within* classical structures, *alongside* the soft, glossy counterpoint of the classical style, as part of a quietly troublemaking methodology. His insertion of scholastically rigid techniques, stiff studies, stood out as disquieting dispatches – all angles and brusqueness – from a subversive rebel still wearing a (slightly threadbare) frock coat. It was a brilliant coup: patient, shrewd, and eventually part of a long-term project.

Knowing the revolution that was to come, the astonishing modernity Beethoven would usher in, we can often miss these messages. These treasonable tracts have, to an extent, disintegrated, become absorbed into the wider fabric of history, making op.18 sound, to our ears, ‘quite like’ Haydn or Mozart. But listen carefully and those mutinous warnings are still there, troubling the environment in which they live, muddying the waters of innocent luxury.

Haydn and Mozart were no timid practitioners. They knew the value of violent emotions, of Sturm und Drang, of minor-key moodiness – of progression, too, in form and tone. But they also knew the Enlightenment was about balance, about harmony, about music neither too easy nor too difficult to either play or listen to: the happy medium. Passions, Mozart would write to his father, should never be uttered to the point of revulsion. Even his darkest works tend to end with a restoration of socio-musical harmony: *Don Giovanni* with a moral in D major; the D minor piano concerto with a jubilant rondo occasionally clouded by memories of pain but ultimately concluding in sunlight.<sup>11</sup>

For Beethoven, this wasn’t enough. His entrance into the ostensibly placid waters of

Vienna disturbed many, not least because he was disrupting the surface elegance that concealed injustice and inequality. Many of Beethoven's early piano and violin works were described as being not only gloomy, eccentric and enigmatic but full of hieroglyphs and ciphers, far from the fashion for restraint and refinement, candour and sincerity. But this trend was itself a false front, emblematic of monumental disingenuousness. Society was not open and honest but locked and fraudulent, a rampant hypocrisy.

Beethoven was altering that aesthetic ideal, that facade, with a bluntness that sought to dispel the smokescreen of finesse. Initially he did so as a composer-pianist of extraordinary facility and personality – a proto-Liszt, a Byronic figure of romance and revolt – but then beyond the improvisatory piano in larger and more respected forms which would help transform the concerto, symphony and opera: *Emperor*, *Eroica*, *Leonore*. For now, though, these lay a little time ahead, and Beethoven required forbearance.

Haydn and Mozart could be dark and daring because they knew where to stop. But Beethoven also knew how to write with self-control and in an attractive manner, when he wanted. The op.18 quartets are the ultimate example of this civility and discipline – but with some grenades hidden under the garments.



To reinforce the sense of engagement with his forefather Haydn's still-rising legacy, Beethoven's op.18 were commissioned in the autumn of 1798 by the same patron who simultaneously asked the Austrian for a set new set of six: Prince Lobkowitz.<sup>12</sup> Mixing symbolism with stark reality, the ageing, unwell but also rather busy Haydn (labouring on the piece he considered his greatest, *The Creation*) managed to complete only two of his projected half dozen, the op.77 pair which would be his last complete quartets. Beethoven, on the other hand, would fulfil his quota of six, launching a cycle that would ultimately come to match, and perhaps eclipse, the astounding feats of his mentor.

Beethoven's work on op.18 began in the second half of 1798 and, after an immense amount of preliminary grind, diabolically chaotic sketches and, finally, extensive revisions, the six string quartets were ready for publication in June and October 1801 by T. Mollo et



Comp. in Vienna, as two books of three quartets (1–3 and 4–6).

They were not composed in the final sequence of 1–6 which we have and in which they are almost always played and recorded. Beethoven was alert to the importance of this set and, after playing through the quartets and taking the advice of his quartet's leader, consciously reconfigured them in order to best present his ideas, with the most robustly daring and exploratory of the six at the start of the collection. Whatever compliments Beethoven was paying to tradition, he still wanted to make a bold statement – and, as ever with this artist, any surface bedlam belied deep consideration, careful planning and prudent modifications. He was also keenly aware that the Viennese public, incongruous as ever, demanded both loyalty *and* novelty from their artists. Thus the actual order of composition, so far as we can reconstruct from the sketches, is usually conjectured to be as follows:

3 in D major

1 in F major

2 in G major

5 in A major

4 in C minor

6 in B-flat major

Nonetheless, considerable debate still exists, especially over the order of 5 and 4.

No final-version autograph manuscripts survive for any of the op.18 quartets, though significant sketches and notes do, apart from No.4, for which none have so far been found. We do have an early manuscript of quartet No.1, which Beethoven sent to his friend Karl Amenda in 1799 – and then two years later begged him not to show anyone because of the extensive changes he made prior to the 1801 publication. (In this same 1 July 1801 letter to Amenda, a practical missive as well as ur-Heiligenstadt Testament, Beethoven makes perhaps his earliest confession of his deafness, before imploring his friend to reveal nothing of his increasingly despondent condition to anyone.) The composer himself was unhappy with the Mollo editions, especially for Nos.4–6, remarking on numerous errors, great and small, in the printing, but it is likely the best surviving primary source we may ever have.

Writing string quartets was not easy. Beethoven not only rearranged the order of the

quartets but created cosmic mountains of discarded paper in order to realize these final products. Adjournments, restarts, rethinks, reorganizations – these would be procedural hallmarks throughout his career. Beethoven's brilliance as a writer of string quartets was, as in other forms, hard-won and doggedly fought for: the composer as engineer battling the elements to construct his bridges to Romanticism. He composed in a whirlwind of furious activity – mental and physical – that we can still see on the disorderly pages of his innumerable sketches and which only became worse as time (and deafness) wore on.

All composers make sketches and have second thoughts: Hollywood's lazy, convenient image of Wolfgang Amadeus's impeccable scores and perfect handwriting, everything floating down from his flawless noodle to his faultless page, is misleading at best, unfair to Mozart's hard work at worst. But Beethoven's processes were far more complicated, far more arduous, than most. And his handwriting was terrible. His sketches for late works like his C-sharp minor quartet produced vast acreages of scribbled, illegible scores, abstract, messy miracles that look like something Jackson Pollock might have fashioned. But all this apparently indecipherable clutter, all this jumble and disarray, eventually evolved into the limpid, unified precision of op.131.

The initial exertions weren't much tidier in the early works either. Projects, as well as ideas, overlapped: not only in his life and mind but physically in the drafts as well. The early outlines for op.18 No.3, the first penned of the set, occupy the main portion of a sketchbook and permit us to approximate many of the wider patterns of that first quartet's creation. But they are mixed in with notes for a cadenza to the op.15 piano concerto, some songs, a rondo, and weird isolated jottings for the op.20 septet.

What might seem like chaos and confusion, offering little but headaches and uncertainty, in fact allow fascinating insights into Beethoven's methods and resolutions. The sketches countenance us to see him creating almost in real time, pooling his furious range of ideas and crafting them into the wonderfully natural-sounding artefacts we hear (though Beethoven is never entirely carefree). Some of the complex, gruelling processes of creation are an innate part of the quartets' narratives themselves – especially in the later works – but more often we hear only the completed object, buffed, varnished, and purged of its production scars.

Other hints from the drafts and roughs reveal Beethoven's processes and decision-

making in illuminating ways. The audacious, imposing opening to the F major quartet, with which he eventually chose to open his quartet account, caused Beethoven a whole host of problems to create: he took nine goes to get it right in the sketches. The longest journeys sometimes take time to get out of the town centre's one-way system. But these redrafts help us comprehend the importance Beethoven attached to not only this opus but the way it opened. When he selected the F major to be first in the op.18 set, he knew both the trouble it had taken him and the difficulty of striking just the right balance between impudence and extension, continuity and courageousness.



This quartet, No.1 in F major, is an aggressively generous string quartet: everything Beethoven's music stands for. It has striking fugal passages in its opening and closing movements which lend an especially impressive air to the whole texture of the work – the kind of daunting supremacy that Beethoven would explore more fully in the stately, sublime and deadly serious worlds of the Third, Fifth, Seventh and Ninth Symphonies. The F major quartet is an eye-catching, purposeful anticipation of later forms, never parodic; out of the six, it is probably the only one that could begin the set with the electric power Beethoven wanted. As ever when considering op.18, we need to remember that it is the work of a considerably experienced and calculating musician.

With this in mind, we can see that the other five are no slackers, either, even if their individual expeditions may seem less challenging and risky than the F major's. It is crucial to regard the other five not as inferior entities, falling away from the arresting brilliance of No.1, but as offering us a range of perspectives on Beethoven's mindful and determined engagement with the past and his contemporaries, as well as his own future.

No.2, third-written, has a simplicity and poise which the unimaginative mark as merely 'Mozartian', rather than an aspect of Beethoven's own personality and intentions. This quartet follows Haydn's models, as well as sharing some of his jokes, and seems to knowingly inhabit the eighteenth century but, especially in its slow movement, develops exclusively Beethovenian elaborations in tempo and mood. Moreover, a note (in the sketchbook for the

first quartet to be written, No.3) reveals that Beethoven already knew he wanted the second quartet in his set to be lighter in style, directly contrasting with the assertive munificence of No.1.

No.3 itself is consistently, even insistently, lyrical, beginning in the middle of a gentle sentence and enlivening its pulse only with a sudden flood of energy in the finale. Vistas are warm and sunny, and once again, we tend to hunt for adjectives involving other composers – *Haydnesque*, *Mozartian* – forgetting that Beethoven was always a lyrical composer, amid and in contrast to his antagonistic music. Here, the melodic ornamentation seems to anticipate the broader strokes of op.59, and even op.132's Holy Song of Thanksgiving.

No.4 is the only one of the six in a minor key – and not any minor key, but that Beethovenian trademark of sullen defiance, C minor. Despite this connection with some of the composer's most famous sound worlds, No.4 is usually regarded as the black sheep of the op.18 family. In fact, it contains many phenomena akin to its C minor cousins: the snarling fury of the *Pathétique* Piano Sonata, the disorientation and alienation of the Third Piano Concerto, the darkness-to-light trajectory of the Fifth Symphony, even the wistful passions and visions of the final piano sonata, op.111. As such it warrants close and careful inspection.

No.5 maintains a conscious lineage from Mozart's A major quartet, K.464, sharing its key, tone and formal plan – both internally and externally as the fifth of a set of six (Mozart's is the penultimate of his *Haydn* Quartets). But Beethoven was not content to merely echo – or worse, reiterate – a successful precursor. For beyond the surface of No.5, little is actually like Mozart. As we have seen, all was wonderfully calculated and contrived, and this produces some glorious, bewitching results.

No.6 is a relatively compact gem, but with passages of terrifying expansion and isolation: a guarded and elusive work of exceedingly high craftsmanship and technical skill. Just as he knew the set had to begin with something particularly compelling, Beethoven ensured that op.18 closed with a strikingly innovative quartet. Through its initial interrogations of comedy and simplicity, No.6 not only engages with Haydn but also foresees the last quartet Beethoven would write, No.16 in F, op.135.

Yet it is the slow introductory beginning to the finale of op.18's concluding quartet which

announces some of Beethoven's originality as well as a prophecy of his own future – and that of his successors. The section even has a nickname, La Malinconia, 'melancholy', and, like the *Moonlight Sonata*, contains an invitation to be played with the 'greatest possible delicacy'. La Malinconia fumbles in darkness, alternating explosions of pain with hushed passages, wandering lost through remote harmonic regions which anticipate the act-three prelude to Wagner's *Parsifal* (1882) or the first movement of Mahler's Tenth Symphony (1910),<sup>13</sup> before the movement is able to find a way forward and bring Beethoven's first period of quartets to a close.



Thus, the collection of six op.18 quartets, so often derided as apprentice works or eighteenth-century leftovers, are nothing of the sort, even while they pay deliberate homage to contemporary attainments. Having started by anticipating some of Beethoven's most thrilling and delectably obsessive symphonic works in the F major quartet, the series ends by approaching the status of the Wagnerian musikdrama or Mahlerian symphony in terms of expressive power and emotional reach. No mere works of juvenilia or fashionable galant, these quartets are vital, discursive, forward-looking chamber pieces of considerable force, especially when regarded as a whole, which they were always intended to be. They interlock with their age at the same time as they interrogate it, asking difficult questions in often subtle, and sometimes awkward, ways.

To regard op.18 as throwbacks is to misunderstand both their respect for, and engagement with, Haydn and Mozart, as well as to mischaracterize those composers' own achievements. As Haydn and Mozart had shown throughout their careers, and as Wagner would prove in *Die Meistersinger* (1868) and Mahler in his Fourth Symphony (1900), surface simplicity or elegance tend to conceal complex emotions, multiple viewpoints and intricate, often intergenerational, dialogues.

Beethoven, too, was absorbed by negotiation and perspective, and op.18 offer some of his most intriguing discussions and astute predictions, even if the superficial illusion is often only one of regressive imitation. But it was also just that: an illusion, a ploy, a gift, smuggling

in insurrection via the front door – hidden in plain sight, and ready to make itself comfortable. In op.18, respect dines with rebellion, sharing its food and conversation, while making the occasional lewd comment and quietly sneering at the bourgeois furniture. It is pure Beethoven.

## No.1 in F major

### 1. *Allegro con brio.*

Like the *Eroica*, op.18's first quartet opens *allegro con brio*, and it is certainly with spirit that Beethoven's vast cosmos of string quartets begins. It is easy to see why he (and first violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh) wanted this quartet at the head of the set.

Intense and strange, the entire first movement is utterly preoccupied – even possessed – by its opening idea, for all the diversity and scope it also manages to encompass. Indeed, that very multiplicity all stems from the immense mobility of the foundational motto theme. This initial figure is edgy, supple, arresting – and utterly unforgettable. Seen on the page, it has a razor-sharp profile, beautifully formed, looking like a coiled spring ready to explode into action, its stored energy bursting across the movement's furious life. No wonder Beethoven took nine attempts to produce exactly the effect he wanted.

As with so much memorable material in Beethoven – the opening of the Fifth Symphony being only the most obvious example – this motto theme is characterized almost entirely by its rhythmic form, and as such it is immensely flexible, able to materialize in many guises (as well as mostly without change, as a powerful reiteration). It can shift its pitch, accelerate, slow down, act in convoy with other themes, even appear without its first note, but it is always recognizable, compelling itself upon our ears and lingering in our musical memory.

It is one of the most decisive beginnings in quartet writing: a clear proclamation of purpose and resolve, moulded with effort and care by a master craftsman, absolutely charged with power and potential – which Beethoven fully exploits. As this motto theme repeats and evolves, through longing or belligerence, it becomes obsessive, hypnotic, lending itself to the temperamental, unstable spirit of fate as well as a dizzying torpor, dazed and confused.

Many of the changes Beethoven made to op.18 No.1, and which we can observe via the Amenda manuscript, involve not only making the writing more self-assured, simple and distinctive but tightening this movement so that its repetitions become even more dogmatic and insistent as well as more noticeably malleable and mercurial. Such alterations were clearly connected, the fluency facilitating the flexibility, which would then appear with

greater intensity in a snigger structure: a pressure cooker.

The *allegro con brio* develops wonderfully, weirdly, its persistent, tenacious theme punching and swirling throughout, its moods and measures ever-changing. The repeated figure, as an agitated emblem, acts like episodes in a comic strip or picaresque novel, the rough and roguish hero imposing himself on a hypocritical, corrupt society. And it is, of course, perfectly possible to see that abrasive rascal as Beethoven himself.

Some of the playful, and significant, effects are generated – as in the final movement – by the incorporation of fugal passages. Their amalgamation within the meshwork of the quartet also gives them a subtle, more serious, power. They don't stand out as self-conscious markers of learning, the composer trying to prove his contrapuntal abilities. Rather, they appear as ways of extending the emotional range and complexity of the quartet via its textures and integrated networks – though they also possess certain mischievous qualities, disrupting the smooth counterpoint of the high classical style and planting the seeds of more revolutionary changes that would arise later in Beethoven's career.

The violins often work as a team, discussing the motto theme and driving the music forward like generals ordering an advance. Initially this onslaught stays in F major, but it is not long before the more yearning or pugnacious areas of the score reach out towards other tonal districts, including an enchanting hushed passage in A flat. Harmonies turn more exploratory, the campaign covering new terrain, but nonetheless we are still in the quartet's exposition phase, which then comes to a secure close in C major.

The dramatic silences and furtive transitions of the exposition often feel like a sonata-form development section (something Mahler would explore and exploit in his symphonies). But when op.18 No.1 does nosedive into its true development, we notice at once. Turbulent energies and far-flung harmonics battle for space that not even the two violin generals can contain, as the motto theme becomes furiously out of control, unleashing hell with its near-constant presence and uncompromising fluctuations.

Classical form requires recapitulation, and the composer provides it, but not without first making us wait – another characteristically Beethovenian manoeuvre. Quirky inflections and a series of dazzling scales flummox the movement, building suspense, before the motto theme finally arrives in an imposing fortissimo. Given the vehemently repeated



manner of the motto throughout the movement, its formal recapitulation might have been less effective had Beethoven not first disorientated us with some spellbinding idiosyncrasy. As it is, it is a tremendous delayed return, wonderfully dramatic, showing how tradition can be slightly tweaked for the needs of innovation.

The coda is no less astonishing, a terse spectacle of sound and silence, violence and reticence, playing with the effects of alternating fortissimo and pianissimo before a hard, muscle-bound finish shuts the door on one of the most extraordinary movements in the unfolding history of the string quartet. Op.18 No.1's allegro con brio has been a masterpiece of form, but one shot through with apparently superficial techniques involving rhythm and repetition that prophesy not only later Beethoven but even *Die Walküre* (1856) and *Le Sacre du printemps* (1913).

## 2. Adagio.

After the war, the peace – and the grief. Op.18 No.1's adagio (marked 'affettuoso ed appassionato') is perhaps the most profound and tender slow movement yet to emerge from Beethoven, even if some elements of its emotional communication are a little self-conscious (which is not necessarily a criticism, as we will see). It is a dignified contemplation of suffering that most obviously anticipates parallel movements in the late quartets, interspersing poignant lyrical passages with tortured pangs.

The adagio firmly establishes its tonality at once: a grave D minor rhythmic figuration on the second violin, viola and cello which is then joined by a despondent but fragrant tune on the first violin, weeping above the drab misery of grief below. Shifting turns – love and sorrow, lyricism and anguish – propel this movement forward in a manner quite different from the opening allegro con brio. It is full of agonizing moments and long, discreet exhalations, the four voices expressing their sorrow but often stuttering or faltering amid the confusions of grief.

Subtle rhythmic vagaries brilliantly generate the feeling of resignation, swiftly followed by more honeyed reminiscences. At one point, the cello tries to comfort the violin by singing its tune, but before it has travelled far, it is clear it will not be repeating, or even varying, the material; it is expanding and developing it. The viola brings in a reassuring F major theme,

but almost immediately splinters of the main theme reappear in spasms of grief. Consolation in D major gradually begins to materialize, but it cannot sustain itself and fades into silence. The original theme makes a final reappearance, but it – and the coda – are disfigured by the upsurges of emotion that have preceded them, and the adagio seems to pass out, exhausted under the burden of incessant despondency. Schubert was especially fond of this movement, and its influence is evident in the heart-wrenching adagio (a rare tempo for him) of his final chamber work, the great string quintet in C, D.956 (1828), with its never-ending despair and intricate rhythmical agitations, mixing turbulence with tranquillity.

Communicating with Amenda, Beethoven famously said he had the tomb scene from *Romeo and Juliet* (c.1595) in mind when writing this movement. Certainly, it carries the weight of sorrow captured in Shakespeare's play, but there are subtler suggestions, too, the F major theme from the viola perhaps evocating the heroine's beauty. But such associations are not always appropriate, even if they can help navigate and differentiate what is an extremely well-constructed but complex string quartet movement.

More significant than any precarious textual-musical mapping between Shakespeare and Beethoven is the wider, more general sense of a staged drama the composer is creating: an Italianate, operatic scena entirely in keeping with the Verona of the star-crossed lovers or the Naples of *Così fan tutte* (1790). Beethoven's adagio is almost knowingly artificial, theatrical, *performed*. This is not to indicate that it is insincere or in any way a parody. Quite the reverse: Beethoven seems to be confirming to us the importance, the meaning, of the theatre, its ability to communicate, in its greatest exponents, deeply felt human emotions and universal truths.

Few composers have both recognized and explored the significance of drama as ruthlessly and as poignantly as Beethoven. Almost all his works are in some way preoccupied by the sense of both spectacle and emotion, from the grand orchestral theatre of the *Eroica*, the concise closet dramas of the *Egmont* and *Coriolan* Overtures, through *Fidelio*, the *Missa solemnis*, and the final confessional one-man plays of the late sonatas and quartets. Beethoven had drama written through him like a stick of rock.

### 3. Scherzo.

The peculiar, propelling rhythms of the scherzo expunge a good deal of the pathos generated by the quartet's sombre excursion to the Veneto. Although it anticipates some of the otherworldly terror of op.135's sinister scherzo, the true spirit of Haydn abounds in the fresh air of this movement. To briefly return to Shakespeare, it is as if Puck has wandered onstage at the end of *Romeo and Juliet*, turning gloomy grief to carnivalesque dreams.

Scherzos, a recent development in musical history which tended to replace the more graceful minuet, were ideal for such magical, supernatural elicitation. Here the movement, especially in its trio section, re-examines some of the harmonic tactics from the opening allegro con brio, floating deliberately into indistinct tonal regions, which only add to the atmosphere of ghostly mischief.

If the scherzo in op.18 No.1 is not yet a true Beethovenian scherzo, its quicksilver charm and fright carry enough intimations of what is to come, even though it sometimes seems to yearn to be free of a chamber form – to be abroad, haunting symphonies.

#### *4. Finale: Allegro.*

Between his revisions to the quartet, Beethoven speeded up this movement, turning it from allegretto to allegro, making it more Mozartian with whirling figurations on the violins, while adding plenty of his own touches. For one, he is more byzantine and deliberate than earlier classical composers with his fugal material, which again is employed to alter the emotional content of the quartet.

Another key feature the finale shares with the opening movement (and, it should be said, fundamental elements of the adagio and scherzo too) is its rhythmic facility. Here, much of this pulsing, shifting energy is used to disrupt the essential positivity, agitating the quartet towards a more anxious conclusion than the harmonies and melodies alone seem to indicate. Many have found that this gives the piece an oddity, practically an abnormality, that doesn't quite add up. Just so. It is all part of Beethoven's growing ability to puzzle and perplex, to refuse to allow the neat, cosy world of the now to exist without quiz or comment.

The Mozartian qualities which sculpt and tint this finale are always being damaged or undermined by little Beethovenian tricks. It's almost like Mozart in a bad mood or having a tiresome day: spinning triplets are made to bristle; the coda is pockmarked by contrapuntal

wit; lyrical themes find themselves blocked by stern repeated chords which might be soft as a smile or full of a stinging sarcasm.

Sparkling the finale certainly is. But it has a pleasing sourness to its bubbles, just enough of a tang to sharpen the palate, never spoiling to acrimony or resentment. The ensuing five quartets of op.18 will see Beethoven intentionally mellowing a little, but the tartness of No.1 in F major has been more than enough to indicate we are in for an intense cycle of sixteen string quartets entirely unlike any yet produced.

## No.2 in G major

### 1. *Allegro*.

G major was a key Beethoven often picked for his most humorous works – one thinks of the so-called *Rage over a Lost Penny* for piano, op.129, which is technically a Hungarian rondo in G – and the second of the op.18 quartets is a fine example of this. It seems to consciously drink the witty potions of Haydn at his most sociable and hilarious. And comedy, especially a comedy of manners, requires meticulous timing.

Beethoven lays the careful groundwork for such jesting immediately. Op.18 No.2 opens with formal gestures that seem almost to be civil greetings between diplomats or guests at a smart ball. All is decorous, slightly reserved, ceremonial and conventional, a gentle curve from the first violin initiating the bows and curtsies. The other instruments simply hold a long chord across the bar, patiently performing their part in the ritual. From here an entirely different phrase, harmless but noticeably distinct, allows the exchanges to continue. Fragments hover with poise. More and more ideas come, enticing and seductive but always orderly and controlled. We feel we are in an eighteenth-century salon: all gold and glass, the hum of gracious tête-à-tête, preposterous frocks and stiff white collars.

But nothing is so easy to puncture as a stuffed and starched shirt. Having set up a charming sequence of conversations and polite chit-chat, Beethoven begins to make the scenery wobble. Not long into the pulsing development section, the proper procedure of sonata form ensuing as required, the main opening theme is suddenly repeated – and conspicuously, with a resonant forte. Surely it is too early for the recapitulation? There are no fixed rules on this, but it feels far too premature. And that's not all: the theme has returned in the wrong key – E flat. It is as if we've said the wrong thing, made some horrendous social faux pas, at the formal ball. Or, more pertinently, we've come home, drunk, with the wrong set of keys. We left the ball without realizing it, the booze confusing and conflating time.

Of course, it's hilarious: a false recapitulation. It is reminiscent of Leopold Bloom, trying to gain entry to his house with Stephen Dedalus after a long day around Dublin towards the end of *Ulysses* (1922), but realizing his keys are in his other trousers:

Why was he doubly irritated?

Because he had forgotten and because he remembered that he had reminded himself twice not to forget.

From here, Beethoven floats into harmonic spheres the quartet has barely touched. We're wondering what to do: we're at the right house but with the wrong key. So we take off round the block. The development section picks up again, pianissimo at first as it tries to shake off the irritation of the key issue, before some skipping and spinning figures brighten the mood and the inebriated soul begins to forget the trouble and enjoy themselves again.

The music starts to become noisier and more flamboyant – doubtless some singing in the streets – before suddenly the cello plays the opening phrase back in G. The keys were in the other pocket after all! The true recapitulation has suddenly begun as if from nowhere. It takes a little time to realize its good luck, but soon the true homecoming has begun, though it's a bit dishevelled.

Returning to G major has taken a long time and, as if by way of an apology, Beethoven offers four very tidy measures. But, we remember, alcohol has been taken. Things unexpectedly swerve, in the softest pianissimo – which, in true comic drunk fashion, sounds deliberately quiet – into developmental music. It is in the agreeably intoxicating realm of E major: more singing, perhaps, or they've discovered another bottle. Although a madcap jaunt, this brief digression neatly balances (though does not necessarily stabilize) the earlier false recapitulation's high jinks in E flat.

The coda stops three times, as if stumbling up to bed, before the movement ends with an endearing little gesture as the subject drops on the pillows and falls instantly asleep.

## 2. *Adagio cantabile.*

Following our metaphor for the first movement, it might be tempting to regard the dreamy, faraway slow movement in C major as just that: the rest and reveries of our partygoer. It even includes a brief scherzo-like interlude to function as a passing nightmare.

The overall shape of the movement underwent some changes. Beethoven – as he did with the first movement of the first quartet – tightens the structure, turning it from a five-

part form to a simpler three-part design. The middle section (in F major) forms the mini-scherzo just mentioned, and it is surrounded by more sumptuous and expansive material, though curiously short-breathed, the slumbering a little disturbed by the adventurous evening of the night before.

Not long before writing his quartet, Beethoven had tried combining the repose of a slow movement with the jest of a scherzo in his string trio No.2 in D major, op.8. Although it works well there, a charming disruption, its effect in the quartet is both subtler and more persuasive, sounding as natural as the changing phases of sleep. It is a remarkable passage, hesitatingly taking a tiny figure from the initial embellishment of the adagio and playing with it, spinning away in fantasy, flinging itself about with an abandon we might well associate with nightmares and hallucinations.

Beethoven's elaborate preliminary ornamentation has been criticized by some as too ostentatious, but decoration is required both to distract from what is to come and to provide some suitable material which can be spun off. Its return after the miniature scherzo sounds more capricious, more parodic – as it needs to, for we are enjoying a comedy here. But it is also wonderfully clouded over, with sly insinuations of *Don Giovanni* and other dark comedies.

First we have a stiff da capo ('from the beginning') repetition but in variation, followed by a series of mottled inflections that keep promising a more intense progression, yet which stubbornly refuse to comply, and the movement drifts into the merely decorative before ending abruptly with a brief, understated reprise of the mini-scherzo's motif.

Haydn had toyed with surprises throughout his music – one of his symphonies, No.94 (in G, of course), even carries this nickname, and in his op.54 No.2 quartet he introduces a slow passage where you expect the swift finale to begin. In op.18 No.2, by speeding up the adagio, Beethoven tricks us into thinking it was merely a dawdling introduction to a fast movement, before fooling us again by re-slackening the pace: it is a slow movement after all. It is classic Beethoven – playing the clown, yes, but also making a more significant statement about audience expectation and complacency.

### 3. Scherzo.

We might think we have had our fill of scherzos, and Beethoven might well have chosen a more minuet-like tone and tempo for this movement. But this is Beethoven. Not content with having already manipulated the relative functions of movements, he now produces a real scherzo to mix things up further, unsettling our self-satisfaction and the smug belief that we know what goes where in the ordered world of High Classical style.

With this movement and in the 'mini-scherzo' interval of the adagio, we also see the embryos of the diminutive dance movements that will punctuate the huge final quartets. Op.18 is no mere entrance examination or exercise in imitation. It is a fertile, industrious workshop, a laboratory of experiments and dangerous ideas.

The theme of this (third-movement) scherzo initially sounds fresh and new, but before long we realize it is only a version of the slow movement's melody, stripped of weightier material. The identity of the quartet's movements has been further questioned, its ability to focus and move forward undermined. Might this be the overdue hangover of the revelries of the night before?

#### *4. Allegro molto quasi presto.*

The finale has the effect of a cup of coffee or cold shower. It is a bright and bouncing movement, full of gaiety and restoration. It is simply cast, very square and straightforward in its phrasing. Here, at least, we feel a little more assured. The formality and trappings of the opening movement, and the stupefactions of the central ones, have gone: we can relax and enjoy the warmth of the new day. Beethoven describes it as 'aufgeknöpft', which we might variously translate as 'unbuttoned', 'chatty' or 'gossipy'.

The cello in particular has a magnificent feeling for the vigorous, sprightly theme of the movement, treating the tune with a comic inventiveness that almost seems to be mocking his companions – perhaps reminding them of the events of yesternight. At one point the first violin plays with the theme, almost hiding it coyly before allowing it to burst back through: embarrassment and regret turned to good humour and acceptance.

This movement has long charmed string quartet groups for not only the way in which each part is able to speak for itself but the how they interact in fizzing, intriguing ways, a delighted morning-after breakfast, everyone nattering and chattering. Themes and their



variants are frequently placed against one another, each instrument taking a part – people telling uproarious tales together in broken sentences – which then erupt with hysterical synchronized punchlines.

The second quartet might be daintier in tone than the first, but it still packs a dashing and ironic punch, its comedy clever and well observed: Oscar Wilde for four strings, but with just a hint of Tabasco. The ease and lightness Beethoven promised us was only another ruse.

## No.3 in D major

### 1. *Allegro*.

First penned of the op.18 sextet, the D major quartet is a chamber conversation of great charm and civility, but it is also an exercise in personality keen to stretch and flex its musical muscles. The first two bars are a powerful, convincing opening that might have served well as the beginning of the whole set, were it not for the even more extraordinary potential of the F major's motto theme.

We seem to be in mid-thought or mid-sentence, joining a conversation a little late but immediately becoming part of it, catching up fast with what is being said. The first violin rises up from A to G in a gentle arc, before gradually falling back down with equal grace, supported by the three other strings who seem to slowly nod in agreement, corroborating the first violin's point (and that the key is D major). It is enchanting, elegant, educated – and possibly takes place outdoors, for it has a freshness and lilt that recalls the opening of Beethoven's *Spring* Violin Sonata in F, op.24, written around the same time.

This almost filmic fade-in unveils fine views and even finer conversation, even if it is one controlled by the bossy (and slightly pompous) first violin. This dominance continues throughout the first movement (and in the subsequent ones, indeed more so than in any of Beethoven's quartets, something we might forgive as his first discourse in the genre, though he makes use of its hegemony magnificently). The poor cello especially is a little subsidiary in op.18 No.3, often simply providing a harmonic underpinning or background, though it speaks a little louder and more freely in the final movement, having gained some confidence and ability to get a word in edgeways.

Quite what is being discussed in the quartet's opening is neither here nor there, but it seems like an intelligent conversation, though carried out in quite a relaxed, almost bland, manner. Are some academics having tea on the faculty lawns, with one of their number – the first violin – dictating the discussion with his thoughts on Euclidean geometry or Spinoza's *Ethics*? Certainly everything flows as if from a teapot, and the material with which Beethoven opens this quartet has great potential for significant further dialogue.

After a brief pause, the viola repeats the opening idea, which is then copied by the second

violin, just as we might do to follow a complex line of argument, to show our agreement or understanding. Eventually all the instruments have their say in various ways, demonstrating their views of the opening ascent and descent, though the first violin alone is permitted to treat it more imaginatively. The conversation progresses, and minor elements of discord or digression are brought in via zestier notes with quirky accents or slightly unusual textures.

At one point, after a long series of repeated notes, the first violin's main contention is disrupted: Has a wasp buzzed in to bother our impromptu little gathering in the college garden? The first violin's train of thought interrupted, in this space a new theme is able to emerge, with a degree of pride and triumph, in C major. This effortlessly turns to A minor before a light bulb moment opens the music into A major, the speaker delighted with their line of reasoning, even elatedly repeating the movement's opening phrases – but upside down and then on their side.

This slightly portentous and mangled delight is bothered by a succession of disconnected, disinterested chords which take us initially to a brief recurrence of the exposition, then into the development section. This begins in a little confusion, as if another reappearance of the exposition is to occur, the speakers repeating themselves as they hesitate on where to go next. The original figure transpires on the first violin, but when the three other instruments join in, things have progressed into D minor, and a short, straightforward development takes place.

As with the first two quartets of op.18, the first-movement recapitulation is cunningly devised. Some emphatic thumps – brusque C-sharp major chords – muddle matters, the sounds lingering on only the lower voices of viola and cello. After this tense pause – has someone said something awkward about the first violin? – the second violin takes it as an invitation to inconspicuously instigate the recapitulation in a soft tone.

Keen to reassert its dominance (in what, after all, it perceives as *its* conversation/quartet), the first violin stirs and, in a slightly louder voice, begins the repeat, leading us back to where the discussion began. It is not identical – there are subtle modifications to the harmony, along with some jokes about being in the wrong key (witty asides about one of the speaker's foibles, perhaps), but it is reassuring enough, before the coda makes a comment on all that has passed and the movement ends with a polite but firm

'Thank you, gentlemen.'

## 2. *Andante con moto*.

The slow movement is another fine Beethovenian study in contrasts and expressive range, another anticipation of the cosmic explorations in the slow movements of the last years: in the *Hammerklavier*, the Ninth, and, of course, the final quartets. Like many of those works, in op.18 No.3 the 'slow' movement is not slow as such: 'andante con moto' asks for some headway, some current to the proceedings so that it does not lose momentum or become unduly sluggish, for there are strange tonal byways to explore in this peculiarly beguiling movement.

Perhaps tired by its first-movement prattling, the first violin delegates the opening theme to his deputy, playing smoothly on its resonant G string. The old impatience recurs, however, and it isn't long before the first violin appears with a counter-declaration before the second has had time to finish its own. Via some lovely counterpoint, another idea materializes, with a gentle staccato as the probing arguments of the first movement continue to give way to the unruffled textures and peaceful rhythms of a more leisurely afternoon. But it is not to last.

In the final part of the movement, a volatile section gives way to what will become a Beethoven speciality: a shattered coda, such as we find so overwhelmingly in the *Eroica*'s funeral march (and which Mahler exploited to devastating effect in the first movement of his Ninth Symphony in 1909). The music becomes disturbed, restless, syncopations fostering disintegration and uncertainty as the movement first wanders adrift and then seems to evaporate into a barely perceptible pianissimo.

## 3. *Allegro*.

A flash of D major jolts us from these troubling fragmentations and enigmatic shadows. The third movement opens on a striking F sharp, the note which so powerfully defines the key of D major. We are in a flashy scherzo, quick and packed with quirks that might be labelled Mozartian were they not so insistently Beethovenian, full of flickers in F-sharp minor.

Flurries of notes from the two violins whirl about in a storm of perplexity and indecision as the music is sucked into D minor in its trio section, before allowing the scherzo to reappear in a slightly modified vein. It is a curt but effective movement, readying us for the bizarre sport of the finale.

#### 4. *Presto.*

Alone, the first violin begins proceedings swiftly, and before long Beethoven is playing a variety of games, especially around keys and harmony, jocularly misdirecting us from one mood to another, never giving us time to realize exactly what is happening. Everything bounces about like a game of musical table tennis: Have our discoursing professors now found an old set somewhere? Far more than anywhere else in this quartet, the four racket-instruments compete with each other in cheerful jollity, as they ping notes and phrases across the board, flipping and looping, chopping and blocking.

The energy Beethoven finds in this twerking, spirited movement (it is in the form of a tarantella) is considerable, with the textures given a particular zing via some cheeky counterpoint that is fast becoming a trademark of the Beethoven string quartet. The verve and vitality have a powerful effect on the whole work, the charging gusto and concentration of the finale dragging the emotional force of the quartet towards its ending rather than its slow movement. Other relatively early works – the piano sonata No.18 in E flat (op.31 No.3, 1802) and *Kreutzer* Violin Sonata in A (op.47, 1803) – perform a similar gravitational shift.<sup>14</sup>

The conclusion is as splendidly peculiar as all that has proceeded it. Fragments of the main theme are simply restated, followed by a pause. The four players are left in suspended animation, bows up and with nowhere else to go. Has our professors' spontaneous game of ping-pong been ended prematurely by someone whacking the ball into a hedge?

## No.4 in C minor

### 1. *Allegro ma non tanto*.

Despite holding the talismanic Beethovenian key of C minor, the fourth op.18 quartet has long been the least popular of the six. But Beethoven in C minor is always captivating, always distinctively powerful. Many composers had used the key to formidable effect: Mozart in his *Great Mass* (1783), piano sonata No.14 (1784) and piano concerto No.24 (1786); Haydn for one of his most muscular *London* symphonies, No.95 (1791), as well as for the 'representation of chaos' in *The Creation* (1799). But it was Beethoven who made the key his own particular symbol of struggle and stress, of turbulence and turmoil, a mark of sublimity and intensity more in keeping with the tenets of the Romantics than the chamber music salons of eighteenth-century Vienna.

In Beethoven's career so far, several of his trios and sonatas had already employed the key, and this quartet opens with a brawny, grimacing surge of minor-key effort, all gloomy insistence – much like the *Pathétique* Piano Sonata, op.13, composed at around the same time. For all the murk, it is superbly constructed and purposeful: the pulse and verve prevent anything like self-pity; its strong theme thwarts defeatism or abject misery. Trenchant it might be, but in its proportions and agility it resembles a leopard.

A low note on the first violin climbs sonorously into a theme of resilience, buttressed by pulses of support from the cello, and less specific encouragement from the viola and second violin. It is a twinge of deprivation as well as fervent enterprise, yearning for deliverance: a premonition of the growling, uncompromising opening to the battling *Coriolan* Overture (1807).

Anger and desire rise from moment to moment, with a Beethovenian dramatic silence almost as if the fury is pausing to take a breath. The theme soars upward, discharging all the repressed rage in a furiously cathartic series of chords. In this first movement, and especially during the drive of the exposition, Beethoven's talent for a good tune is used to wondrous effect, able to convince us despite the wrath and chaos surrounding it. A less memorable melody might not have persuaded with such power.

After a period of vague and incoherent behaviour from the cello – all staccato

detachment – the first violin offers a minor theme of terse inquiry: a furious general replying to one of his colonels’ mumbling gobbledygook? In keeping with this, the lieutenant second violin is given the thankless job of introducing a new theme (derived from the second phrase of the main theme) to this stormy beginning. It is in C minor’s relative major, E flat, and the whispered message – which is genial, almost suave in character – actually works to calm things down.

This ushers in the relatively simple development section, initially via a self-pitying review of the first theme turned to G minor, before the cello in its highest register repeats the good news of second violin’s E-flat communication: Have we received better intelligence from the front? But the first violin finds it hard to shake off the atmosphere of despair, and its utterance of the reassuring E-flat theme is warped into a bleak and subsiding tonal breakdown which becomes lost in mumbling pianissimo from the viola and second violin.

All is quiet and enigmatic, heavy with the fog of war, trapped in the bunker. Slow modulations emerge from the gloom, and the first violin tries to reassert the main theme in C minor, which it eventually does, initiating a candid recapitulation. This time the consoling E-flat theme is given to the darker voice of the viola rather than second violin, which itself then joins the alto, supported both by reassurance from below on the cello and high trills of determination from the first violin. It all leads to a rugged, burly coda which ends the movement with a passionate resolve.

## *2. Scherzo: Andante scherzoso quasi allegretto.*

The pleasant initial theme of the second movement acts like a gin and tonic after a trying day, its clinking contrapuntal rhythms suggestive of ice tinkling in the glass (the fugal gestures even seem to repeatedly melt away to nowhere). We can almost feel the juniper juice doing its work, unwinding the nerves. It is undeniably what we deserve, after the trials, anger and desperation of the first movement.

This first subject is one of Beethoven’s most absorbing exercises in counterpoint: an antiquated but luminous fugato that manages to be both affectionate and reticent, firm and relaxed, a stiff upper lip that is terrified too. Such an inexplicable concoction is exactly what the scherzo wants to convey.

No.4's second movement is an oddly hybrid, almost kooky piece, not quite sure what it is or wants to be: Scherzo or slow movement? This is deliberate. We are in a tense and indeterminate interim – the uncertain period following the breakneck confidence which ended the first movement. If this were a war film, we would be in the tense second act, preparing for the grand assault: waiting, worrying, intermittently confident and fretful, with fear hidden by humour.

This movement is marked 'scherzo', and although it often functions as a post-agony slow movement, this description is important for players, listeners and commentators to take into consideration as the weird detached moments and sporadic stabs of sforzando make their presence felt. As ever with Beethoven, and especially in these op.18 quartets, the sequence and category of movements is constantly being interrogated, challenged and rethought. This erratic slow movement is not some rural idyll but the fidgety calm before the reappearance of the storm.

### *3. Menuetto: Allegretto.*

Come the hurricane does, but not quite yet. First, an unruly and fresh minuet: perhaps drinks and high jinks the night before the big push. It is generally fragrant and lyrical, and would be a charming interlude but for the first violin's persistent, adamant triplets, which seem a constant reminder of the still-dangerous predicament. The minuet's opening is actually built from the same notes as those which opened the first-movement allegro, uniting the quartet further, binding us to its dramas and dilemmas.

The notes might be the same, but the atmosphere is not. It is quite passé in tone, reminiscent of Mozart at his most lithe and genteel, though with periods of chromatic urgency. Perhaps we are in the officers' mess, a slightly obsolete setting of old-school ties, dated slang and old-fashioned attitudes, but punctuated by moments of real-world fear.

### *4. Allegro.*

The finale is old-school in other ways: it is both a textbook rondo (with a lively energy and leaping get-up-and-go) and akin to a war movie's climax – as they used to be made by the



British, full of partisan pluck and sentimental spirit with little probing or gore. It is all very clean, Beethoven affectionately reproducing some of Haydn's finest finale work.

In isolation, the main theme of the finale appears much less heroic than that of the opening movement. But context is all, and its emotional strength is in part derived from its placement at the end of the quartet and the surfeit of passions and excitements that have preceded it. The four instruments seem to battle both together and against one another in this movement, the first violin a young hero joined by friend and foe alike to fight for freedom and honour. Much of it recalls the finale to Mozart's great symphony No.40 in G minor (K.550, 1788), with a series of exploding crescendos and an uncontrollable energy charging towards victory.

But there are subtleties too. At a furious climax, the cello, which had been busy interjecting on the squabbling other strings with some splendid pizzicato, suddenly drops down to a gentle pianissimo and works to lull the momentum into a strange stillness. Arguments about how to proceed are given a more refined air as the two violins share a theme. The tempo quickens again before abruptly stopping. We wait, in suspense.

Suddenly – out of nowhere – the main theme returns on a wave of sound and is accelerated at an astonishing speed, like a fighter pilot screaming onto the screen, on the final, triumphant mission. It develops into a manic, tense climax, modulating from minor to major, before closing with a series of fierce, victorious shouts in dazzling C.

Cue credits.

## No.5 in A major

### 1. *Allegro*.

Beethoven's connection to, and friendly mockery of, his contemporaries is nowhere more apparent in op.18 than in the Fifth Quartet. It is a delightful sardonic spoof, toying especially with Mozart's quartet in A major, K.464, on which Beethoven's is consciously – even self-consciously – modelled (he had copied out its finale entirely for his own edification prior to commencing work on the op.18 set). None of the hostility found in the F major or C minor quartets is here: amusement and performance is the order of the day, the quartet an ironic student revue of recent trends in music.

Or is it? The conspicuous coincidences evidently intend No.5 to be, like op.18 more generally, in dialogue with the past and present, partly as a means to meet, greet and agree – but then, for Beethoven, to move on, to adventures new and strange. This A major quartet seems to be wearing two sets of clothes: on top, a tuxedo; underneath, a wetsuit. Pleasures are to be had, for sure (the finale is an *opera buffa* for string quartet), but there is some more serious activity at work too.

It opens with a steady A major chord which is immediately destabilized by alien accents, showing Beethoven's irrepressible urge to lark about. The first violin rises up in the steps of a scale, gathering energy and momentum before breaking out in song and dance, the theme embellished and transformed with a range of erudite techniques that are smuggled in unnoticed amid the exhibition. This profusion of material is pure Mozart, and yet the process of metamorphosis from simple origins is more obviously from Beethoven's pen.

Eventually we swing onto an E major chord which begins a darker passage in E minor, and the conspiratorial opening takes on a more pensive and personal hue. The four voices of the quartet become merged in an interlude of brooding poignancy which wants to break out into G but is held back by the perseverance of the minor key. After edging back to the major, and unexpectedly falling silent, the strings delicately strain to regenerate: the E minor's ruminations surface for a time before being overtaken by the spritely disposition of E major.

The development section begins with Beethoven's characteristic theatrical flair in the rare obsidian realm of F-sharp minor,<sup>15</sup> briefly shifting to a more playful disposition, before

darkening the skies again as the recapitulation back to A major is arranged. For this, Beethoven has an exquisite strategy. He sets it up by having the intentionally dramatic development section just mentioned act as a diverting tactic. Then a carefree A major section from the exposition is repeated, but this time pestered by some opaque harmonies which give a delectably strange entry into the recapitulation where the home key is re-established. Tearing up the scale of A major to fashion his coda, Beethoven ends the movement with a clever riff on the three notes with which it began.

## 2. *Menuetto.*

Shadowing Mozart's manoeuvre of placing the minuet next, Beethoven begins with the first violin singing a sweet, tender tune supported in an unassuming fashion from the second while below them the viola and cello patiently wait. It could be an aria from the last act of *Le nozze di Figaro* (1786), for we seem to be in a garden at night.

The gentle loveliness of the theme is too good not to share, and the viola is given the chance to play the entire tune. The next part begins as sweetly as the first before becoming hostile as some thunder in C-sharp minor appears, stunning the movement into silence.

Once again the heavenly melody resumes its appealing song, but now the C-sharp minor has shaken its composure. The glistening poise and elegant counterpoint is now ever so slightly ruffled. Was that thunder in fact some teasing?

## 3. *Andante cantabile.*

The elegance of the oft-repeated tune Beethoven manufactures for the superb second movement is too sincere to be a pastiche of Mozart: it truly matches him, with love and affection. Yet there is more than a hint of Schubert, too, in this music, and in some of the sketches for No.5's third movement, amid various indecipherable notes, is the word 'pastoral', confirming our suspicion that the Schubertian (and Beethovenian) joys of the countryside are present throughout this work. The warmth of the opening has all the cordiality and relaxation of the Scene by the Brook of the *Pastoral* Symphony (No.6 in F, op.68, 1808), Schubert's *Trout* Quintet in A (D.667, 1819), or 'Danksagung an den Bach' ('Thanks to the

Brook'), the fourth song from the same composer's great cycle *Die schöne Müllerin* (D.795, 1823).

A set of variations in D major, this movement was part of the current fashion – almost fetish – for variations, one Beethoven relished and returned to again and again throughout his career, especially in his final works. Here Beethoven shows all his facility with the form and his importance in elevating its status. The original theme's vocabulary is entirely ordinary and ripe for development as each variation is given a new pulsing character and dramatic power. Here the immense reach of the late quartets' variation movements is acutely foreseen.

After the earnest, congenial theme is presented, the cello encourages some disjointed replication, invigorated by eccentric twangs, followed by a stealthier variation led by the first violin. The third deviation allows the second violin to chop the music to pieces before the fourth tries to quietly patch it together again, with some garish sticky tape. Out of this quiet work, the viola and second violin play a radiant, sequined version, the first violin contributing sparkling jumps and tweets, while – not to be left out of the fun – the cello appends some speedy inflections and sardonic drawls from below. The final variation has the cello thudding on, imitating a drum (the Mozart work on which No.5 is based, K.464, is sometimes nicknamed the *Drum Quartet*), before all the instruments frolic with innumerable bits and splinters of the theme. It all builds to a great climax, but then the theme is unceremoniously dissolved into the ground via two heavy chords from the viola and cello.

#### 4. *Allegro*.

The finale is as fast and carefree as a falcon, its wings built from the preliminary three-note swing. It feels unlike so much Beethoven, which is just the point, as Beethoven captures the life force of his Mozartian model, K.464, a work he made a point of openly and repeatedly telling people he adored.

Everything is succinct and dynamic, as if in a hurry, with places to go, people to see: the notes have a sparkling, chatty, slightly trivial quality to them but are intricate as only Mozart (and now apparently Beethoven) could write. The instruments flow with questions and responses as if old friends are catching up over coffee or cocktails, the glorious possibilities of

the string quartet format wonderfully explored and exploited.

Eventually a darker, more sensitive theme emerges as the tone of the conversation seems to change, perhaps the sad recollection of a departed loved one. Deep chords from the quartet have an almost funereal character, and we are given a moment to reflect, before slowly the mood lifts again. The first violin picks up the main theme, and the cello joins in, raising a toast, expansive and prolonged, with the second violin and viola chiming in. As ever, Beethoven's counterpoint is a flawless exercise in complex communication.

Mozart, too, knew how to slow down in his final movements: not only in the K.464 model, but memorably in the final movements of two E-flat piano concertos, K.271 (1777) and K.482 (1785), where the world seems to pause and take stock. Beethoven, of course, would do it himself to mesmerizing effect in the finale of his *Eroica*.

In this quartet, Beethoven contrasts the themes with his characteristic intensity – far more than Mozart did – and so allows his own voice to be heard amid the imitation. This more personal development done, we expect the conclusion to come with a more distinctively Mozartian flavour. But Beethoven plays his usual game of making us wait, first imposing a murkier version of the main theme before allowing it to be re-established, with its earlier triviality cut and now empowered with a deeper, sincerer consequence.

The first violin utters a farewell motif, which the other voices answer with their own versions of the same theme. The notes are passed around from instrument to instrument, ciao and bye, before swiftly disappearing into silence.

## No.6 in B-flat major

### 1. *Allegro con brio.*

The last of the six, the B-flat quartet was also likely the final one to be written. And the series ends with both a bang and a whimper. In many ways, this quartet is the most modern of the group, not only a doorway to later Beethoven but, as we saw earlier, a highway to some of the extraordinary developments of Wagner in the musikdrama and Mahler in his symphonies. This is an immensely strong quartet; Beethoven knew it was important to finish as powerfully as he began (though there are, of course, no weak links in the chain).

At times this quartet has been criticized for a perceived lack of unity. Yet this is surely not only to misunderstand the psychological purpose of its variety but also to overlook the shrewd way it binds itself together, by subtly reworking thematic material as well as emotional content. What is more, the sixth quartet continues the work of the earlier ones by disrupting our notion of the position, identity and function of classical movements. Both these aspects are not only fascinating in themselves but a tantalizing preview of the techniques lying ahead in the final quartets.

No.6 opens with a marvellous Haydnesque freshness, but with the unmistakable spice of Beethoven adding to the flavour. Everything is cool and simple on the surface: balanced, regular, rhyming, all in bonny good humour. If it wasn't so appealing, we might even label it crude. The first violin and cello converse with an effortlessness that is then repeated between the two violins, and such is its ease and comfort we are almost compelled to join in. For a huge stretch everything is sunny, the music never drifting into even glancing harmonies. It flirts and fizzles – and should be relentlessly dull. But it is one of the most charming, exciting things in Beethoven's entire output, full of sincerity and an effervescent joy. The quartet form and texture is used once again to brilliant effect as a conduit for dialogue: here, hilarious, bubbling sociable banter.

A swing to F is achieved with similar ease as a new theme is presented before a shocking descent into some very sinister F minor that rises back almost as swiftly – and with a fleeting reminder of the zigzagging main theme, the exposition ends. Beethoven's developments can be remote affairs, investigating faraway tonal zones, but here he initially stays in the familiar

territory of F major before going on some outings: first to D major and then, after one of the longest pauses imaginable, G minor. This particular excursion is not only a jaunt to a new key but a leap forward to the thrills and cadences of Beethoven's 'middle period'. It is a fabulously disorientating section, as time travel might well be, and the suspense builds as we gradually return home to the recapitulation.

When it comes, the recapitulation is given in an upfront manner at first before some further Beethovenian surprises as he disrupts the repeat (of what is by now a very familiar sunny tune) with some unforeseen additions. And one subtraction: the movement is sans coda, and ends with the last buoyant measure of the repeat.

## 2. *Adagio ma non troppo.*

The slow movement opens with a first violin theme of enticing purity and unfussy modesty in E-flat major, but its simple charms are soon pursued by the threatening lower voices of the viola and cello, who stab at the violin's melody. This eventually hauls the music into the minor key, played indistinctly but loaded with worry and menace, before unleashing a clamour of angry dissonance, violent stresses and well-marked silences that divulge the intense sentiments beneath the placid surface. Although wonderfully sinister in itself, it also functions as a scheming preparation for the strange harmonic world of *La Malinconia* to come.

## 3. *Scherzo.*

Before we reach that, however, a scherzo arrives, exploiting rhythmical ambiguity and our sense of personal space. It is an extraordinary movement with bizarre and mischievous cross-accented rhythms that must have caused many brows to furrow and lips to purse in 1801, even among those well used to Haydn's games.

At times it is almost vulgar, strings made to sound like hunting horns, the syncopations shifting and fluctuating with no decency or respect. The viola and cello try to stand for stability, but the violins refuse to match their beat, rebelling against the order their lower cousins maintain. It requires four players of immense skill and commitment to maintain the

wonderfully belligerent atmosphere, and the effect is generally one of scandalous amusement – but at times threatens to boil over into fixation and mania.

A whimsical trio section via a fickle first violin is extremely brief before a disquieting repeat of the recalcitrant scherzo is introduced with a B-flat minor scream. It is curiously immature, raw, practically childish, and seems to predict some of Mahler's brilliant improprieties.

#### *4. La Malinconia: Adagio – Allegretto quasi allegro.*

The first section of the final movement acts most obviously as a slow introduction, but its power is such that it almost stands as an independent movement – making the sixth in some measure Beethoven's first five-movement quartet and looking forward to the extraordinary works of the last period. *La Malinconia* is surely the most striking and original music of the entire op.18 set – in fact, nothing before in music had sounded like this. Like Sibelius's *Tapiola* (1926), it is an extraordinary and unique noise – disturbing, black, restless, static – but strangely reassuring, too, as only certain forms of darkness and pain can be.

Amid the bustle and bubble of this quartet, melancholia has long been waiting, patiently lurking in the way depression does, furtive and malevolent as a snake. It has been foreseen in the first movement's shocking F and G minor passages, in the arachnid gloom and ferocity of the second part of the slow movement, and in the related manic episode of the scherzo.

The scherzo's crudity and overexcitement (as well as the liberated – perhaps, in hindsight, unbalanced – glee which opens the quartet) has a clear psycho-musical attachment to the despondency and violence which surrounds it. Melancholia (manic depression or bipolar disorder, as we now call it) is not just about sadness but about mutable, dangerous and disruptive behaviour: '*La Malinconia*' could just as easily refer to the entire quartet, not just the introduction to the finale. Understanding the importance of this adagio section, however, Beethoven is careful to instruct his players to treat the passage with great delicacy: it requires a string quartet alert to the full meaning and potential of '*pianissimo*'.

It begins on the violins and viola, the cello silent, and is remarkably unsettling. It echoes the second theme of the first movement, its march pressed into a refined phrase, with an elegant little turn on the end. It is repeated, and the cello enters, dragging the music into a



dark pit of chromaticism and haunting, protracted dread. The elegant little turn, at the start so innocent, becomes a twitch and then a menacing spasm, repeating and repeating in a manner which becomes quite alarming.

It is hard to know what key we are in: it drifts purposelessly and forever, seeming to travel everywhere and nowhere, screaming past galaxies and suns but moving not at all. The mind is pedalling in violent agony, but the depression has paralysed action. As we said earlier, it seems to closely anticipate the act-three prelude to *Parsifal* (1882). A mixture of musical travelogue and psychological portrait, Wagner's great orchestral preface depicts the titular hero's lost, desolate years roaming the earth, searching for the province of the Grail. Full of lethargic sighs and fragments, like *La Malinconia* it wanders aimless through the keys and motifs, with a futile ennui, desperately trying to establish itself.

Eventually, in the quartet, a new theme emerges from the nothingness – or not quite new, since it is a painstaking, mournful reworking of the nasty minor-key section of the slow movement. The once-elegant little turn, now twisted to a paroxysm of frightening repetition, comes back once more, rocking back and forth, again and again reiterating its diminutive phrase.

Slowly, and by short steps, the movement begins to climb out of its pit of misery. Notes and chords begin to build, and the volume starts to increase before suddenly being cut off, exhausted by the struggle. Silence. A pause. The preoccupied, ominous music begins again, even more forlorn than before, and abruptly dissipates into German dance sounds. This is no occasion for relief, however: the main theme is given on the first violin's darker middle strings, and there are weird, off-centre disruptions in the rhythms of the other instruments. The lurching develops upward and gradually gains in brightness, but the tension is being imperceptibly ratcheted up as well. It can result only in crisis and with a horrendous scream crashes onto a diminished chord.

*La Malinconia* is back, its miserable tramp returning, as do the vicious little spasms from the once-elegant turn, shaking and quivering in horror and fear. The dance attempts to restart, in the wrong key of A minor, but is almost immediately halted. Silence; misery. The dance tries again, this time fumbling for the right key, which it eventually finds. Before it does so, however, a few conspicuous turns slow and sour the music, forcing it back inward, as the

clouds and shadows of La Malinconia reappear.

All seems lost, but, finally, any suggestion of melancholy is expelled – for now – as the movement surges frantically towards closure. It is a breathless finish, the tempo as fast as any Beethoven would write, the music desperate to banish the black dog and move on. It does so, but we are left with an appalling dread that it will return at any moment.



Thus ends the extraordinary cycle of six string quartets, op.18. They were completed in December 1800, the month their maker turned thirty. Shortly after, a new century – the nineteenth – began. Few composers were as ready for it as Ludwig van Beethoven.

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<sup>4</sup> Shakespeare – a writer Beethoven revered from a young age – is, as so often, the archetype here. The astounding accomplishments of the Henriad tetralogy, mature comedies, high tragedies and late romances have often undermined the strength and originality of his early plays. Even the lingo ('mature', 'high') we use to discuss Shakespeare's later oeuvre emphasizes this. Yet the youthful *Titus Andronicus* is not just a juvenile bloodbath but an urbane analysis of urban power, cultural interaction and the mechanics of historiography. The three *Henry VI* plays are not mere apprentice works but a fascinating interrogation of time and national psychology; *The Comedy of Errors* is a brilliant metaphysical study of identity with some superbly intricate plotting, and *Love's Labour's Lost* a multifaceted proto-Joycean word-fest quizzing the meaning of names and language. Yet, despite this virtuosity and complexity, these works are routinely dismissed as being inferior in quality simply because they are earlier in time. Op.18 have often suffered a similar fate.

<sup>5</sup> 'Werke ohne Opuszahl', 'work without opus number.'

<sup>6</sup> Later designated as the First, op.15, though composed after another, now known as the Second, op.19.

<sup>7</sup> This is not damning with faint praise either: Beethoven's trios and violin and cello sonatas contain some of his freshest, most enticing music. The op.5 cello sonatas in particular are brilliant, cutting-edge works, the first examples of their kind where the cello is given a fully developed role rather than simply being a continuo providing the harmonic structure to a piece. That said, the piano remains the star in op.5: it would only be with his later cello sonatas – opp.69 and 102 – that Beethoven would bestow equal standing on both instruments.

<sup>8</sup> While composing his op.18 quartets, he also began his First Symphony, op.21, a work of exceptional originality and daring, albeit with extensive debts to its predecessors. It premiered on 2 April 1800, just over a year before the first op.18 quartets were published.

<sup>9</sup> The pioneering set of six works from 1772 known as op.20 – the *Sun* Quartets – carry a low opus number but were in fact the work of a man of forty and were his twenty-third to twenty-eighth essays in the string quartet genre. Quartets, and their evolution by Haydn, took time. Eventually, he would write sixty-eight of them.

<sup>10</sup> In his G major quartet, K.387 (1782), for example.

<sup>11</sup> Mozart's haunting and darkly resplendent C minor piano concerto, K.491 (1786), is an exception – and it is easy to see why it was a Beethoven favourite. It ends gleefully in the minor, a sinister dance despondently pronouncing the victory of

the minor mode.

- 12 A music-mad Bohemian aristocrat who sang with a fine bass, Lobkowitz (1772–1816) dabbled in string playing of one form or another, and his private household orchestra would, ironically, stage the first performances of one of music's most revolutionary, terrain-altering works: Beethoven's *Eroica*, in the summer of 1804, prior to its public debut the following spring.
- 13 As well as the angst and alienation in everything from Franz Schubert's *Winterreise* (1827) and Alban Berg's *Wozzeck* (1925) to Nirvana's *Nevermind* (1991) and Radiohead's *OK Computer* (1997).
- 14 Schubert executed a similar trick in his *Death and the Maiden* String Quartet in D minor (D.810, 1824). But where Beethoven (and Haydn before him) play the transferal of energy for laughs, Schubert is absolutely serious, allowing it to further deepen his own work's dance of death.
- 15 Mozart himself would compose only one whole movement in this key: the shattering, grief-stricken adagio from his piano concerto No.23 in A, K.488, from 1786.

## PART TWO

### THE MIDDLE QUARTETS

## Chapter Two

### Russian Revolutions: *Op.59*

What do we think of when we think of string quartets (if we ever think of string quartets)? If we're being kind: sophistication, elegance and intimacy. If we're being a bit nasty: aloofness, difficulty and boredom. Either way, we don't tend to think of them as heroic. And yet, when Beethoven came to write his next quartets after op.18, they came smack in the middle of his extraordinary 'heroic period' – following on from the achievements of the *Eroica* Symphony, the *Waldstein* and *Appassionata* Piano Sonatas, and his only opera, the prison-and-rescue drama *Fidelio*.

Indeed, in order to arrive at the platform of the three op.59 quartets, we will need to pass through these stations – *Eroica*, *Waldstein*, *Fidelio* – on the way, seeing how developments in their particular forms both allowed and encouraged Beethoven to radically advance the string quartet. Or, to alter the metaphor, the pungent, piquant stew of op.59 needed a variety of ingredients – symphonic expansion, elaborate technique, moral complexity – to create its exceptional flavour. These were ingredients which Beethoven needed to discover and experiment with, and which we need to unpack, in order to understand the constitution of the final dazzling dish.

Known as the *Razumovsky* Quartets after the Russian ambassador to Vienna, Count Andrey Razumovsky, who commissioned them, op.59's range of emotional expression,

technical burdens and inexplicable moments (that were not just peculiar but bordered on the bizarre) all pointed to a very new kind of quartet. And it was one comparable to Beethoven's other pioneering achievements in the symphony, concerto and piano sonata. Born of an age thirsty for change and keen to (sometimes literally) execute it, this was truly contemporary music, formed amid dramatic shifts in political power and social organization: indignant, insistent, imperative.

The three quartets of op.59 challenged the notion of what chamber music was for and could be, destabilizing forever the time-honoured conception that it was a staid form of polite domestic discourse or genteel accord and coordination. If, in op.18, Beethoven had been knocking on the door of revolution, in op.59 he booted that door firmly open. Harbingers and delegates of change rather than incarnations of it, the rebellious quartets of op.18 would be vastly surpassed by the reach and scale of op.59. Challenging to perform, their scope and magnitude also make extraordinary demands on the listener, puzzling early – and even modern – auditors just as the *Eroica* had. Here was music designed not just to please, or to mask its threats in agreeable sounds, but to knowingly, openly, confront and subvert.

Now, with the extraordinary artistic developments and achievements in opera, symphony and sonata under his belt, Beethoven could embark on uncovering the true expressive potential of the string quartet. It was, he felt, a capacity which had only been lying dormant, sporadically stirring, in the great works of Haydn and Mozart (as well as his own op.18 set). The op.59 quartets would tear open the gates of insurrection and dramatic scope, taking their musical ideas and thrusting them forward, but doing so with weapons that were both well-built and flexible, supple and strong.

Musical ideas, once released, were for Beethoven a frenzied wild animal that he initially let loose, abandoned to the craze of its own delight, before recalling and subjecting it to modulation after modulation; ultimately it achieves the mollifying – but triumphant – conquest of its own logical procedure. The long-standing, orthodox musical forms would be shaped by Beethoven into uninhibited vehicles capable of far more lyrical and passionate demonstrations, trial, effort and error – which we can sometimes see in the sketchbooks – that would bear immense fruit.

From here the proportion and equilibrium of Haydn's and Mozart's themes, which we often witness in the earlier Beethoven, tend to disappear, in favour of more emotional manifestations imbued with a malleable potential. Development sections, betwixt the exposition and recapitulation in sonata form, would also be radically transformed: for Haydn and Mozart, this was a play area, a soft space for imitation and fugal fun; as we will see in the *Eroica* and op.59, in Beethoven it would become a blood-soaked combat zone.

Yet despite the wildness, the emotional shifts, this transformation was by no means uncontrolled. Beethoven's developments were lucid, coherent products of his musical and psychological reasoning, as well as being part of wider networks of sound and demonstrating a meticulous, pliable understanding of tonality. If drama, emotion and psychology drove and inspired his works, they were built and sustained by the most profound musical considerations. He knew the rules so well he could exploit and subtly manipulate them, like a leading barrister in court.

Concepts and manoeuvrings learned in the symphony and piano sonata Beethoven would now apply to the quartet, turning the new works of op.59 into symphonic quartets, generating chamber music on a scale never imagined. Objective expressions of drama and humanity, they retain much of the traditional sonata-form panache, while also broadening, extending and adjusting the form, allowing an individual creative force to shine through but within a tangible, recognizable container. Here orchestral and percussive effects surge into the slim vessel of the quartet, often stretching it to its limits, creating an immense burden on both the instruments and the form, making the strange familiar and the familiar strange.

It is one of the neat ironies and instructive paradoxes of Beethoven's life and career that music of such a trailblazing, insistently revolutionary bent should have been instigated by an imperial diplomat.



Who was Count, later Prince, Andrey Kirillovich Razumovsky, the man who commissioned and gave his name to Beethoven's next three essays in the string quartet form, works which took contemporary chamber music to such unprecedented levels of edgy

drama and intrepid grandeur?

Born on 2 November 1752, in Glukhov in the south of the Russian Empire (now Hlukhiv, Ukraine), he was the son of Count Kirill Grigoryevich Razumovsky, who served as the last Hetman of Zaporozhian Host (a form of regional governor for the Ukrainian Cossack Hetmanate state). The post was finally abolished by Catherine the Great in 1764, and Razumovsky, père, went on to become a field marshal in the Russian Imperial Army as well as president of the Saint Petersburg Imperial Academy of Sciences. He had several children, one of whom became minister of education, another a significant botanist and zoologist in Germany and Sweden. A daughter, Natalia Kirillovna, served as one of Empress Catherine's ladies-in-waiting and as hostess for popular literary salons which attracted the likes of Vasily Zhukovsky and Aleksandr Pushkin.

It was Razumovsky's second son, Andrey, however, who ensured that the family name endured down the centuries, becoming a fixture on concert calendars and in music collections the world over. In 1792, following an earlier posting to the Regnum Neapolitanum, he was appointed as the tsar's diplomatic representative to the Habsburg Court in Vienna – a crucial post in the Napoleonic era. He would be a chief negotiator in the Congress of Vienna (1814–15), the international conference which reorganized the map of Europe after the downfall of the French emperor.

A lavish and occasionally reckless aristocrat-cum-ambassador, Razumovsky stood out in a city absolutely teeming with other wealthy, extravagant noblemen. Although he had the appearance of a surly minor bureaucrat, he made up for his physiognomic deficiencies by being profligate in books, art, architecture and matters amorous, pursuing women and paintings as men of his breed had been sanctioned to do by their peers. The queen of Naples was one especially conspicuous notch in the ambassadorial bedpost. He also married meticulously well into the Viennese nobility and arts scene: his wife Elisabeth, Countess Thun, was sister to Prince Lichnowsky, patron and dedicatee of Beethoven's op.1 piano trios, the *Pathétique* Sonata and the Second Symphony.

Keen to assert, consolidate and promote his position as both a lover of the arts and envoy of Alexander I in Vienna, Razumovsky built a magnificent neoclassical palace, lying impressively on a hill in the Landstraße district, overlooking the Danube, and crammed it



with both antiquities and modern art (as well as adding a roof garden for good measure). For New Year's Eve, 1814, in the middle of the Congress of Vienna's world-defining talks, Razumovsky planned a sumptuous ball, no expense spared, and with the tsar himself as guest of honour. On the morning of the event, in one of the temporary salons, a fire broke out. It spread, setting the main ballroom ablaze, before engulfing much of the palace, consuming countless irreplaceable artefacts, works of art and the count's own beloved library.

Although the emperor raised him to prince the following year, for his services to diplomacy, Razumovsky was never the same again. His feted, flamboyant prime was over, and the following two decades were spent in snowballing mental and physical decline, wandering around Europe, popping up in England or France, and occasionally back in Vienna, 'penniless', as one of Beethoven's own final conversation books recorded.<sup>16</sup> It was a miserable, but very human, end to a life that had been a curious mixture of the helpful and the wasteful.

It is as a musician and patron of the arts, however, that Razumovsky's life has been largely remembered – and celebrated. Like many aristocrats of the time (his father and uncle were both keen singers), Razumovsky, fils, was absolutely music mad. An occasional acquaintance of Mozart, he played the violin – and torban, a sort of many-stringed Ukrainian lute – exceptionally well, developing his skills via Haydn's quartets, often with Papa Joe himself as tutor, and as second violinist for his in-house quartet.

Beyond playing, providing a more stable footing for string quartet performance was to be Razumovsky's lasting attainment. His own quartet, the Razumovsky Quartet, eventually merged and overlapped with the Schuppanzigh Quartet, led by Beethoven's friend Ignaz Schuppanzigh. Schuppanzigh was, of course, closely associated with Beethoven's career, both early on and in the late works, and his quartet inaugurated themselves as the first truly professional and long-term quartet in Europe. It was a significant recognition of the status, appeal and importance of the string quartet form and would be a pivotal factor in the genre's durability as one of the heights of musical aspiration and sophistication.

In early 1806, Razumovsky commissioned new string quartets from Beethoven. The pair vaguely knew each other: Razumovsky had once asked Beethoven for lessons in music

theory, but the composer had declined, sending him to his own former tutor, Emanuel Förster, instead. The quartet commission apparently came with the proviso that some Russian folk themes be included. The composer duly turned to his personal library and a collection of traditional Russian melodies he had in his possession, scouring them for suitable material. Fulfilling most of his brief, two of the three *Razumovsky* Quartets contain authentic Russian tunes, apparently taken from this source; the third has a Russian-style theme, which may be Beethoven's own or from an unknown Russian location.<sup>17</sup> All three tunes are afforded prominence in the quartets, bequeathing op.59 a delicate but distinctive Slavic flavour to go with their generally groundbreaking zest.

So, the commission agreed upon, in the spring of 1806 Beethoven was set to return to quartet writing, for the first time since his op.18, written in 1798–1800 and published in 1801. Not an especially long gap, but a momentous one, for, as we have said, the intervening period had seen his craft advance not in mere leaps and bounds but distances quantifiable in light years or other such astronomical measurements.



Several factors contribute to our understanding vis-à-vis the onset and development of Beethoven's 'heroic' period, many gathering around the composer's mounting confidence, independence and maturity. Others cluster among the wider geopolitical and social changes of the times, which both inspired and fed on world-shattering art. Something else, however, something far more personal and devastating, lay at the heart of this superhuman explosion into revolutionary sounds and forms: by the early years of the nineteenth century, the music's maker was beginning to lose the ability to hear.

Beethoven had mentioned his sporadic but persistently aggravating hearing problems in several letters, most notably in 1801 to his friends Franz Wegeler and Karl Amenda. Here, the tone is quite pragmatic, rather than despondent, noting some problems in both professional and social settings. To Wegeler he also used a phrase which would become not just famous but characteristic of Beethoven's art and personality, as well as a convenient marker of his next creative phrase, however porous those periods always were: 'I will,' he

wrote, 'seize Fate by the throat; it shall not crush me completely.'

By 1806, and the time of the *Razumovsky* Quartets, he would write himself upbeat affirmations and peppy little mantras in his sketches: 'Let your deafness no longer be a secret – even in your art!' says one in the notes for op.59/3. Clearly the momentum and impetus of his deafness, both as creative spur and catalyst to transformation, were to be a part of the music itself; music was not simply a by-product of his new bravery in overcoming or living with his disability. The work would be as heroic as his struggle, the life writ large in musical form, and in a sense making art and biography as intertwined as the double helix of DNA.

Back in 1802, however, fear and despondency quite naturally followed his initially pragmatic reaction, but these would eventually develop into an uncompromising tenacity and resilience. This mix of horror and determination also produced one of the most extraordinary texts in European cultural history, the ultimate statement of human suffering and artistic exertion, personal pain and public endeavour: the Heiligenstadt Testament.

On the advice of his doctors, Beethoven spent six months, from the spring to autumn of 1802, in the then quiet, wooded suburb, now part of the Döbling district of Vienna, which gives the document its name. Towards the end of his stay, on 6 October, Beethoven sat down to write to his brothers Kaspar<sup>18</sup> and Johann. Unsent, the letter – which is both a private confession and quasi-legal document – was eventually found by Anton Schindler and Stephan von Breuning among Beethoven's papers, as they sorted his flat, after the composer's death in March 1827.

From any pen it would be an astounding piece of writing; from Beethoven's it becomes something almost cosmic, with an overwhelming, Herculean power. Although addressed to relatives, it is also directed to the wider world: 'O ihr Menschen,' 'O you people' – the composer anticipating the themes and recipients of his Ninth Symphony two decades hence. Lucid, intimate, heartbreaking, in the Heiligenstadt Testament the still-young composer pours out his grief over the extent and progress of his deafness, his frustration and vexation turning to anguish, gloom and a more profound kind of hopelessness.

The wretchedness of his existence, and of his ghastly body, is outlined in disturbing, traumatic terms. Depressed, he even contemplates the alarming but perhaps quite understandable step of suicide as a logical solution to the situation he finds himself in. He

was already a difficult person socially, part of which he attributed to his numerous health issues. Deafness exacerbated this and also had profound implications for his career as a musician – both in practical ways as a pianist and/or conductor, and correspondingly as a composer. Who, after all, would want to listen to the music of a man who couldn't hear?

Yet from this desolation, from this agony, came the drive to cope, surmount and succeed. Despair will be turned into destiny. Patience, Beethoven acknowledges, will be the key. From this, courage will be found and built upon, determination seeing him through. The final part of the Heiligenstadt Testament, including a postscript added on 10 October, is packed with resolution and hope: 'O Providence! Grant me but one day of pure joy!' The style would seem to be high-flown, slightly melodramatic babble were it not so sincere, so intensely forlorn – but full of quiet sanguinity amid catastrophic desperation. Beethoven commits to endure torments and tribulations, admit misfortune, confront deafness and accept death with boldness, audacity and spirit.

So much, so powerful. But what does this mean for the music? It is hard to trace certainties, and we should perhaps be cautious about doing so, even if it seems clear how much deafness both influenced the style of his music and affected the physical procedure of composition. The content and character of his music began to change, as well as turning further inward. Musically, this would eventually create the spiritual, highly philosophical works of the final years; publicly, deafness perhaps allowed him to justify his antisocial behaviour, even encouraging aspects of it since he now had a ready-made excuse.

Beethoven perhaps never experienced that 'one day of pure joy' the Heiligenstadt Testament asks for. But despite all the woe, he knew enough about happiness, tenacity and strength to communicate it in sounds, many of which he himself never heard. Social (and its related romantic) suffering forged the increasing concentration of hope and heartache we find in his music. Although encroaching deafness in many ways developed more forcefully the traits and emotions that were always present – agony, anguish, passion, pain and perseverance – it also altered him, and his music, forever.

In order to see how Beethoven implemented these changes and intensifications into writing new string quartets, the op.59, we first need to survey the transformations he wrought in the symphony and piano sonata, in the monumental achievements now known

as the *Eroica*, *Waldstein* and *Appassionata*.

Works prior to the Heiligenstadt Testament – including, but not limited to, the sixth op.18 quartet, the opp.10/3 and 26 piano sonatas – embrace suffering before striving towards resolution and fortitude. But nothing in Beethoven's music – or any music, come to that – had prepared for the howl of grief and suffering which screams at the centre of the *Eroica*'s funeral march – and is then able to overcome its torment. For it is the *Sinfonia Eroica* which was the key (and public) response to the crisis of deafness (even if it also carries many socio-political associations and innumerable purely musical implications). The *Eroica* is anger, despair and resolve, mixed and always mixing, inconsolable but dogged, fearless in the face of the utmost dread.



The *Eroica* began at the end, its finale arising from some previously written piano variations (the *Prometheus* Variations, op.35, which are usually now known as the *Eroica* Variations, and which themselves were derived from Beethoven's ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus*, op.43). These provided a foundation for the rest of the symphony – a new work in E flat – and the variations are readily apparent in the last movement of the *Eroica*, though the symphony forsakes the strictness of classical variation form and employs a new hybrid style for which we still have no name.

Indeed, the whole work would be an unnameable creature, an overpowering Cambrian explosion of evolutionary development in the symphony that can only truly be understood as a revolution. Sheer size, emotional expression and potential meaning were greatly swollen, making the already powerful symphonic form of J. C. Bach, G. C. Wagenseil, Carl Ditters von Dittersdorf, Joseph Aloys Schmittbaur, Haydn, Mozart and early Beethoven himself something now left behind forever, with only a few basically comic, interrogatory and pseudo-classical returns to the past possible.

Like Wagner's musikdramas or Mahler's symphonies, the *Eroica* grew in length because of the space needed to fully explore its musical, emotional and dramatic content: its size is exactly proportional to the organic profusion and cogent investigation of its own material.

But it is length governed by unity as well as variety, the two working together, and the *Eroica* stands on four mighty columns, four equally strong and fundamental movements, each conceived and advanced on a majestic scale and operating as one to create and support the colossal structure. And it needed to be a huge construction, for it was to be a site for not only drama and performance but huge moral, ethical, social, political and philosophical debate: an acropolis as well as an amphitheatre, parliament and Parthenon.

This unity occurs at the micro as well as macro level. In the first movement in particular, the motifs are given an intense and complex relationship with each other, their intricate language built from a series of quite basic melodic and rhythmic units. This lexis can then be expanded and built upon to create a very strong lattice structure and a multifaceted, super-evolving symphonic idiom. Add to the concentration of motifs and rhythmical vigour a vast harmonic range, and the *Eroica* was able to speak in an array of accents and voices, constantly modifying its own linguistic expressions and emotional resonances.

At a larger level, and to change the metaphor, the system is like bamboo scaffolding, both sturdy and flexible, an ideal combination. This is then replicated in the still-wider framework, creating a significant intensification in the progressive potential of sonata form. Because everything is delicately related via a slender but strong thread of unity, the exposition and development of the work especially can undergo transformations and daring shifts unlike any which had occurred before.

The overall plan of the *Eroica* is as straightforward as its internal mechanisms are complex. It is a daring cosmic panorama where struggle and defiance meet, an act of creative fearlessness and transcendent revitalization: the first movement a gigantic tussle and surge of conflict; the second a cataclysmic funeral march; the third an exuberant reawakening of life and joy; the finale a self-assured, victorious avowal of the human spirit. It is a journey unlike any other in music, an exhilarating thrill ride combined with a voyage of despair. It is paradise glimpsing hell, darkness encountered and overcome. As a feat of the imagination – as an exquisite, poignant work of art – it has no real equal.

The *Sinfonia Eroica* opens with thrilling new sounds that are actually familiar chords simply repackaged into brusque, shocking statements of intent. These are followed by cellos beginning, and violins completing, the main theme, but with chromatic intrusions and

syncopations for added spice. The exposition is almost effortlessly expansive, its capaciousness and ability to grow both alarming and impudent. When we reach the development section, a vast brawl occurs, bloody and brutal, dissonant harmonics and offbeat rhythms generating a battlefield of tension. But then, over hushed apprehensive trembling from the violins, which gradually builds in thrill and trepidation, a horn – unable to wait any longer – sneaks in, sweeping the rest of the orchestra into the fray, the surge of a violent army: the long recapitulation has begun, before the structural necessity of a massive coda.

The second movement is a vast funeral march, one which makes the similar movement in Beethoven's op.26 piano sonata from a year or two before sound like a lament for a locust: trivial, even precariously trite and hackneyed. The *Eroica's* posthumous procession has an uncomplicated design – and makes extremely good use of it, exploiting the simplicity for both scale and raw emotional power.

An outer frame, in C minor, is incredibly slow, full of heartache and sorrow, an agonizing musical representation of grief. Inside this construction there lie three subdivisions, each separated from the other by fragments of the initial, grief-stricken theme, in various keys: a constant reminder of misery's control and sway. First, a hopelessly optimistic C major trio section, followed by a sombre, almost ceremonial F minor fugue, then finally a catastrophic, truly earth-shattering orchestral disturbance, plunging the music into chaos and further despair. It is this fortissimo turmoil, perhaps, that represents Beethoven's realization of his invading deafness, the pit of pain out of which he could climb, a wounded titan. After the frame is closed by a return to the original C minor theme, initiated by a touching oboe, a titanic coda follows – one where the music eventually collapses, unable or unwilling to be comforted, dissolving in desolation.

The third movement restarts life and expectation, reminding us that the dead live on in hope and memories. A scherzo, it begins invisibly, delicately, on strings and woodwind before – after a considerable period of apparently extended mourning – the rest of the orchestra enters, merrily joining the dance at the wake.

The final movement, a return to the origins of the symphony, is an exceptional, unique blend of variation, passacaglia, rondo and utterly free musical development. It begins in

clamour and commotion before proceeding from an unadorned bass line to a dance and then to the true *Prometheus* theme, where the real engine of the movement gets going, but with intermittent reappearances of identifiable forms of the main theme. An immeasurably noble slow section – all iron and fire smelting – provides dignity and the final benediction of heroism to the whole work, before such honours are swept sideways via a jubilant coda.

The extramusical associations – be they personal, political or philosophical – that prompted this symphony and have subsequently streamed from it are important – and, indeed, are fundamentally connected to its musical ones. But we have to be careful. Arturo Toscanini, asked if the first movement of the *Eroica* was Napoleon, Hitler or Mussolini, replied, ‘It is allegro con brio.’

Whatever the connections to Napoleon – Beethoven initially titled the work *Bonaparte*, before famously scratching the Corsican’s name out when he proclaimed himself emperor of the French<sup>19</sup> – the *Eroica* must always be a detailed self-portrait on a vast symphonic canvas. For the *Eroica* is Beethoven, the true Promethean spirit, heroically stealing fire from the gods and turning it into the music of the future. But private and contemporary music, too, for it displays both his immense struggle and his intrepid victories over the deafness that was beginning to dominate his life. The personal and universal were fused.

Beethoven lost faith in Napoleon, but he abandoned neither conviction in himself nor belief in the species as a whole. Heroism was important to Beethoven: individually, idealistically – and musically, especially through symphonic work, whose vast public arena could portray the full might and mystery of humanity and its deeds. The *Eroica* had shown the potential of the symphony as a vehicle for significant conceptual, moral and philosophical weight – something taken up, in their various ways, by Bruckner, Brahms, Tchaikovsky, Mahler, Sibelius, Vaughan Williams, Shostakovich, Florence Price, Masao Ohki, Allan Pettersson, Alla Pavlova and Kalevi Aho (along with many others) in the decades and centuries to come.<sup>20</sup>

But perhaps more importantly, the *Eroica* had shown how all music could strive for and attain a measure of heroism, defying the odds and achieving gallant victories over fate and fortune.<sup>21</sup> Symphonies, in their scale, were more obviously attuned to civic heroics, but such was the power of the process and the faultlessness of the model that Beethoven’s techniques



and new musical style could be applied to smaller and more private forms, too, with no loss of impact or potential ideological import.



After the *Eroica's* gargantuan statement of desolation and resilience, changing not only the course of the symphony but the entire direction of Western music, Beethoven would compose numerous astonishing new works, allowing the *Eroica's* size and power to infiltrate all the genres of his art, including and especially the string quartet.

Likewise, the instrument at the centre of so much of his career so far – the piano – and its principal means of classical musical expression – the piano sonata – would not escape the new symphony's gravitational influence. Three especially important piano works came around this time: two are large and world famous; one is tiny and comparatively unknown, like a moon hiding behind planets. The Jupiter and Saturn, the *Waldstein* and *Appassionata* Sonatas, opp.53 and 57, frequently conceal a Ganymede – the op.54 sonata, No.22 in F – but all three show Beethoven rewriting and remodelling the piano sonata in the wake of the *Eroica* and further furrowing the earth for the op.59 quartets.

The *Waldstein* Sonata in C major, nicknamed as such in honour of its dedicatee – Beethoven's friend and patron, the splendidly named Count Ferdinand von Waldstein und Wartenberg – was begun in the winter of 1803–4, after the *Eroica* had been sketched out in full. It was his twenty-first piano sonata, but Beethoven was still insecure about his music for the keyboard. An entry in a notebook (a year later) reveals his doubts: 'my piano music still always makes the poorest impression on me.'

Yet none of this self-consciousness is apparent in the *Waldstein*, which joins the *Eroica* as a prime specimen of his new heroic style, and the first for piano (whatever the not inconsiderable achievements of works like the *Grand Sonata*, op.7, or *Pathétique*, op.13). It opens in a unique manner, with low throbbing pianissimo chords which almost immediately hint at other harmonic regions before a reaffirmation of C. But before long all hell is let loose with a ridiculous display of pianistic fireworks whose variety of colours and rapidity of technique outshines all the earlier sonatas.

The subsequent adagio is a fleeting but weird cerebral-spiritual wonder. It echoes many of the methods of the first movement – a muted pulse, descending bass line, shifting harmonies – which are then developed into a phantasm of strangeness. From here, it meanders in darkness, always unsure of its destinations, modulating to nowhere.

Or not quite nowhere, since in some ways it is a slow introduction to the galactic finale, where being lost in space begins to take on the energy and evasion of a rocket. Alternating C major and C minor gradually builds momentum, like a generator converting mechanical energy to electrical power. Rhythms hasten and accelerate, gathering speed – *Can this really be music for only two hands and ten fingers?* we wonder – as the sounds erupt in explosions of thrust and impetus. Eventually, with a few formidable C major chords, it zooms into infinity.

Beethoven had, in his previous twenty piano sonatas, made much of the expressive qualities of the instrument, as well as the virtuosic capabilities of his own digits, but the technical strength and dramatic clout of the *Waldstein* broke new ground, bringing in many features of the concerto and immediately raising the status of the sonata. It was, moreover, a work for keyboard that could proudly, unapologetically, sit beside the orchestral oomph and intellectual intensity of the *Eroica*.

The noise, power and length of the twenty-first sonata was followed by the diminutive stillness and quiet of the twenty-second. A daisy next to an oak; a pilotfish by a shark; but still a piano sonata, an intricate, witty middle panel in the heroic triptych flanked by the hurricane canvases of opp.53 and 57. Its being so close to giants compels us not only to draw comparisons but to more visibly notice similarities and balances, as large and small must always invite, complementing and completing each other. In op.54, there is much to see.

Cast in two F major movements, the actors in Beethoven's spectacle seem to wear spacesuits in a period drama: urgent phrases and shifting harmonies are futuristic in appearance, but the whole set-up has a more old-fashioned feel which only heightens the oddity and audacity of the modern lunges. The second movement features a pioneering use of a single theme to reconnoitre a vast range of harmonic enlargement, as well as some outlandish, truly alien touches towards the end that bring Webern and Boulez into a Haydn sonata. Small it might be, but the F major sonata, op.54, is a cheeky, clever gem – peculiar and far-sighted.

The third piece of this heroic expansion of the piano sonata's literature began in the autumn of 1805, offsetting the C and F major of the others with some dark, moody F minor. The *Appassionata* Sonata is a beast of emotional scope of dramatic amplification, but one which took Beethoven some time to get right, the answers to the tough questions he posed for himself coming only after battles in the notebooks. It is as if Beethoven decided to hike between point A and point B, damn if he found there were rivers and mountains between them; he was still going to get there. And traversing those rivers and mountains make the journey what it is, as much as the final terminus does. This is heroic music, the determination and challenges the whole purpose of the voyage.

We open with a shadowy, evocative theme which modulates and then leaves itself unresolved, suspended in the air like a proto-*Tristan* chord, something then replicated a little higher, before reiterating the original inquiry. These three unanswered questions – and there will be many more – will find harmonic resolution only after much delay, rescheduling and heightened dramatic tension: piano *liebestods*. But Beethoven is anticipating Wagner in not only musical terms but the emotional ones which coerce and construct the *musikdrama*, for this is a piano sonata full of theatre, anxiety and human peril.

As it is, the coda of the first movement is required to close the harmonics: F minor nails sealing the coffin. These allow dreamy variations to occur in D flat in the second movement, before a violent zombie rebirth in the finale where we plunge between major and minor courses without any respite towards a ferocious ending.

Stormy, modern, edgy, the three piano sonatas opp.53, 54 and 57 took keyboard writing decisively out of the parlour and into the stratosphere, just as the *Eroica* had taken symphonic music beyond the concert hall and into complex socio-politico-historiographical debate (as well the furthest reaches of both the cosmos and the human heart). If the nineteenth century wasn't sure it had arrived, it was now being told – and firmly. With these decisive developments achieved, it was unlikely the string quartet would escape untouched. But one more key composition needs a little examination in order to arrive at op.59.



Years of infatuation and loneliness had followed the op.18 quartets, as romances came and went and deafness segregated Beethoven further from a world he both loved and mistrusted. In the wider scheme of things, revolution had brought the ideals of true and global camaraderie closer to reality – before snatching them away, as self-interest and vanity once again overtook the principles of office. Amid these disappointments, personal and political, one work would have an important bearing on the tone and character of the *Razumovsky* Quartets as complex human dramas: Beethoven's only opera, *Fidelio* – also known, at various times, as *Leonore*.<sup>22</sup>

The work's origins can be traced to the 1803 contract Beethoven signed with Emanuel Schikaneder – of *Magic Flute* fame – to write an opera together, in a deal which included free lodging for the composer in the apartment complex at Schikaneder's Theater an der Wien. The libretto, *Vestas Feuer*, did not appeal, however, and only a scene's worth of music was composed by the time the text for *Leonore/Fidelio* caught Beethoven's eye in 1804. The resulting work was premiered in November 1805, revised in 1806, and then considerably reworked for a final version presented in May 1814, labour which Beethoven claimed was harder than creating a new piece from scratch.

Its demanding birth and multiple revisions, as well as Beethoven's own dissatisfactions ('my most difficult child' he would call it), have led many to belittle *Fidelio's* status, often by failing to appreciate the hybrid nature of the work: its novel amalgamation of elements of opera, singspiel and oratorio is frequently bewildering, but tremendously exciting too. Such innovations have regularly confused theatregoers, who tend to want their entertainment more generically straightforward: the odd intrusion of lighter elements and a domestic subplot to a drama they thought was grand and dark is frustrating to sensibilities far from Beethoven's own. Challenging, too, has been *Fidelio's* often extremely taxing vocal and instrumental writing, as well as the degree to which Beethoven employed the orchestra as a dramatic, incisive and analytical force.

Despite *Fidelio's* flaws (and certainly some structural issues persist), the sun-drenched faith of invention was relentless with Beethoven, and this work is no exception. Whatever changes were made to the opera – and the rougher earlier edition has much to recommend it – the themes of conjugal love and political oppression endure. Rejecting disillusionments

which were going on in his own personal life and the political sphere of the continent, Beethoven could celebrate marital harmony and the defeat of oppression onstage. And Beethoven acclaimed them with music of profound power and touching intimacy, pouring into his work the themes and feelings which meant so much to him, as well as commemorating the very art of the theatre itself as a conduit for change and festivity.

Worsening deafness didn't help him deal with the complex, busy social and technical world of the opera house, with so many elements needing to come together both practically and artistically. But, perhaps more significantly, for all his passion for the theatre, Beethoven never quite had the true gift for it that major opera composers – Monteverdi, Mozart, Wagner, Verdi, Strauss, Janáček, Puccini, Britten – have had, that instinctive understanding of how musical drama on stage functions. The awkwardness of Beethoven's personality led to a dramatically uncomfortable opera, but one which, with patience, consequently yields some fascinating innovations and quirks: weird splicing, unexpected fluctuations and tonal shifts, dangerous but highly effective harmonics.

The crux of *Fidelio*, implicit in its original title ('Leonore, or the triumph of marital love'), is the risk undertaken by a dauntless, loving wife to secure her husband's freedom from incarceration: he is a political prisoner chained to a wall, cold and hungry. This straightaway combined the two ideals of love and liberty which meant so much to Beethoven, and which tended to elude him: romance waning, political despotism prevailing, deafness progressively confining him to his own prison. In much opera, women are passive victims; in *Fidelio*, not only is the man an inert figure but the energetic instrument of salvation is a woman, a protagonist of immense courage and intelligence, anticipating Wagner's great revolutionary heroines Elsa and Brünnhilde, characters who fight for love against the armies of tradition and political expediency.

In operatic terms, *Fidelio* is a considerable landmark, carrying the form beyond Mozart and towards Wagner. Beethoven was clearly not always comfortable adapting his music to the requirements of opera – a varied allocation of set numbers, ensembles, and so on. Text-sprung musical forms were often a challenging replacement to the sonata-form structures instrumental music provided (that he could twist and expand), and which then had to be organically grown to fit the demands of plot and character. And yet he managed it, since,

whatever its organizational imperfections, as a study of feminine agency, political tyranny and the heroic human spirit, *Fidelio* has few equals, conveying immense dramatic and emotional truths through the sheer strength of its musical expression.

Audacious in the presentation and thence discussion of its themes, Beethoven's only opera is an important part of his journey towards op.59, even if that crossing sometimes seems less obvious than in the symphonies and sonatas. Musically, it was significant – it confronted and extended established forms, as well as their melodic, rhythmic and harmonic components; yet the basic moral and emotional themes of the work were also crucial, because Beethoven (now more than ever) saw all his music as having a profound ethical-human dynamic, the two bound together, like man and wife, in a mutually beneficial partnership. *Fidelio* confirmed the connection between music and morality, sound and drama, that his new string quartets would explore further.



Amid the frustrations and limitations of Beethoven's personal life, as well as the general malice and corruption of the world outside, came the exalted, spacious worlds of the Third Piano Concerto (op.37) and *Kreutzer* Violin Sonata (op.47), works of huge technical difficulty and emotional scope. They were soon joined by *Fidelio* and the *Eroica*, the *Waldstein* and *Appassionata*: lofty, complex and honourable works which eventually afforded their creator a good deal of happiness, despite – or perhaps, in part, because of – their arduous creative journeys. More works poured from his pen, in one of the most astounding purple patches in musical history: in or around 1806, the *Triple* Concerto, Fourth Piano Concerto, Fourth Symphony, Violin Concerto and *Coriolan* Overture all enrolled on his swiftly multiplying list of works, with the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies not far behind.<sup>23</sup>

As a body of work, its variety alone would be astonishing, but the sheer quality and musical development Beethoven advanced in these compositions mark it as an almost entirely unique sequence. It was music that both goaded boundaries and would establish itself as the absolute core of the classical music repertoire. And in the middle of this bountiful harvest, Beethoven began to consider returning to the string quartet. Razumovsky's bait

came at just the right time.

For Beethoven, music was no longer merely a joy, for pleasure and occasionally poetic expression. It was – as *Fidelio* and the *Eroica* had shown – a sublime, moral and heroic force, one born of the will and often requiring considerable industry and application to bring it about, art wrought from the innermost places of the soul. It was also now a constant aspect of his being. Beethoven's notebooks went everywhere – one never knew when they might be needed, when the muse might strike. In the street. By a river. On a hike in the hills. At supper or paying a visit in town. And those sketchbooks were full of torture and agony, as well as the white heat of inspiration, as he sought to develop and refine his art amid the increasing commotion of his existence, as deafness continued to further isolate him from society – and from love.

Whatever ideals of matrimony Beethoven had celebrated in *Fidelio*, he would remain unmarried his whole life, always a source of immense sadness in him. Unlike in his music, too often his romantic reach extended beyond his social station's grasp, the composer usually loving (or at least desiring) unattainable, usually aristocratic, women. He also simply had the bad luck never to meet the kind of person he both wanted and needed.

But his siblings were more successful, and on 25 May 1806, Beethoven's brother Kaspar married Johanna Reiß, daughter of a well-to-do furnisher. She was a woman Beethoven seems to have both detested – with a nasty, and sadly not isolated, misogynistic spite, calling her a disgraceful tramp and whore – and, possibly, been in love with. The two emotions were as linked as any spurned lover's throughout the long, chequered history of passion and obsession. Either way, the union of his brother with Johanna produced a boy, Karl, who would play a strange role in the later years of the composer's life, giving it harmony and focus as well as discord and bitterness.

The day after the wedding, Beethoven began the first of his op.59 quartets.



Like Mozart's last three symphonies (K.543, 550 and 551), composed in the single white-hot summer of 1788, the op.59 quartets were written fast and form a sort of trilogy –

connected works, intended to be regarded together. Beethoven's selection of key, character, size and overall design suggests a deliberate attempt to provide a reciprocally revealing set of differences which also interlock via many common features (such as the Russian, or quasi-Russian, melodies in each).

If op.18 were siblings, placed together through circumstance, as well as some degree of planning, op.59 are more unmistakably partners, bound together by deeper conscious decisions from their creator. Each of these quartets is substantial enough to have been published alone, yet Beethoven wanted them to share a single opus number, to be regarded as a set of mirrors to reflect and refract each other, both illuminating and distorting in a series of fascinating gestures.

In diversity of colour, texture, appearance, size and shape, op.59 are like the outrageous, varied villains from a Roald Dahl novel: the bizarre aunts Spiker and Sponge from *James and the Giant Peach* (1961), or the fat Boggis, dwarf Bunce and pencil-thin Bean in *Fantastic Mr Fox* (1970). More subtly, these heterogeneous quartets appear as the diverse battle standards of army regiments, joined in war and triumph, their ensigns proud and evocative, their insignia complex and full of storied history.

The first, in F major, is long and expansive, with four huge movements. It opens with a marvellously wrought tension, impeccably controlled and spacious, before a scherzo of anxious absurdity and guilty glances. A dark private funeral follows, all in black but with twinkling jewels, before the windows are opened, the light and air of an impudent, fearless finale restoring life with an exuberant outdoor Russian ramble, full of gentle jokes and wry reflections.

It is an extraordinary string quartet, the F major: it liberates itself from the more recognized and starchy tradition, screaming forward with a freshness of style and novelty of tone. Its self-possession, aplomb and sheer felicity still stagger, even now, in the third decade of the twenty-first century. Beethoven obtains from his four stringed instruments – just four! – an astonishing range of colour, effect and emotion, taking them to their expressive and technical limit while seemingly locating unheard of new sounds from both the individual violins, viola and cello, as well as their various combinations and configurations. What is more, Beethoven is able to make these diminutive chordophones proclaim like organs or



oboes, horns or clarinets, their vibrating strings turned to brass and woodwind. It is instrumental exploitation and manipulation on a grand, pitiless and absolutely compelling scale.

The second, in E minor, is especially strenuous and almost insolently contradictory, both dense and angular, tense and given to passages of irresponsibility (a lopsided allegretto is humorous, peculiar, almost drunk). It is wonderfully interconnected, with C major (and E minor) in particular enjoying an important role across the complex, resourceful span of the work. Beethoven is not only playing games with keys and form but ensuring that tonal monotony never sets in.

We enter a very different domain in the second of the op.59 quartets. The virtuosic, dazzling mysticism of the first is twisted to a much more realistic, unforgiving and hard-nosed world. The maverick F major quartet's unruffled, indefatigable exploration of existence becomes in the E minor an acrimonious, futile scrap with an unsympathetic providence, dragging back the renegade soul at the moment of its triumph in a work of compressed severity. After an abundant battery of thematic potential in the first quartet's initial allegro, in the opening movement of the second we have a stark and frigid dearth of themes – impecunious, but the more desperately, resplendently urgent and intense for that.

In the F major, the work seems wonderfully liable to spin out of control, off into orbit, at any moment; here, in the E minor, all is methodical, stubbornly investigating its system and significance via a dour magnificence. Strict sonata form with much more clear-cut subdivisions returns after the louche advances of the athletic F major – though it is a sternness full of dark dramatic power and potential. The E minor is an inspired partner in the op.59 set, bringing an expedient brooding presence and moody malevolence to the outfit, forever channelling an opaque orthodoxy and cold-blooded suave cunning.

The third quartet, in C major, is even more classical than its cohorts, but more roughly fashioned, too – like a dirty tiara. It (intentionally) fumbles and flounders, sometimes lost but never disheartened, absent in a magnificent maze, and ends with a finale of outrageous oomph and defiance, coherence and unity, overcoming the emotional strains and historical perspectives the quartet has explored. This is Beethoven shouting his disability down, sneering at it, mocking its inability to prevent him from composing music of extraordinary

newness, innovation and individuality.

So op.59 closes with another distinctive, resolute work. This is Beethoven at his most courageous and tenacious, searching his soul coolly and dispassionately and defying the difficulties of both his life and the art of composition. Objective consciousness and emotional-intellectual sensibility have been developing rapidly in these works and reach a fine apotheosis in the C major, which sits firmly on the shoulders of its predecessors – acknowledging their role but also proclaiming how marvellously tall it is. Full of plunging thunder and admirable radiance, it is a fine and fitting conclusion to the set.

Weight distribution across the movements of the three quartets fluctuates considerably. The F major tackles its hardest musical matters at the beginning, before steadily moderating the burdens of its depths and confrontations with a witty, almost relaxed, finale. In the E minor quartet, a more even spread is achieved, with an equal concentration sustained throughout. In the final quartet of the set, the C major, hazy uncertainty and deliberate backward glances early on are surmounted by an ending which, although not unduly long, is still massive, its gravity generated by a fugal finale of enormous energy and animation.

These quartets' ability to shift mood and character (and their motivation for doing so) is always unsettled, never steady or predictable. Yet variety is not only the key to their individuality but crucial to their capacity to function as a coherent, mutually cooperative gang, ready to astonish. For these are string quartets of unyielding power, joining the other genres of this period by breaking boundaries in length, form and harmony, enhancing their emotional and cultural content: indomitable and consequential.

Op.59 is challenging music. It is ruthless, risk-taking music. It is the music of a man in full and audacious control of his immense powers of imagination. It is also music well-suited to the war-strewn, dangerous times in which it came about: brash, disruptive, intense, full of discomfort and suffering. Beethoven saved these stresses and dramas, these stories of dispute and conquest, arrogance and bombardment, and stored them in the *Razumovsky* Quartets, enduring reminders of our incessant need for conflict and some of the means through which we might find peace.

For these quartets are only ostensibly abstract, only apparently immaterial and conceptual classical preoccupations. Beethoven was incapable of writing music that wasn't

either about himself or his times. We can take this as egotism, solipsism, narcissism. We can perform any kind of lazy pop psychology and paint Beethoven as an overconfident, self-obsessed egomaniac (which great artist isn't?). But what he was able to do was more important than any acrimonious latter-day disapproval will reveal. Beethoven was not just presenting us with his own world, inner and outer. He shows us our own strife and commotions, our own internal battles and external dramas, the tension at the heart of existence, the anguish of our species, as well as the mechanisms we might use to prevail. Beethoven was the ultimate individual, and yet by a wonderful paradox that individuality is passed on to us all, speaking to our own problems and insecurities, doubts and fears, thoughts and dreams.

The *Razumovsky* Quartets were composed at a time of political disarray and military tension by a man experiencing a profound and disorientating personal loss: a disintegrating ability to hear. But they were also written by an immeasurably talented composer who was changing how music would be heard, how it would be experienced, how it would be appreciated. The highs and lows of Beethoven's life are there in the music, this extremely dazzling and demanding music, sealed in the crotchets and quavers, the melodies, harmonies and rhythms which four string instruments seize from the page and thrust into our ears, hearts and brains.

With op.59, Beethoven changed chamber music forever. No string quartets so far written – not even the marvels of Haydn and Mozart or Beethoven's own op.18 – could match this trio's extraordinary reach and power. In determination, aspiration, peculiarity and sheer brilliance they dwarfed everything that had been hitherto written. They would take some time to be understood, of course, but it is hard not to see their influence on every single string quartet written after them.

This was music that achieved the impossible: it transplanted the daring energy and expansions of the *Eroica* into a much smaller and more sedate medium. It was like giving cheetah food to a cat. But it worked, and those kittens would now stalk and terrify dogs, horses, wolves – anything that foolishly ventured to get in their way.

Count Razumovsky, always so keen to make his mark on the world, cannot have guessed the extent to which his name would now be immortal, forever associated with world-

shattering genius and the combustible forces of revolution.



## No.7 in F major

### 1. *Allegro*.

The *Razumovsky* derring-do and surprises begin right away. A cello theme gradually reveals itself in stages. Above, a static, almost stubborn accompaniment, gently repeated and obstinately dissonant, with the harmony so carefully placed as to create a sense of suspended animation. All is curiously inert yet gloriously roomy, almost as if we are outdoors: the impression is one of unusual breadth and dramatic suspense, the colours and textures of the sound entirely unique.

It is a quiet revolution and a splendid magic trick, a sonic illusion that pretends to both move and not move, the horizon spreading out and motionless, the music full of strength and flexibility. Other structural deceptions (floating around sonata form) will contribute to the duplicity: the exposition repeat is fake, abruptly swerving off into the development; the exact moment of recapitulation is smudged and obscured. This is the string quartet as conjuring ploy, a musical mirage – a Beethovenian game of time and space.

As with the *Eroica*, the first op.59 quartet surveys dimensions on a vast scale, exploiting wiles and ruses to heighten the feeling of expansive wonder. The whole beginning is built from its widening theme, with an unstable harmony that will allow further explorations to follow, with ideas constantly positioned in new tonal/emotional situations, much as Beethoven had done with the first of the op.18 quartets, but now with even greater imagination. Indeed, the first movement of the first *Razumovsky* Quartet is a shrine to spaciousness and heroic design, the initial melody engendering a whole species of interconnected groups which evolve in rhythmic strength. Glamorous, alien questions occur early on, but – as in the *Appassionata* – they lie unanswered, their resolutions coming only later, in the development.

Unfurling slowly, the opening cello is serene and unflustered, showcasing its charms with this unexpected opportunity to begin a quartet. The second violin and viola pulse their accompaniment. Rising from the depths, the cello eventually hands over to the first violin, who sings the theme with warmth and assurance before turning to a more fragmented series of leaps and jumps, spaces and silences.

From here, a new hornlike theme emerges, chic and charming, first on the violins, then the lower voices, before leading to reminiscences of the main theme. Its capaciousness is energized via embellished scales which swiftly break away and lead to – where else? – classical C major and the true second subject of the exposition. A persuasive musing theme much like the first, it rapidly acquires a pulsing zeal with all four string roles contributing their labour and imagination. The precision Beethoven demands for this section is considerable, as the voices of the quartet sing in ever-greater flights of ingenious fancy, vanishing and reappearing with astonishing fleetness of escape and evasion, eventually bringing this luxuriant exposition to a close.

And now comes a moment of truly epoch-making audacity. At this point, traditional sonata form requires a repeat of the first section of the exposition. Beethoven refuses this fence. At first, however, he seems to want to take it: the cello begins its gorgeous, unfolding theme. We're as we were. Then, after only four bars, everything begins to veer off into new melodic and harmonic areas. It's been a trick. (Beethoven even places a note in the score, telling players it's a dishonest return, and that the exposition is to be played just once.)

It seems that, when he was writing the quartet, Beethoven had wanted a usual recurrence of the exposition, but the profusion of material and greatly expanding size of the movement meant that he couldn't possibly include it. So a neat swindle, a pretend repeat, was placed there instead – a sardonic smirk at not only classical convention but the extravagance of his own quartet writing.<sup>24</sup>

As it is, after this false start, we're now in the development, which mixes lyricism with more dramatic sections, as well as fond recollections of our opening cello theme, occasionally given heightened strength and an ambitious power that is orchestral in its effect. Modulations are passed around the instruments, who shift between numerous keys, remote harmonies dazing and confusing the atmosphere, as invisible alterations of mood transpire – at one point, the second violin, viola and cello combine to make three-quarters of a string quartet sound like an organ.

Deliberations come and go, each of the instruments sharing the burdens of several inscrutable ruminations, mysteries strengthening in darkness as well as energy, a gloomy, nostalgic agitation. A progressively escalating bass manufactures tension, as does the weird

inclusion of some eerie fugal writing in the remote key of E-flat minor. Everything seems to be slinking back in a shadowy pianissimo to where it began: the recapitulation is surely imminent.

Without warning, the moment of return is halted, blurred, Beethoven again removing the key landmarks so recognizable on the classical sonata-form journey. Cello, viola and second violin fall silent, leaving the first violin alone and high in the air, from where it travels up towards a very high C. Eventually it is supported by the other instruments, who take a portion of the primary theme and from it begin to build the final section of the movement. But strange things start to happen, Beethoven apparently implying we've heard enough of the main melody. It begins to deviate into abnormal, ephemeral harmonies, a wandering Odysseus lost in the shoreline fog, before – suddenly – the mists clear and we find ourselves safely home.

The recapitulation can now commence, but it is a little shaken by the arduous journey. Differences in detail abound as freedom soars amid tradition, the nomad re-acclimatizing to the society they have been away from for so long. The atmosphere darkens: sinister tales are recounted, distant hornlike sounds accompanying the storytelling before the quartet breaks up into separate dialogues.

In C major, the cello raucously announces a toast, seconded by the viola, before the music of the exposition is more conventionally reheard, the theme rising to a powerful climax which is truly symphonic, the capacity of the four strings pushed to the limit and sounding magnificently orchestral. From this boisterous peak, distracted recollections of the opening melody float in before being more assuredly reconfirmed.

During the coda, quite short for Beethoven, the cello, viola and second violin flash various themes before us, catapulting a ballistic first violin to a euphoric, stratospheric C, before themselves evaporating to allow the violin to quietly descend from the skies. There is a quick, malicious glance to D minor, before the movement ends in a rapturous confirmation of F major via a pair of resolute closing chords.

## *2. Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando.*

After this explosive opening, there is no let-up, and we find ourselves amid one of

Beethoven's most original movements, which dazzlingly fuses traditional forms. The usual scherzo-trio-scherzo sequence is replaced by a sizeable, playful sonata-form scherzo, with contrasting material thrown casually about by the individual instruments in ways which sharply anticipate the final quartets. In its boldness, ingenuity and charm, it is a movement of wonderful street theatre and near-miraculous courage.

As in the first movement, a cello raises the curtain on the action, this time with a Beethoven trademark: a theme immediately distinguishable by its rhythm. In fact, the first motif is simply one note, rhythmically varied. Like so much Beethoven, it is – on the page – utterly unremarkable, inconsequential, as if found lying around on the floor. But another admirable oak is to sprout from this acorn, as Beethoven first sees and then exploits its full potential – in rhythm, harmony, melody and dialogue.

The second violin answers the cello's monotonous drumming with a sharp and broken melody. Viola and second violin repeat the exchange, but in alarmingly remote harmonies. Thus the game begins. Ideas are hurled, kicked and heaved between the instruments, with elements either expeditiously (and noisily) stretched or abruptly immobilized, spinning silently in the air. It is a stunning feat of chamber music sport, the quartet's snazzy, kaleidoscopic ball kept airborne with a series of vigorous and elaborate skills, a masterly display of sound and silence, energy and inertia, balance and movement.

At the first performance, the cellist Bernhard Romberg tossed the music to the floor, calling it an unseemly joke. Quite so. Beethoven was free, hilariously free to bend the elements of music any which way he desired, and few places demonstrate this better than the aberrant scherzo of op.59/1.

### 3. *Adagio molto e mesto.*

After the activity, the idleness – or, at least, rest. And perhaps tragedy, for the marking 'mesto' ('mournful') suggests injury or worse.

The second violin begins in a quiet voice, as if not wanting to be heard. Are we at a funeral? The viola and cello present gloomy harmonies, a grounding above which the first violin sings a sad song. A high cello repeats the tune – still quietly, but now more candidly, with an emotional directness the movement has so far been a little reticent to provide. The



first violin returns, singing high, sweet and engaging above the other instruments. It is a passage worthy of Wagner at his most gorgeous and complex, weaving counterpoint to fully exploit its emotional power.

This is sombre, sweet music, sad but robust: staunch, loyal and resigned (a spouse fondly remembering their departed partner who would have hated a fuss), but occasionally giving in to immense sadness. The movement expands, unobtrusively transitioning through the cycles of grief. Cello and violin duet, the cello especially conveying an unwavering forbearance, while the violin speaks more forcefully. It is simple, stoic, heroic.

Heartache breaks out in a passage of uncontrollable tears: a good healthy cry, the heart releasing its pain, discharging its suffering to look for relief. The cello breaks into furious plucking, a vehement, pounding angst, the other instruments desperately trying to rein in the resentments of sorrow.

Calm – exhaustion – inevitably follows this grief storm. At first there is drained despair, the viola and violins offering a weary pizzicato, before the cello picks out a tragic motif immediately repeated by the first violin and then with horrible despondency by the viola. Amid this desolation, Beethoven moves to provide one of the most consoling passages in his entire output: a heartfelt, generous expansion into the fertile warmth of D-flat major. It is a stunning contrast, achieved swiftly and simply, weariness overcome by a new resolve. But mourning steals back, the viola mumbling the desolate theme, the first violin in F minor taking us back to a restatement of the main theme.

A repeat of the material follows but now modified with an even richer vein, taking on more meaning and profundity, the cello especially providing a heroic support to the first violin's dark modulations. Elation and consolation mingle via some exquisite scoring before the first violin sings an otherworldly, wraithlike final cadenza which soars above all else to close the complicated journey of this poignant movement (which moves without a break into the finale).

In the sketches, Beethoven had inscribed this adagio as 'a weeping willow or acacia tree over the grave of my brother.' Although this was perhaps a bit macabre – both Beethoven's brothers were very much alive at the time – like Mahler's *Kindertotenlieder* (*Songs on the Death of Children*, 1905), it is not tempting fate but is an essay in empathy and hope,

consoling pre-existent and future, potential and actual, grief. And comforting not just one's own family but the whole world, the brotherhood of humanity.

The inscription is also a fitting – and familiar – combination of emotion and landscape, one which wonderfully captures both the sentiment and atmosphere of the extraordinary music Beethoven creates. Decorative but honest, elaborate but sincere, it is one of the most touching things he ever devised.

#### *4. Finale. Thème russe. Allegro.*

The violin's eerie refrain ends with a persistent trill in C which the cello immediately develops into a more vigorous tune in F major. Marked 'Thème russe', it is the foundation of the finale, and is simply an exaggeration, a magnification, of the trilled C. This spirit of effortlessness and recreation is the finale's thrust, its gateway, a pointer to its mood, though the adventure is still a considerable length, a huge sonata-form movement.

A bittersweet Russian flavour is suggested by the theme, one in keeping with the curious mixture of sport and pain that the whole quartet has been preoccupied by. The finale sparkles with happiness and joy, but its jollity is frequently demoralized by an undercurrent of melancholy – a very Russian kind of nostalgia, often reminiscent of the qualified exuberance which closes the finale of Beethoven's (contemporaneous) Fourth Symphony, op.60.

After starting in F major, we modulate to D minor, the theme passing from cello to first violin and then other voices as the speed begins to increase with mounting verve and vitality. A swerve to C brings a second theme from the second violin, a thoughtful version of the main subject, complemented by jumps from the first violin and syncopations on the lower strings.

Amid this troubled ambiance, a minor-key version of the theme from the first violin and cello gives way to a diffident, inquisitorial motif in C minor, closely related to the Russian theme, which bursts into C major and a chattering among all four instruments. The question is posed again but this time is answered by a forceful new theme first from the viola and cello and then from the two violins. It is admirably orchestral, like the climax of an overture, before falling away to familiar trills in C from the first violin that then leads effortlessly into

the main Russian theme.

A development section of substantial length follows, though one that is not unduly complex, before a recapitulation and coda ripe with contrivance. A fanfare-like chord detonates in our ears, a trumpet-bomb on strings, to herald the final victory over the forces of darkness that have held so much of the quartet captive.

The initial explosion subsides, and an elegantly sinuous theme, straight out of *Die Meistersinger*, is allowed to prosper among all four instruments, growing in strength and rhythmical energy before briefly decelerating into some buoyant musing which veils any sadness. A stirring gesture of farewell is spoken by each voice, one after the other, and then, to end, a moment of quiet rumination is suddenly brushed aside by a fizzing presto and some wildly impatient fortissimo F major chords.



The *Razumovsky* Quartets have begun in electrifying, superhuman fashion, Beethoven's command of form so absolute that he can now expand and taunt it in unimaginable new ways, as playful as a kitten but as strong as a tiger. Beethoven has thrown off the fetters of Haydn with something utterly liberated, entirely fresh and enthralling, something ready to stimulate and spur the future of the medium. It was a work that indeed proved to be profoundly influential, and across musical boundaries: Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms found in it the keys to unlock a whole brave new world of chamber music; while for Richard Wagner, it was a quartet he endlessly studied, especially in the years of his final stage work, *Parsifal* (1882).

## No.8 in E minor

### 1. *Allegro*.

After the fat expansions of singing F major appear the angular extensions of elusive E minor, a rare and remote key. Haydn had used it for one of his murkiest works, the so-called *Mourning Symphony*, No.44, of 1772; Mozart in his twenty-first violin sonata, of 1778 (the only work he cast in this key). Beethoven himself placed the melodramatic andante of his Fourth Piano Concerto, written around the same time as this quartet, in E minor. His dark and daring use of E minor also recalls Haydn's forceful middle-period minor-key quartets, op.33/1 in B minor and op.50/4 in F-sharp minor.

In changing key, we also abruptly change mood, moving from the quasi-fantasia world of the first quartet, full of fiction and evasion, towards a sterner kind of reality in the second. This quartet is harsh, even bleak, full of obdurate fury and an awareness of our abysmal impotence against the gloomy truths of existence. The free lyricism of the F major is banished, its liberated games with sonata form exchanged for a strict opening movement with clearly defined sections – though, this being Beethoven, still with considerable elasticity and a vast expressive power.

The first movement is, for all its gloom, as fit as a butcher's dog – and given, as well, to frequent bark and bite. Its gestures and progressions are abrupt, curt, gruff. Where the F major quartet opened with a spacious cello, the E minor snaps into life with two terse staccato chords, forte, from all four instruments. These two chords, in E minor and B major, seem immediately to be presenting a challenge, almost picking for a fight as they slash through the air. Where the F major quartet stole the *Eroica's* expansiveness, the E minor purloins its remarkable indignant force.

A silence follows – which, after the harshness of the opening, sounds far longer and quieter than it actually is. Out of this climbs the first theme, a supple angry little subject, pianissimo, which almost immediately stops for another pause. The opening phrase is then repeated, shifted up from E minor to F major, still pianissimo but with a mounting resolve. A third silence; another pause absolutely loaded with anger, meaning and dread, the stillness of a violent bar drunk – or our irate little butcher's dog – about to go berserk. (Wagner revered

these silences, these pregnant pauses, and employed similar devices to extraordinary effect in his musikdramas.)

From here, the drunk (or dog) loses control, and a flood of noises is unleashed from the quartet. The narrative is cryptic, equivocal, abstract, the smooth flow of the F major replaced by an irregular plot, punctuated by pauses. Questions from the cello and violin are given an answer which, though exquisite, seems vague, oblique. Mournful melodies follow on the higher strings, each trying to avoid each other, occasional pauses lifted to passionate voices as well as more serene lines. Thunder and tempests abound in great strangeness, with weird harmonies and even weirder syncopations, before eventually the first violin and viola assert themselves with a move towards G major and a new theme, amiable and sustained but only a brief burst of sunlight on a stormy day.

Initially we return to the subpoena in E minor from the opening and a repeat of the exposition. A second repeat generates an unexpected shift to G minor and a series of astonishing returns to the initial chord/silence routine, which becomes a foundation to lead to B minor and the start of the development section.

Harmonies relocate swiftly, moving from compassion towards urgent worries impressively littered by trills and silences before first the cello, and then the other instruments, repeat the opening two chords with a resentful cry. The speed of the development's musical transitions has allowed it to reach the home key a few bars before the restatement proper, meaning development blurs into recapitulation (as in the F major quartet).

The development is ephemeral but extremely formidable, packed with strange energy and constant transferals of strength. It is one of Beethoven's most resourceful and inspired sections to date, transitioning with ease and supple power despite – indeed, because of – restricting itself to the boundaries of sonata form's rules. Beethoven understood entirely the regulations which governed music, and here he stretches them to the absolute limit, a master criminal one step ahead of the law.

Recapitulation follows, with subtle changes to make the revisit more interesting – lengthening the second theme, say. But what is most distinctive about this part of the movement is the startling compliance with tradition, returning and repeating the whole of

the development and recapitulation (though this latter part is often now omitted in performance, against Beethoven's wishes). It might slightly undermine the journey to the coda, but Beethoven understands what he is doing, balancing the movement in wonderful symmetry – an equilibrium this composer is rarely known for. Moreover, the second return to the same intersection has an even more disquieting effect, E major suddenly shifting to E minor and then C minor, unbolting the door to an ample coda.

We travel through a succession of remarkable harmonic stages, eventually relocating E minor. The key changes are taken very gradually, especially compared to the lightning switches of most of the movement, which naturally serves to enhance the drama and anticipation. Slowly but surely the artist is taking fate by the throat, the unfurling coda actually a tightening grip, before a final fortissimo burst leads to a whispered close, destiny silenced.

## 2. *Molto adagio*.

For the next movement, take your pick of elaborate, honeyed and often sky-bound metaphors from the critical literature (and Beethoven's own thoughts). A starry night dreaming of the music of the spheres. A hymn from heaven. A calm, unfolding valley under a clear blue firmament. Certainly, whatever image we call forth, this exquisite, static adagio seems to want to atone for the unpredictable tensions of the first movement. It is in full sonata form, including a development section, like op.59's F major, but unlike the slow movements of most earlier string quartets.

Breathing calm and an almost idealistic grace in E major, this very slow movement has an otherworldly quality to it Beethoven himself recognized and which appears to anticipate the sublime prelude of *Lohengrin* (1850). This seems fortuitous rather than fanciful, since Wagner's music depicts the descent of the Holy Grail from heaven in the care of an angelic host, and, for all the cherubs, Beethoven's adagio is truly paradise *on earth*, for it is an immensely human (and humane) stretch of music, an extended continuous stream of melody that just might have been inspired by that 'one day of pure joy' Beethoven longed for.

It is music of immense emotional benevolence, something we should let work its magic on us, as well as on any cold analysis: Beethoven, after all, marked the movement to be played

'molto sentimento,' 'with much feeling.' The air of op.132's Holy Song of Thanksgiving is unmistakable.

Internally, little changes across the unruffled course of this visionary, chorale-like piece. Five themes enfold and embrace one another – though there are some occasional tense moments to pepper the clemency. At the recapitulation, the second violin ascends above the first violin's song in a wondrous moment; then that serenity is re-presented by all four voices in slow, majestic, but quite forceful chords, before a radiant, saintly coda.

### 3. *Allegretto*.

The witty and eccentric scherzo – now a truly Beethovenian specialty – toys with the opening ideas of the quartet, panting off the beat, wheezing its theme in nervous excitement, and leaping (not for the first time in this quartet) from E minor to F major. Much of its jittery, wistful sound world seems to anticipate the quirky mazurkas of Chopin, who used this traditional Polish dance for some of his finest piano works.

The trio section brings in this quartet's Russian folk tune, one many composers would later redeploy: Mussorgsky reused it in the Coronation Scene of his mighty *Boris Godunov* (1874); Tchaikovsky as the introduction to act three of *Mazeppa* (1884); Rachmaninov in the sixth of his *Six Morceaux* for piano duet (1894); and Stravinsky in his ballet *The Firebird* (1910).

Given its widespread future use, Beethoven's own presentation of the theme is curiously, wonderfully, detached, posing the music in caustic, playful quotation marks – almost anticipating the many and frequent reapplications the theme will have in later compositions. It is also, perhaps, a sly, ironic shrug at his patron Razumovsky's insistence on including such features in 'his' quartets.

It is pig-headedly contrapuntal: the tune is grumpily passed between the instruments with escalating impatience so that eventually the entries overlap in harmonic anarchy. If we come to this theme already knowing the stately subsequent use of it in *Boris Godunov*, it seems even more of a parody, wild and rude in an amusing, tender manner which only Beethoven could get away with. Folk tunes, he seems to be saying, can be a bit dull sometimes<sup>25</sup> – though, of course, in the F major quartet, the folk theme had been

wonderfully twisted, both tonally and rhythmically, out of all shape, rendering its Russian origins and identity a little redundant.

#### *4. Finale. Presto.*

After a hitherto obstinate, resilient (though not absolute) connection to E minor and E major, the sonata-rondo finale begins in impulsive fashion, in C major, almost wanting to leap ahead to the third op.59 quartet too soon. As it is, it is one of the most thrilling conclusions to any string quartet, a capering, coarse and rowdy march with an exotic, outdoorsy feel to it. It breathes an al fresco rural air, all cantering horses and colourful ribbons, beer and bedlam.

All four instruments launch the movement on a C major chord, forte, from which leaps the main theme. Along the journey, E minor desperately fights to make itself heard, with several firm avowals drowned out before finally its harsh perseverance pays off. The repeated, irresistible insistence of C major on having fun and the determination of the true, dour E minor provide first-rate entertainment – like a cliché, formulaic housewife in a knockabout farce trying to drag her unruly husband away from the boisterous, boozy temptations of the country fayre.

Midway through the antics, a fugue arises, mocking academic pretence and adding to the disorderly, almost Bruegelesque, mood by inverting the main theme. The coda begins with a similar joke, the theme dressed in C major before stripping off the layers to reveal its authentic E minor colours in a hysterical, lively declamation of true homecoming.

The gravitational pull of E minor, finally triumphant at the end, while amusing when pushing against C major, also manages to drag the quartet back to a more integrated self, balancing the four movements wonderfully (unlike the top-heavy F major and bottom-heavy C major quartets). It is a harmonizing resolution to one of Beethoven's most varied, unstable and dangerous achievements, precariously unhinged and drugged to the eyeballs in the slow movement, a perilous riot of revolutionary threat and spectacle given wonderful unity.



## No.9 in C major

### 1. Introduzione: Andante con moto – Allegro vivace.

The hard-won conclusiveness of the E minor quartet was to be given even greater power through the rough and remarkable fugal finale of the next quartet, a work which starts slowly and ambiguously before achieving a truly stunning apotheosis. A more classically inclined quartet than its two predecessors in the op.59 set, Beethoven's confidence is now sky high, and he is able to take on and confront the past with maximum audacity. He even allows himself a minuet, such is the self-assurance with which he can now move.

For all the courageousness, the distinctively Beethovenian bearing and caprice, there is still love, and the quartet pays tribute to Mozart at both ends: the fugal finale recalls Mozart's *Spring Quartet* in G major, K.387 (1782), as well as elements of the *Jupiter Symphony*, K.551 (1788), while the jarring, almost atonal slow introduction evokes the so-called *Dissonance Quartet* in C major, K.465 (1785), the last of his *Haydn Quartets*. None of Beethoven's glances at Mozart, however, suggest a withdrawal to the eighteenth century; rather, they are a new way of handling old designs, reworked with the heroic vitality of his new spirit. For a start, the ambiguity at the outset of the quartet is maintained for far longer than in Mozart (and even, to a degree, extends across the first three movements entirely).

Right at the beginning, the opening chord to op.59/3 must have been an electric shock, comparable to the alarming off-key opening to the *First Symphony* (1800). The chord itself is not especially odd. What was unorthodox and outrageous was its employment as the first noise from a string quartet. Normally, dissonance arises from consonance, but to have it materialize from nothingness was extraordinary. It was an affront, a challenge, a deliberate Beethovenian cat among the still-complacent pigeons of the eighteenth century. *Listen!* he seems to be saying, *Listen! I've got something astonishing to tell you.*

And indeed he has. The discordant introduction to the quartet is sombre, disorientating, dislocating, all haziness and uncertainty in a ghostly pianissimo. Expectations of a home key are raised and then frustrated, the composer ruthlessly concealing the music's tonality. Even the first violin's generally solo melody which presents the first theme does little to establish the key. Eventually, after nearly fifty bars of this fumbling in the dark, the bright light of C

major comes on, definite and decisive.

Or is it? The light immediately begins to crackle and waver on a weak beat. Hardly the strong response we need to the long and insistent question of the slow introduction. A brighter light is needed to convince us. The first violin takes off on an eccentric solo flight praised by the rest of the quartet, before another hop from the lead violin is greeted first by D minor and then resounding C major chords, which banishes much of the earlier doubt. C major can now be securely proclaimed, the house now truly a home, and lit like a film studio.

Although carrying much variety in its space and rhythm, the music – to modify our metaphor – now plunges forward in C major, delighted – relieved – at finding itself on the dazzling open road. The exposition progresses in a good-humouredly impartial mode, indeterminate but blithely happy, passing the music from voice to voice, and tending towards luminous, conventional G major, before a sharp incline and strange yearnings in the development, all the way over in D-flat major.

Given the strenuous journey taken to locate C major, this developmental byway seems a little perverse, and fortunately, it is not long until we are heading back to C major and the recapitulation. Even this journey is not without incident, however, and we begin to perhaps rather regret that little excursion down the intriguing path of D flat, before we find our way back to the main highway and a good long stretch of comfortable terrain (eventually celebrating with a refreshing little coda soda).

## *2. Andante con moto quasi allegretto.*

The third of the op.59 quartets seems to lack an authentic Russian folk theme – no one, it appears, has been able to locate it yet. This might be because there is no source; rather, Beethoven, in this slow movement, is evoking the idiom of folk themes, romanticizing their mood and features for his own purposes (and, one supposes, to fulfil his contractual obligations to Count Razumovsky).

The quartet swirls a prolonged contemplation above an uninterrupted and entrancing ostinato, the first violin singing a mysterious, exotic A minor song over a repeatedly twung E from the cello, heavy and impassive. It is marvellously atmospheric, straight from the Russian steppe: disturbing, serenely possessed, the poignant evocative memories of a lost and remote

community, full of smiles and tears. It is alien, melancholic, hypnotic, deeply strange – and absolutely unforgettable.

There are repeated attempts at consolation, though we seem to feel that this is not what is required, the movement wallowing, revelling, in its nostalgia and gloom (in time, a magnificently Russian trait to be fully exploited by Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninov). All is brooding, subdued, but there is nothing wretched or heartbreaking about its character.

An extended sonata form, the andante has occasionally wild inflections of mood, each of which is wonderfully dispersed among the four instruments of the quartet, before a quizzical coda seems to gently ask us to depart, leaving the movement to its eternal wanderings across the arid grasslands.

### *3. Menuetto: Grazioso.*

From this strangeness comes the latent familiarity of a minuet, though it, too, has a pensive air, recalling the eighteenth-century form which has by now (in Beethoven and elsewhere) been so brutally supplanted by the quirky energy of the scherzo. Such ruminations are part of the movement forward, however, since Beethoven is knowingly glancing back from his own resolute present, rather than yearning to turn back the clock. The movement's inscription 'grazioso' ('graceful') is rather un-Beethovenian and seems to indicate the artificial nature of this peek back from the here and now.

All is effortless and charming, delivered smoothly from voice to voice and testing the ability of the four players to work fluently as a team. The trio imposes flourishes and dance-like syncopations, gently interconnected to the minuet but sounding much more contemporary, with a disquieting leap to A major in the middle. The repeat of the minuet itself (following ABA form) takes a surprising turn in the coda, its purity souring slightly into some of the inscrutability which pervaded the first and second movements.

### *4. Finale. Allegro molto.*

Its purpose, it transpires, is to theatrically transition into perhaps the most rumbustious and swashbuckling of all Beethoven's finales so far, one not equalled until the exuberant joy of the

Ninth Symphony (1824) – and that work needed full orchestra, a choir and four soloists. The bridge from minuet to finale also calls to mind another Beethoven symphony: the Fifth of 1808, with its extraordinary metamorphosis between the third and fourth movements and its relentless headlong journey to its luminous C major close.

In op.59/3, the device is no less exceptional, moving dramatically into the chaotic antics and dizzying skill of the finale, where both the tonal resources of the string quartet and fugal conventions are pushed to the absolute limit. At times, the complexity and volume of the music seems to approach Wagnerian proportions and makes some of Bach sound a little frail by comparison. It is writing of astounding strength and confidence. (It is at this point in the notebooks where Beethoven reminds himself ‘Let your deafness no longer be a secret – even in your art!’)

We dive into a screwball fugue. Or so it seems. First the viola, then the second violin, then the cello, and finally the first violin individually enter, each with their own eloquent subject. But Beethoven is taunting us: as soon as the first violin has joined the group, he ditches the fugal texture, and the two violins take flight elsewhere.

The fugue form, it seems, has been merely hijacked to provide a launch pad of energy, the gathering impetus and dynamic propulsion from the voices joining forces. The huge surge of energy and vitality of this finale springs from the contrapuntal forces at work – no wonder it needed a strange and elusive transition to start with. Once launched, the movement can slow its acceleration a little, if not its speed, and most of the finale continues at a swift pace, only slackening for consciously engineered moments of suspense.

Quasi-fugues come and go, but again this is merely to power the momentum forward, a fugal propellant to create a precipitous action-and-reaction locomotive verve, thrusting the movement on through a range of often remote harmonies and keys. A double fugue is proposed at one stage, the initial theme given a weird countersubject of staccato notes which make the whole vehicle vibrate with an alarming fright, before it bursts through this glitch, gaining even more energy and speed.

Half beats, unusual accents and stressed rhythms introduce further pressure to the system, and a series of jerking stops cause some further panic and dread, before finally the rocket soars into space with the flawless control and awesome flamboyance of a Saturn V,

bound for the lunar landings to come.

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16 Beethoven's conversation books, tools through which the increasingly deaf composer communicated, are a valuable resource, offering a unique, often very detailed insight into the composer's life and art. Although (usually) only one side of a dialogue – his interlocutors scribbling down what Beethoven could not hear – they record not only details on compositional processes, changes and attitudes but business dealings and more personal affairs. They also overlap with private notebooks and lists, with more inebriated entries displaying anxieties or manic behaviour, as well as the rich mundanities of existence – orders for tins of sugar and walking sticks, or amusing adverts carefully copied down from newspapers, along with precious, painful insights into the harrowing final weeks of his life.

17 Modest Mussorgsky, for one, considered it faithful enough to transcribe for piano trio in 1859.

18 Beethoven's brother Kaspar Anton Karl van Beethoven (1774–1815) was often, as here in the Heiligenstadt Testament, addressed as Karl by his composer sibling. For clarity and to avoid confusion with his son, Karl – Beethoven's nephew – we will refer to him as Kaspar.

19 It was a complicated business. After originally pledging the work to Napoleon, Beethoven later thought he might lose a valuable patron's fee with such a lofty dedication, hence rededicating it to Prince Lobkowitz, though keeping the politically idealistic title *Bonaparte*. When Napoleon declared himself emperor in May 1804, Beethoven scratched out the title, though conceding later to his publisher the work was really the *Bonaparte* Symphony. Like anyone betrayed in love, Beethoven still harboured strong feelings for Napoleon and what he represented, despite the tyrannical directions the leader had taken. By 1806, the symphony was published under an Italian title, 'Heroic Symphony, composed to celebrate the memory of a great man', which left things both conveniently vague and sharply sardonic, perhaps lamenting the death of ideals within the French dictator.

20 Aho's *Insect* Symphony (No.7, 1988), which depicts various bugs and hexapods – including butterflies, ants, grasshoppers, and the alarmingly named 'parasitic hymenopter' – is a sort of '*Eroica* for invertebrates', opening in anger with belligerent wasps and incorporating a Lepidoptera dance as well as a lament for the dead dayflies.

21 Carl Davis's majestic, monumental score (1980, rev.2000) for Abel Gance's revolutionary silent epic *Napoléon* (1927) – an extravagant, energetic, experimental five-and-a-half-hour cinematic study of the young Bonaparte – engages in a fascinating dialogue with Beethoven's own music. Not only does Davis re-employ the music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially the *Eroica*, but his own imposing original music alerts us to the glories, problems and dangers of heroism, of celebrating military conquests, of sonically commemorating war.

22 *Fidelio* was originally titled *Leonore, oder der Triumph der ehelichen Liebe* ('Leonore, or the triumph of marital love'), but underwent several name changes as Beethoven fiddled with and revised the work (and to avoid confusion with Pierre Gaveaux's 1798 opera *Léonore, ou L'Amour conjugal*). 'Leonore' now usually refers to the earlier version of the work, and which has been occasionally recorded, most notably in a fine, exciting version by John Eliot Gardiner on the Archiv label.

23 These latter two were premiered on a freezing-cold December night at the end of 1808, in the pitilessly unheated Theater an der Wien. It was an extraordinary concert which has gone down in musical history and folklore. Although long by modern standards, it was not especially so for Beethoven's time. It had the following gargantuan programme:

Sixth Symphony in F major, op.68

Aria, 'Ah! perfido', op.65

Gloria from the mass in C major, op.86

Fourth Piano Concerto in G major, op.58 (with Beethoven as soloist)

Fifth Symphony in C minor, op.67

Sanctus and Benedictus from the mass in C major, op.86

A solo piano improvisation, op.77 (played by Beethoven)

Choral fantasy, op.80 (with Beethoven as soloist)

24 Brahms would repeat the trick, in a first for the symphony, in his Fourth (1884).

25 Even so, Beethoven would also, as we will see, write a wealth of wonderful folk song arrangements.

## Chapter Three

### The Aficionado's Gift: *Op.74 in E-flat major*

Standing gloriously alone, like its brusque younger comrade op.95, op.74 is often seen as a lighter or less pioneering work than either op.59 or the late quartets. Its nickname, too – the *Harp*, after the inventive deployment of plucked strings and arpeggios in the opening movement – has contributed to the general feeling that this is a slighter chamber piece: naive, mawkish, fey. This somewhat sluggish cliché suppresses a challenging, often very touching, string quartet of great unity, ingenuity and sophistication. Sharing both a year (1809) and a key (E flat) with the *Emperor* Piano Concerto and *Lebewohl* Piano Sonata, the *Harp* Quartet is a work every bit as daring as these peers, replete with their tensions, technical difficulties and emotional range.<sup>26</sup>

Op.74 is full of self-confidence, of dignity, warmth and humanity, Beethoven riding the crest of his composing wave after the furious torrent of pioneering works in the preceding few years. Here was the composer if not relaxed then certainly enjoying himself, relishing the freedom and possibility his unconventional imagination granted him to create new worlds in old forms. The *Harp* is an unfettered gem, a glorious game: sumptuous in sound, with a well-organized exploration of form and feeling. But, like many a Mozart piano concerto, the gracious surface quality of this work often hides and belies a good deal of depth and mystery as it toys with suspense and surprise, as well as providing a summative glance back to the

achievements realized in the early works. It is a string quartet dressed in fine robes which conceal its darker and more complex connotations.

Sequestered in the middle of a bountiful creative period, op.74 is often forgotten, neglected or even demeaned by those that look only at the daring advances of the *Razumovsky* Quartets or the perilous profundities of the later works. Yet this is a quartet which demands to be heard, and which repays careful repeated listening, as it seduces and beguiles us with its sonic magic and genial charm. But the world this quartet came from, and the compositions which surrounded it, was less hospitable than listeners might expect – and will help us reveal the *Harp's* secrets. So let us turn to the other music Beethoven was writing in 1809, as well as the tumultuous events which both hindered and advanced his creativity.



The French Revolution had promised – not least for Beethoven – so much. But it didn't take long for the forces of darkness to cloud the sun of liberty and change. The series of massacres and public executions now known as the Reign of Terror polluted France in the mid-1790s. The rise of Napoleon shortly after promised power to the people and their representatives; in fact, of course, it merely delivered dictatorship. And war – for France in the early nineteenth century was bent on subjugating the continent via the First French Empire (known, less pugnaciously, as the First Republic). A series of bloody and brilliant military campaigns saw Napoleon respected and feared as a master tactician, full of barbarous energy and skill. But crowning himself emperor in 1804 confirmed for many that he was simply a dictator, a despotic monarch, seizing power and control with a new tyrannical regime.

Through the first decade of the new century, the Corsican had restructured much of French political and cultural life – just as he was at the same time considerably redrawing the local map via his martial crusades. The years 1809–10 would – perhaps – prove to be the high point of his career, during which he controlled most of western continental Europe. (And we know where to go if we want an aural representation of those armed attainments: the thrill, glamour and ruthless violent energy of the *Eroica's* opening movement.) But then the disaster of the Russian invasion in 1812 sealed his plunging spiral into the vortex of



abdication, exile, escape, re-exile and death.

Before this inevitable end – all dictators must eventually come to grief, as the *Eroica* also predicted – Napoleon was a merciless success. Yet his main adversary in central Europe remained the Austrian Empire. Although roundly defeated at Ulm and Austerlitz in 1805, and compelled to accept the humiliating Pressburg Peace, the Austrians retained an impressive army. By 1808/9, with Napoleon distracted by the opening exchanges of the Peninsula War against Spain, Portugal and the British, they felt they had a good opportunity to retake some lost territories. The state was near bankrupt but knew that its status as a Great Power depended on its ability to regain influence over the German and Italian lands.

Without declaring war, in April 1809 the Austrians crossed the Inn River into Bavaria, then a key French ally, taking Napoleon – and much of the continent – by surprise. Fierce battles ensued as Napoleon recovered from the initial shock, and by May he had pummelled the Austrian forces and occupied the imperial capital, Vienna, for a second time. The Austrians rallied, however, and the resulting Battle of Wagram a few weeks later was the largest military engagement European history had known. Napoleon prevailed, but it proved extremely costly to both sides: tens of thousands were killed or incapacitated, in a horrific, bloody encounter.

Defeat for the Austrians led to the collapse of their partnership with the British, the loss of millions of their citizens via territorial changes, and an uneasy alliance with the French. Napoleon turned his attentions to domestic affairs. Literally so, since he divorced his empress Joséphine (she had not provided him with the anxiously demanded heir) and expeditiously married Marie Louise – daughter of Francis, the last Holy Roman emperor and first emperor of Austria – who promptly produced the coveted son: Napoleon II.

The following year Napoleon, père, tried to invade Russia, and the rest is history. So let us return to the spring of 1809, when the French forces were pounding Vienna. Twenty howitzers were stationed on the heights of the Spittelberg, raining their shells down on the city, sending citizens scurrying into their cellars for cover. One of their number, Ludwig van Beethoven, had no such basement to hide in, so he retreated through the commotion, fires and broken glass to his brother Kaspar's,<sup>27</sup> where he cowered dejectedly in a makeshift crypt,

famously covering his ears with pillows to protect his already damaged hearing against the merciless onslaught of bombs and explosions.

Across the city, on 12 May, a projectile detonated outside Haydn's house, shaking the building like an earthquake and terrifying the composer's staff. The papa himself urged his 'children' not to worry, for no one would want to kill him, but the bomb left him deeply shocked. The following day, Napoleon was back in the Schönbrunn Palace, and a new occupation had begun. On the twenty-sixth, a French officer of the occupying army visited Haydn and sang an aria from *Die Schöpfung*, moving the ageing composer to tears.<sup>28</sup> It was a perfect, poignant paradox of war. That evening the composer gathered his household together, went to the piano and played – three times – the Austrian anthem, that modest, eloquent wonder, which he had, of course, written himself. He repaired quietly to his bed the next day and died peacefully there, aged seventy-seven, on the thirty-first. The man in the cellar was now the undisputed leading composer in Europe.<sup>29</sup>

Beethoven was shaken by Haydn's death. They had had a complex relationship (knowing Beethoven usually entailed this), but, gradually, the ambitious German would acknowledge the magnitude and importance of his Austrian antecedent, his former teacher; certainly it was something he found easier to do after the mentor's death. Beethoven had a tricky relationship with power, with authority, with control, with influence (though he would not always deny his inspirations). He knew he needed the respect, patronage and support of wealthy or prominent patrons; but he also knew that his personality and his art demanded independence and autonomy, whether literal or symbolic.

It is odd now, two centuries on, to think of Beethoven recoiling and trembling in his brother's basement while, above him, his great nemesis-hero Napoleon was hammering the city into submission, marching across a makeshift bridge over the Danube, and then relaxing in the emperor's summer palace, imposing new rules and regulations on the proud Viennese populace.<sup>30</sup> For these two titanic figures in European history to be so close by, both at the height of their powers – which were so different and yet so intriguingly the same – is frightening, mesmerizing, even at such an immense distance. Quite what might have transpired had these two critical figures of the nineteenth century ever met in person is perhaps best left for the reader to imagine.

As it happened, although many new restrictions were imposed on the subjugated city, some freedoms were afforded: forbidden books were uncensored, proscribed plays were restored to the stage – including, significantly for Beethoven, Schiller's *Don Carlos* and Goethe's *Egmont*. But a few literary liberties were hardly sufficient to purge or simplify the complex relationship Beethoven had with Napoleon or banish the carnage and commotion the French dictator had inflicted on both Vienna and Europe at large.

Much of this complexity can be seen in the previous chapter and the creation of the *Eroica* – the dedication, the scratching out – but, more broadly, the idea of heroes (and villains) appealed to Beethoven, as inspiring forces, as coequals in the bloody battles of art and existence. Beethoven might have hated the literal skirmishes of war, the terrible ferocity and injury man inflicted upon man (and the general disruption to life, composing and art in general<sup>31</sup>), but he also knew the dark forces within certain 'Great Men' were mirrored in his own creative constitution.

Art can never, should never, excuse violence of any kind, but Beethoven recognized how stimulus and motivation worked. Nonetheless, whatever their superficial similarities – in outrageous skill and ruthless determination – Beethoven knew a truth that Napoleon could never fathom: however much the composer believed in himself, he believed in humanity more. Beethoven trusted in the power of art to transform lives, cities, nations, freeing people from brutality, persecution and conquest, whether on the political and global or personal and local level.

During the occupation, a music-loving French diplomat – Baron de Trémont – visited Beethoven, despite having been warned by locals against calling in on the gloomy, acerbic misanthrope – particularly since the composer had no servant at present (none of them could put up with his abusive behaviour for long) and he would likely be living in even worse squalor than usual.<sup>32</sup> When he arrived on Beethoven's street, Trémont found his own troops trying to blow up the old city walls which lay under the composer's window. He knocked three times and was about to quit when the door opened and 'a very ugly man' scowled at him, asking what he wanted. Eventually, the diplomat was let in – to the filthiest, untidiest and most obscene space he had ever encountered. Here all our clichés about Beethoven's living habits are substantiated. Dust covered everything; moisture crept up the walls;

manuscripts lay littering the floor and every available surface; an unemptied chamber pot sat under the piano (which did, at least, confirm that the composer of the *Eroica* was a human being).

Amid the dwindling, festering remains of last night's supper, crusty old pens and upturned tables, for a few hours – in a mixture of meagre French and imperfect German – the two discussed Homer, Plutarch, Euripides, Kant – and, of course, Shakespeare (a lifelong Beethovenian passion to which we will return in the next chapter). Trémont had to shout from time to time, partly because of the composer's deteriorating hearing but also to get a word in edgewise as Beethoven enthused on the people, art and ideas that moved him. He was a slightly illogical conversationalist, speaking in jumps and jerks, but he was also generous in his praise and often given to elevated statements eulogizing his eternal heroes and castigating the contemporary scoundrels of the continent.

Trémont confirms that Beethoven remained very preoccupied by Napoleon – but then, this was 1809, and so was most of Europe. Beethoven respected, even venerated, Napoleon's rise from nothing to greatness – it was, after all, his own trajectory, or at least one he was in the process of completing. But he rightly resented the self-crowning as emperor, the vast imperial campaigns, the endless and repeated assaults on liberty and humanity, especially because such incursions, whether political, legal or martial, went so far against the civilized, even benevolent, potential Napoleon had suggested for Europe in the aftermath of the French Revolution.

In one of the neat mockeries of life and art that history throws up from time to time, it was shortly after Beethoven completed his fifth (and final) piano concerto, a work now known as the *Emperor* Concerto, that Napoleon battered the city in which it was created. The origins of the concerto's moniker are unknown, or at least heavily disputed, but surely Beethoven would have detested his work having any direct connection with the violent man assaulting his home, damaging his ears and disrupting his art. He would assuredly have wryly noted the irony since, for all that, the grandeur, the reach, the pain of the *Emperor* is on a scale to match the scope of both the *Eroica*'s symphonic expansions and Napoleon's fierce victories.

The concerto's existence has, in fact, a minor, quirky connection to the French emperor.

In the autumn of 1808, Beethoven received a lucrative job offer, for the position of kapellmeister at the court of Cassel, from the king of Westphalia – who was none other than Jérôme Bonaparte, Napoleon’s kid brother. Beethoven had always sought such a position, partly for the financial security but also to emulate his beloved grandfather, and, in January 1809, he accepted the post. He knew, however, that he would probably never go: for a start, he was already busy trying to obtain a perpetual annuity from wealthy local benefactors. These patrons have often been presented as stumping up the cash in order to persuade the composer to stay in Vienna. In fact, as he would do throughout his life, Beethoven was manipulating people and events to his own pecuniary advantage (as well he might).

But whatever Beethoven’s machinations, it is also true that the Austrians were never going to let the French purloin their leading composer. Archduke Rudolf, Prince Kinsky and Prince Lobkowitz pooled their not inconsiderable resources and together pledged to pay Beethoven a pension of four thousand florins a year.<sup>33</sup> This promised to afford Beethoven some measure of stability, not least when the income from other commissions, students and publications was added to it. It wouldn’t make him obscenely rich, but it might make him comfortable, mitigating some of the loss of performance earnings due to his intruding deafness, which had by now severely limited his star power on the piano stage, and freeing him to dedicate his life to his composing work. As it turned out, however, payment of this salary was inconsistent and intermittent, given various deaths and bankruptcies, as well as the wider economic chaos caused by Napoleon. For the most part, Beethoven would have to rely on his acumen and aptitude, rather than any plump pension.

Still, the patronage of Rudolf was priceless. Half brother of the reigning Austrian emperor, Francis (soon, we remember, to be Napoleon’s new father-in-law), he was obsessed with music. He took keyboard lessons with Beethoven (the palace tutor was deemed insufficiently competent for the young nobleman’s ambitions), and in 1808 the teacher dedicated his Fourth Piano Concerto to his pupil. This was to be the first of many such dedications, including the *Archduke* Piano Trio, the *Hammerklavier* Piano Sonata, the *Missa solennis* – and, of course, the *Emperor* Piano Concerto.<sup>34</sup>

Whether the pounding rhythms and relentless surging melodies of the *Emperor* Concerto’s opening movement directly correspond to outside events – the work was

essentially finished by the time of the Vienna war, siege and occupation – is a matter of speculation (and, of course, we should remember that artists have imaginations as well as inspirations, and that musical works, whatever their provenance, defy such originating limits). What is true is that the musical work reflects the war-ridden age of its composition, being an almost exact fit for the external happenings in this period of Napoleonic triumphs and ‘courageous’ undertakings, as well as the pitiful pain such actions caused.

The *Emperor* is a belligerent beast of a concerto, bold and insistent, an uncompromising feast of bellicose beauty and seductive ornaments. It screams both charisma and ferocity, demanding that we listen to what it has to say before allowing us to dream and wonder. The gentler lyrical grace and terror magnificently explored in the Fourth Piano Concerto are swept away by an endless stream of musical mayhem and splendour, as piano and orchestra fight for supremacy on the battleground of the concert hall. It constantly bursts into passages of sustained expressive power, requiring that we sweep and swoon with it, our hearts swelling with the dazzling opulence, our inner metronomes stomping to the martial embellishments. It is safe war. It is exquisite war. It is as grand as it is grumpy, as harrowing as it is heroic. We will always lament the absence of a sixth piano concerto from Beethoven’s pen, especially one from the later phase of his career, but his last essay in the genre is an outstanding, worthy final testament to his celebration and development of the form, taking it beyond Mozart’s astounding achievements and towards the two miracles to come from Brahms.<sup>35</sup>



That spring, Beethoven would write to his publisher complaining about the endless ‘drums, cannons, men and misery’ which had surrounded and invaded Vienna. He was unable to compose properly, and this was a deplorable state of affairs. At the same time, he was not unaware of or indifferent to the plight of his fellow citizens: on the contrary, long-winded, sprawling letters from that year give testimony to the understanding and deep compassion Beethoven had for everyone else’s suffering as well as his own. At one point he mentions little singing parties he had been hosting at home on a weekly basis – one hopes he had voided, cleansed and polished that chamber pot under the piano beforehand – and his sadness at

their curtailment because of the invasion.

Singing parties at the homes of the middle classes might not seem the most important thing in the world, but that, surely, is the point. The vehement horror and stupidity of war – whether in 1809 Vienna, 1968 Saigon or 2022 Kyiv – is about not only the more obvious agony and affliction it causes but the cessation of life's diminutive pleasures and the modest diversions of everyday normality. Those little singing parties – to someone with Beethoven's difficult social personality, one increasingly dislocated by his encroaching deafness – must have meant much to him. They were an opportunity to meet people – new friends, a lover perhaps – as well as for the more serious business of gaining professional contacts and even musical inspiration from the performances.

It is not a little poignant to imagine Beethoven in the hour or so before he held these little soirees, excited at the prospect of the musical evening ahead. The image we have of him as the gruff moody artist is one well-earned, and entirely justified, but there was another side to him too. Perhaps he was not entirely the jolly innkeeper of comic opera tradition, but at least a jovial, genial, witty host, fond of mischief, wine and friendship. He wasn't only the superman, the heroic titan hewn in marble and granite. He was a vulnerable human being, one often very lonely and secluded, routinely suffering ill health (chronic tummy trouble) and becoming increasingly incapacitated and isolated through hearing loss. Few people have deserved moments of contentment like this as Beethoven had. How much the sadder, then, that Napoleon's aggression denied this modest pleasure to him.

At this time, the Scottish music publisher and promoter George Thomson (who had already worked with Haydn) sent Beethoven several dozen songs from the British Isles – mostly Scottish, Welsh and Irish folk songs – that the composer had agreed to arrange. Thomson had been attempting to persuade Beethoven for years, and now he succeeded. This was steady work amid the insecurity of the composer's still-precarious existence as a freelancer (the annuity from the princes was collapsing as the patrons dealt with the chaos of war; publishers, then as now, were sluggish and indifferent with the payment of their invoices).

When he eventually agreed, Beethoven evidently loved working on these delightful songs, which today have become a bit neglected and underappreciated. Many keen

musicians and music lovers are surprised to learn he even wrote them, even though Beethoven composed far more of them than any other category of music (over two hundred songs). They are well worth exploring. Schubertian in their infectious charm, the folk song settings are simultaneously stimulating and relaxing, offering an innocent amusement and tender affection not always heard in Beethoven's – let's face it – habitually tempestuous and demanding output.

Thomson requested further work from Beethoven, asking that the piano parts for some violin sonatas (which never materialized) and further folk songs not be too difficult. The composer was a little indignant, conceding the need to earn his living and pay his bills (inflation and taxes had skyrocketed during the siege and occupation) but asserting, too, his role as an artist of some stature who could not simply provide music 'to order,' even if it was for fine young Scottish ladies.<sup>36</sup>

The year 1809 was a tumultuous and significant one for Europe and the wider world,<sup>37</sup> but often somewhat forgotten compared to, say, the infamous, fabled dates of 1812 or 1848. For Beethoven personally 1809 might not have yielded the prodigious productivity of the earlier parts of the decade, but it was hardly progressing without artistic profit. The *Emperor* Concerto, the British folk songs, and six songs, op.75, were complete; despite his old stomach problems returning to bedevil his concentration, the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth piano sonatas would follow by the end of the year (with the twenty-sixth, the *Lebewohl*, finished not long after). And these are only the more familiar fruits of a useful, albeit very interrupted, twelve months of work.<sup>38</sup>

What is more, in the autumn, Beethoven had finally left the suffocating heat-prison of Vienna and travelled to Baden, where he was belatedly allowed his usual summer break that the occupation had this year denied him. It was here that he completed the other great composition of 1809: the *Harp* Quartet, op.74.



As with the twenty-fourth and twenty-fifth piano sonatas, in the op.74 string quartet – his tenth – Beethoven might have been treading water to some extent, creatively speaking,



marking time as he pondered the next step in a tricky year. But this did not entail any slackening of the imaginative pace, any lessening to the supreme quality of his artistic endeavours. Like those piano sonatas, this quartet has a vigorous sparkle to it, a hospitable air which belies the belligerent viciousness going on in the world outside.<sup>39</sup>

This opposition between art and environment shouldn't surprise us, of course – though it is strange how often critics, commentators and connoisseurs seem to require 'happy' art to have been created in 'happy' circumstances and 'unhappy' art under 'unhappy' conditions. Art and artists are complex, restless, resourceful things. One of Mahler's darkest works, a symphony now almost a popular cliché for doom and despair – the Sixth – was written during the sunniest period of the composer's life; Wagner authored his only mature comedy – albeit a relatively dark and complex one – during a period of largely abject misery (though one brightened midway through via his locating love and money).

If we were being slightly trite, even a little facetious, we might imagine Beethoven composing his generally cordial *Harp* Quartet as a convenient, palliative means to escape the turbulent times in which he lived. But great art rarely has such banal therapeutic origins; nor is the work exclusively welcoming, for op.74 is a shrewd, urbane chamber work, as well as an animated exploration of light and warmth.

Op.59 had a visible virtuosity, as well as a discernible detachment, a staggering methodological perspicacity. Those three quartets were the work of a mind that knew its art and the contents of its own soul with a frightening degree of accuracy and self-awareness. The *Harp* is subtler in its attainments, more content to exist as a relative unknown, its flawless coalition of conception and execution the aficionado's gift. The op.59 quartets – for all their brilliance – sometimes seem to burst the banks of their genre (though they stop short of yearning to be symphonies). No such dilemmas inhabit op.74: it is an exquisitely designed string quartet that could not exist in any other form.

In some ways, we might regard op.74 as connected to the F minor, op.95, that followed in 1810 (these were Beethoven's last quartets until the middle of the next decade and the final few years of his life). Like Brahms's *Tragic* Overture and its companion piece, the *Academic Festival* Overture (both from 1880), Beethoven might have been deliberately creating contrasting works to be seen together, as the op.18 and op.59 sets had done.

That said, both op.74 and op.95 also exist in splendid isolation and seem to have more interpretative value when regarded separately. The open, cogent, relatively straightforward E-flat work consolidates the fertile period it comes at the end of, strengthening form and feeling. It is a marvellous full stop. The terse F minor is an impressively strange work, a disquieting semicolon, problematic and forward-looking, almost needing to be seen by itself, idiosyncratic and alone, relishing its aloofness and peculiarity. If op.74 is a heartfelt gaze back down the foothills of the past, assured in the progress it has made so far, op.95 turns around to stand as a tense and tentative glance from base camp towards the towering mountains ahead. (Though, as we saw in the introduction to the op.18 group, this somewhat mischaracterizes the aims and achievements of the earlier quartets.)

This directional elucidation of these two isolated works at the centre of Beethoven's quartet-writing career should help resolve and put to bed some of the strange contentions about 'contradiction' many observers have felt between the pair (as if Beethoven, of all artists, was neither entitled nor keen to have some variety or even paradoxes at the heart of his art). There should be nothing curious about a far-sighted thinker exploring the diverse and visionary aspects of art.

Op.74 is an honest and unguarded work, accessible without being simplistic, amenable without being naive. There is a silkiness and equability to the first movement of this quartet which, along with its coy nickname, have led many to neglect it, assuming, perhaps, that less demanding or less revolutionary art has nothing to say. But any hearing of the adagio, an ardent and deeply sincere study of longing which turns a humble tune into an otherworldly wonder, or the coarse, hearty scherzo (with its glimpses of dashing dexterity) must complicate any view of this as an entirely serene work. Beethoven, it is true, coheres the drama of the quartet in a remarkably effective manner, not so much polishing the rough edges as uniting the work in a perfectly formed, and generally well-behaved, whole.

(The by and large positive reviewer in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* singled out an 'unnecessary jumble of harsh dissonances' at the end of the first movement as being an especially displeasing mistake from the composer. Whether or not we agree with that statement in qualitative terms, it should surely disabuse anyone of the notion that this is a string quartet of unblemished tranquillity – though it is true that its wounds are not of an

especially deep kind.)

There is an audacity, a distinctiveness, to the slow opening of the quartet which immediately undermines claims of artlessness, as does the ensuing defiance of sonata principles after the first movement. This quartet is rarely what it seems, the surfaces always giving way to something more elusive, more tenuous, more unexpected. Indeed, the very pizzicatos and arpeggios which have given the quartet its 'harp' sobriquet are a vital part of the surprises the work offers up: strategically placed under the feet of the allegro, they fizz and pop like firecrackers.

Another minor curiosity is the way the two internal movements are both in keys distant from the home of the quartet (E flat). The lyrical, increasingly sumptuous and impassioned slow movement (whose candour averts any sense of gushing romanticism) is in A flat, while the adventurous scherzo that follows is in C minor, Beethoven's by now very familiar mode of sinister zip. But, again, this variety is meticulously handled by an excellent governing structure to the quartet, allowing such spirited freedoms within its interior without loss of integrity.

Groundwork drafts for op.74 filled some three dozen pages of a notebook with many of the ideas already in a very advanced, and almost final, form (though the opening of the third-movement scherzo evidently underwent some significant reconsideration).<sup>40</sup> Other sketches are likely to have been lost, of course (especially given the chaotic conditions of 1809), but there is also a feeling of Beethoven's confidence in this work, which we can certainly perceive in its finished state: it wanders wonderfully through harmonies and melodies, and with a generous rhythmic assurance. There is no idolatry or idealization of Beauty with a capital *B* at work here, only a natural, straightforward graciousness and charm, anticipating some of Mendelssohn's unfussy freshness.

Beethoven's *Harp* Quartet is a work that deserves to be better known and perhaps a little more loved. The only reason it isn't is likely to be the wealth that surrounds it, and the fact that, for all its amiability, it is actually a very difficult work to play. But such griefs need not be wallowing in self-pity or the lamentations of esoteric connoisseurs: op.74 is not totally obscure, and the riches that came before and after it will always ensure it remains a vital part of the string quartet repertoire, in concert halls and in private listening.

Yet, even considered on its own, it is a vibrant, stimulating and gratifyingly unified work of art and one which effectively rounds off the scintillating first half of Beethoven's career composing string quartets.

## No.10 in E-flat major

### 1. *Poco adagio – Allegro.*

The *Harp* Quartet begins with a long, slow introduction, placid and sinuous, to some extent reminiscent of the opening to Mozart's great C major quartet, K.465 (the *Dissonance*), but where Mozart's preamble has an ominous quiet, Beethoven's unfurls like a flower heralding the dawn.

It is 'adagio', yes, but one slightly modified via the 'poco', and this influences the character of the fascinating, sprightly movement to come. The first sound we hear is a simple E-flat chord, resonant despite being marked 'sotto voce', which is almost at once taken down by the cello to D flat – the first of several tonal shifts amid the supposedly docile texture of the *Harp*, which has surprised us virtually from the moment it started. Modulations are a shrewd feature of this quartet, delicately altering the pastel colours of the musical fabric.

All is dignity and anticipation. Sometimes this slow beginning seems like a question (shortly to be answered by a forte allegro), but it should feel more ponderous, more wistful, more *relaxed* than an interrogation. It is slightly veiled, oblique, shrouded in the warmth and promise of a new day. The principal theme, with its mix of leisure and pensive quizzing, slips in and out of the texture from a range of instruments: first the viola, then first violin, before the cello gives a gorgeous grand rising demonstration from A flat to E flat and then G flat. Beethoven is in absolute control of his art here, the immaculate technique generating an atmosphere of the utmost polish and poise, with gentle, subtle tensions on the fringes of his dewy web.

A dramatic stabbing minor chord midway through the two-minute slow introduction is rather disturbing – indeed, it almost sounds like a morning alarm call, but one in snooze mode, since it recurs again amid the continued slumbers. It is not just dawn but an aural representation of waking up – and one, it seems, more authentic than the mythical opulence of Brünnhilde's Awakening in act three of Wagner's *Siegfried*.

Rouse we do, with a blunt, bucket-of-cold-water allegro. It resolutely confirms E-flat major as the home key of the quartet, though there remain some slight anomalies to disturb the certainty. The first violin leads with a poetic phrase, related to that of the introduction,

which is soon taken up by the viola. This melody retains that faintly strange D flat which had unsettled the noble sunrise stirring of the opening.

Before long the distinct sonority of pizzicato is exploited, initially by the viola and cello, then on the pair of violins. The boldness of this choice justifies the quartet's nickname, for these plucked strings are no mere accompaniment, contrary to the usual duty of pizzicato (though Beethoven himself had already used it as a valuable expressive tool, most conspicuously in the slow movements of his first and third op.59 quartets). They are leading the sound and direction of the music, and will come to occupy a place of real importance for the recapitulation, and as a connective device for other areas of the quartet.

The exposition concludes unobtrusively and is followed by a cheerful and chirpy development section: there is a repeat of the initial, robust E-flat chord, which then dives in a Haydn-like manner to a luxuriantly written G, fortissimo. The two violins divide their labours before uniting in modulation to C, then toying with fragments of the second theme from numerous perspectives. With typical inventiveness, Beethoven snatches a rhythmical motif from this second theme and utilizes it for the remainder of the development, repeatedly turning it over with the first violin and cello, while the second violin and viola contribute a restless accompaniment.

Arpeggios emerge from the commotion, initially plucked, then bowed and leading eventually to the recapitulation, which is reasonably verbatim and in regulation form, with material both stretched and squeezed. But there is an arresting change, too: the pizzicato section has doubled in size, giving a romantic, princely feeling to the movement, before the recapitulation subsides into an unassuming close.

Stillness prevails. The harmonics drift through hazy ambiguity towards the coda. Suddenly, the first violin is given the most extensive and extravagant cadenza in all Beethoven's sixteen string quartets. It storms through with a dedicated urgency, as if in a concerto. It is astonishing to hear, the first violinist furiously playing across the strings with a feverish energy, as first the main theme, then an urgent, insistent iteration of the pizzicato signature, swell below. A remarkable passage, it reasserts the glory of E flat, before closing with a surge of stupendous excitement.

Modest, capricious, the opening movement of op.74 is an unpredictable marvel, a liquid

statement which is never ostentatious or grandiose, even during the cadenza. The *Harp* sports its demure colours with pride, charm – and a twinkle in its eye.

## 2. *Adagio ma non troppo*.

After the energy and charisma, the exquisite repose. The *Harp* Quartet's next movement opens broadly, singing a soft lullaby. All is smooth, magnanimous, serene. Beethoven here is expansive, even nostalgic, but never schmaltzy or overemotional. The feelings are genuine, their representation authentic and valid. Accusations that this movement – or, especially, the spacious slow movements in the Ninth Symphony, *Hammerklavier* Piano Sonata or late quartets – is sentimental are a result either of an indulgent, disingenuous performance or an inability to hear Beethoven's emotions for what they were: unpretentious expressions of his humanity, vulnerability and compassion.

A divine and lingering melody is presented, along with a pair of decorated adaptations of this theme, which are infiltrated by two correspondingly expressive subdivisions. The three main statements increase their sumptuousness with an almost miraculous sense of orderly proportion: each is set slightly lower than the preceding one and separated by those alternate subsections.

Opening, the first violin sings in the stratosphere, high above a constrained accompaniment, which returns again and again, each time more deftly varied, more carefully invigorated. The music is a lyrical wonder, with some lovely ornamentation, but its power – and ability never to descend into the merely maudlin – comes from its strict regulation and self-control (a discipline amid sublimity that will be more fully explored in the late quartets).

Like Mozart's, Beethoven's texture is so meticulous, so flawlessly woven, that to eliminate a single bar would tear the whole, ruining the gradual unfolding of the themes, returns and diversions. But, in another resemblance to Mozart, the tranquillity is frequently troubled by darker harmonic exhalations that remind us of Wolfgang Amadeus's capacity to convey his own anguish and inner pain even (and especially) amid ebullience or serenity.

By the theme's third entry, it is fairly animated: below the first violin, the second violin offers staccato fast notes, the viola some slightly slower pizzicato, along with marked punctuations from the cello, before the voices begin to speak in a more unified, contrapuntal

fashion, alternating and trembling, with memories of the 'harp' motifs from the opening movement. Brooding themes reappear, reminiscences deepening and the music becoming more fragmented, even slightly bitter in the melancholic reflections (though the acidic taste should never be allowed to overwhelm the dish).

By the end, however, the music is able to employ a coda to disperse the sadness and rediscover peace, helped especially by a strange repeated F flat from the viola (which sounds like a Brahmsian clarinet). It pains the harmony – an ache, a sigh – but it is a lament which helps move the music to its conclusion: the main theme tiptoes softly from the cello, and wide chords in A flat glide the adagio to a close, reverberations dying away into a beautiful silence.

### 3. *Presto.*

The fading into the ether which ends the slow movement is then – a great Beethoven joke – rudely interrupted by a hectic scherzo in C minor, a wonderful contrast to what has come before, offering a true divergence where the subdivisions of the adagio did not. It might seem obvious, even deplorably inevitable, to draw comparisons with the lightning violence of the Fifth Symphony, probably Beethoven's most famous scream of C minor. Yet this scherzo does evoke, with a graphic urgency, the first and third movements of that endlessly influential warhorse – completed, of course, only the previous year.<sup>41</sup>

Strength rushes forth with raucous pleasure, the first violin progressing through intervals not unlike the opening movement, with quivering rhythms beneath. The stark first section is repeated, and the motif is thrashed out by all four instruments together. It is classic Beethoven: a forceful inferno of sound. From here, the first violin tears off to find D flat, then an inflection to F minor, before the original theme returns in a burst of C minor flashes. The second violin tries to maintain the pace of the initial motif, as its leader offers some disjointed mutterings and the cello cavorts from G to B to C. Further modulations and pounding motifs heighten the drama even further as the quartet fluctuates between asserting its C minor ferocity and fighting off the distractions of other tonal colours.

We pass through vacillation, triumph and fearful anguish on our way to a tremendous trio in C major, introduced by the cello and joined by a curious phrase from the viola. Before



long the first violin hauls all the instruments to a polyphonic riot downstairs, which has a Bach-like disposition but with an acutely Beethovenian zest to its flavour.

The scherzo returns with even greater speed, such that it almost falls over into a repeat of the trio and then a final reappearance of the scherzo – only this time it becomes unexpectedly murky, creepy even, a reprise of Mahlerian menace and mischief.

It is a magnificent coup, and one which allows Beethoven to reroute the music onto an A-flat chord: the same pulsing inflection which commences the legendary bridge into the finale of the Fifth Symphony. But where the symphony grows and growls into its C major resolution, the quartet is serene, coolly re-entering E-flat major in readiness for the very tidy finale.

#### *4. Allegretto con variazioni.*

Six neat and economical variations comprise the final movement, six frankly enjoyable and straightforward takes on an eccentric theme. The eccentricity derives from the fact that the motif's rhythm is a little odd: a syncopation which not only feels quaint but looks far ahead to twentieth-century jazz. Crucially, it recalls the very opening of the quartet – one of the factors which help unify the work so well. It is a refined and very fitting finish, well signposted and with a breezy charm.

The first variation exuberantly contracts the theme to weird staccato progressions and prowling arpeggios, before the second falls into tenderness and reflection, with the viola given a prominent role. The third variation is more profuse, the cello and second violin pulverizing the theme while the viola and first violin offer some quirky perforations on the offbeat. The fourth is laid-back and unflustered, the first violin singing a simple version of the melody above soft considerations from the other instruments. The penultimate variation returns to the flamboyance of the first and third, and with a prominence given to the first violin – who performs some teasing caricatures of the theme's rhythms, while the rest of the players enact their more restrained accompaniment. The sixth and final variation could be straight from Schubert's pen: a breathless pianissimo, the cello playing the role of a drum while the higher voices lace and entwine their harmonies like oboes and horns.

Mimicking and expanding the very opening of the quartet, the cello plays a sturdy,

almost stubborn, E flat which progresses to D flat, while the other instruments interweave their sounds to advance the movement towards a coda. Here, the last variation becomes extended and full of quirky, unexpected ideas: first, a repetition leads to the viola clutching at a thematic fragment of the sixth variation before the entertainment is taken up by the violins, and then finally the cello, in a hearty, expansive sport.

The very ending of op.74 is another glorious game: a collective episode taken at speed recalls the third variation before a sizzling fortissimo is followed by two quiet chords and silence. It would take a hard and cynical heart not to think that this amusing finish is Beethoven's tribute to his mentor Haydn, who had died a few months earlier: it crackles with the jocular and delight of the illustrious father of the string quartet. Whatever the awkward, problematic nature of Beethoven's relationship with Haydn, he was not above good-natured homage and playful praise. He knew the debt.

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26 The *Emperor* was written in early 1809 and publicly premiered on 28 November 1811 (the only one of Beethoven's piano concertos for which he was not the debut soloist; the deterioration of his hearing made this impossible). The *Lebewohl* was written in 1809 and 1810, before publication in 1811.

27 Or was it the cellar of Beethoven's friend the poet Ignaz Franz Castelli? History can't seem to decide.

28 Though some sources have claimed the officer visited on the seventeenth and sang from *The Seasons*.

29 At Haydn's memorial service two weeks later, Mozart's *Requiem* was performed at the Schottenkirche.

30 One of the less brutal but more absurd regulations was the requirement for each Viennese resident to place a lighted candle in their windows to mark the emperor's birthday on 15 August. It is not clear whether Citizen Beethoven complied with this edict.

31 Concerts in the Theater an der Burg were playing to audiences counted in single figures, and Vienna's opera houses and theatres had had the muskets and guns from their storerooms commandeered in the desperate attempt to defend the city.

32 Around this time, Beethoven had decided to economize by eating at home rather than in restaurants: restaurants were fairly inexpensive, but servants were even less costly. He eventually found a married couple; the wife did the cooking and the husband the household chores. It was a short, calamitous and rather unfortunate relationship, Beethoven despising them both. It is true that the composer's interminable stomach and hearing ailments must have caused him significant pains and bad moods, but it is remarkable the rate at which he went through domestic staff. None stayed for long, further isolating him, and his life became (to its termination) an endlessly enacted search for new cooks and servants, most of whom he found despicable and who themselves were terrified of the raging, unreasonable monster Beethoven could so often be. As Berlioz said of him, '[He was] intolerant and brutal, yet gifted with a remarkable sensitivity.'

33 A relatively healthy sum, especially for a composer of the early nineteenth century, albeit one of Beethoven's fame and attainments, it was equivalent to the combined annual remuneration of four middle-ranked, middle-class civil servants.

34 As was usually the case with invasions, the nobility packed up and absconded, and when Napoleon came to Vienna in

1809, Rudolf was no exception. Beethoven began a piano sonata as a friendly send-off for his generous patron and beloved pupil, calling it *Das Lebewohl*, 'The farewell'; the other movements were completed when the archduke returned to the city. Now known, of course, as the *Les Adieux / Lebewohl* Sonata (No.26, op.81a), it shares the *Emperor's* key of E flat as well as its expressive air of defiance amid misery. A work of considerable power and vision, it anticipates the solo piano works of Robert Schumann and Johannes Brahms and would be a profound influence on Gustav Mahler, who made extensive, agonizing use of the sonata in his final completed symphony, his Ninth of 1909.

35 Beethoven began a sixth piano concerto, in D major, during the mid-1810s but abandoned it after about seventy pages of sketches, making it one of the most substantial of his unrealized compositions. It was a strange piece, curiously retrograde and with a markedly decorative piano part, and Beethoven was probably right to have discarded the project. In many ways, his now near-complete hearing loss largely argued against such a work (deafness had prevented him performing as the soloist in the *Emperor's* premiere in 1811). Moreover, as we will see, by the mid-1820s, Beethoven's musical attentions lay focused predominantly on only one form: the string quartet.

36 The songs didn't sell well, mainly, it seems, because of their difficulty for amateur players; nonetheless, Thomson and Beethoven continued to collaborate on folk songs over the years – especially once the end of the Napoleonic Wars improved postal services between Edinburgh and Vienna.

37 The early months of 1809 also saw the birth of some staggering talent: Edgar Allan Poe (19 January), Felix Mendelssohn (3 February), Abraham Lincoln and Charles Darwin (both 12 February), as well as Nikolai Gogol (1 April). Alfred, Lord Tennyson, (6 August) and William Gladstone (29 December) would join them later in the year.

38 The inspired No.24 in F-sharp major and lively No.25 in G major, opp.78 and 79, are unglamorous but by no means inconsequential sonatas. Indeed, according to Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny, only the *Appassionata* and *Hammerklavier* Sonatas meant more to the composer than his twenty-fourth exercise in the medium. After the *Lebewohl* of 1809–10, he wouldn't write another piano sonata until the summer of 1814, as the so-called fallow years began to desiccate his output.

39 Though by the time Beethoven was able to work more fully on the quartet, and away from Vienna in the relative peace of Baden, the hostilities had mostly died down; the Treaty of Schönbrunn was signed on 14 October. Nevertheless, the air of aggression and oppression lingered: Napoleon, and his bullying intimidation of the continent, wasn't going anywhere.

40 With the kind of loveable chaos only Beethoven can produce, the sketches are full of the usual musical prompts, cues and aides-memoires, as well as multiple outlines for other pieces, such as the *Les Adieux* Sonata and protracted efforts at setting Goethe's song 'Freudvoll und leidvoll'. Even more endearing are the ephemera of everyday life which intrude upon the work in hand: a reminder to pay the servant on a certain date and, intriguingly, a note saying simply 'At the Golden Cross.' This 'Goldnen Kreuz' was a pub or wine shop on the periphery of Vienna which Beethoven was known to frequent: perhaps he stopped by on his way to Baden and worked on the quartet there.

41 We can also see why Schubert so loved this scherzo and how it probably shaped the writing of his unfinished one-movement C minor quartet (the *Quartettsatz*, D.703, of 1820).

## Chapter Four

### **Black Sun: Op.95 in F minor**

**F** minor is a curt and frightening key. Vivaldi chose it for the *Winter Concerto* of his *Four Seasons* (1725), as did Haydn for one of his greatest *Sturm und Drang* Symphonies, the so-called *La Passione* (No.49, 1768). When Mozart opens the final act of *The Marriage of Figaro* (1786), with Barbarina searching for the mislaid pin in the chilly darkness of the garden, he has her sing ‘L’ho perduta, me meschina’ (‘Oh dear me, I’ve lost it’) in F minor. Carl Maria von Weber knew he needed the key to express the dread and tension of his clarinet concerto No.1 (1811), as did Schubert for the tortured pain of his piano *Fantasia* for four hands, D.940 (1828), and Mendelssohn in his final major work, his sixth string quartet (1847). Romantic pianist-composers as diverse as Chopin, Liszt and Brahms all preferred F minor for some of their most uneasy expressions, while both Tchaikovsky and Vaughan Williams would pick it as the key for their fourth symphonies, perhaps their most troubled and angst-ridden works.

If C minor was Beethoven’s personal calling card, a belligerent general he could summon for some of his most distinctive statements, F minor might be regarded as a useful second in command. His very first piano sonata, of 1795, as well as one of his most forward-thinking and ambitious, the *Appassionata* (1806), were both cast in the key, as were the dungeon scene of *Fidelio* and storm episode in the *Pastoral Symphony*. So, too, were two terse masterpieces

from 1810, the only significant music he composed that year: the overture and incidental music to Goethe's *Egmont*, op.84 – and his eleventh string quartet, op.95.

It's possible to see this quartet as forming a contrasting pair with the more spacious op.74 of the year before, or as supplying preparatory groundwork for the quartets Beethoven would write at the end of his life. Yet there is something about the brusque energy and fierce self-respect of this extraordinary chamber specimen which seems to demand its prevailing unaided, in magnificent remoteness, a desolate warrior on the lonely slopes of art.

Dubbed by its composer the *Quartetto serioso* – though which of this man's quartets, we may ask, might *not* be given this moniker? – it is certainly a work of great gravity and seriousness. But, Beethoven being Beethoven, it also wears a wry smile amid the frowns and sports a few mischievous tricks up its sleeve, for no one liked atmospheric alterations and the disruption of expectation as much as the Bonn bombshell.



Opus numbers (plus Köchel, Deutsch, Hoboken and Bach-Werke-Verzeichnis numbers) are a useful and necessary part of organizing and cataloguing a composer's oeuvre, but they can be a bit misleading, and Beethoven's musical directory, though for the most part chronological, is not strictly so. Op.1 – his first piano trios – were not his first compositions but, as we saw in the op.18 chapter, the first works he deemed worthy and appropriate to carry the important marker of an opus number. Crucially, Beethoven's list of works also contains the 'WoO' numbers ('Werke ohne Opuszahl', 'work without opus number'), for pieces that the composer either didn't consider suitable or creditable enough to carry an 'opus' designation, or which slipped past the main index. There are 138 opus numbers (for 172 works), though Beethoven in fact wrote over 700 different pieces.

After the Fifth and Sixth of 1808, Beethoven's next essays in the symphony – the Seventh in A major and Eighth in F major – come from 1812, two years after the *Quartetto serioso*, op.95, yet they carry the slightly earlier opus numbers 92 and 93. Works naturally fester and ferment in an artist's head, consciously and unconsciously, for many years before they might actually come to be written down, so we need not suppose these two significant

symphonies, written concurrently, did not have any influence on the composition of 1810's op.95. It is useful to consider how Beethoven's long-term and larger-scale musical thinking, especially within the Eighth Symphony, might have impacted this devastating chamber work.<sup>42</sup>

The expansive generosity – the sheer fecundity, range and drama – of the Seventh Symphony have led many to quite rightly place it along with the Third, Fifth and Ninth as among the great titanic spectacles of Beethoven's symphonic career, with their momentous rumbles of thunderous providence. These are perhaps the most famous of his works and most thrillingly and decisively showcase his genius and importance: intense, theatrical masterpieces which take axiomatic acorns and from them create the mighty proverbial oaks which helped change the scope and direction of Western art music. To an extent, of course, this is true, and the pounding strength and cosmic heartbreak of works like the Seventh Symphony are unquestionably magnificent, helping to define Beethoven's musical personality.

But there was another side to Beethoven, away from the grandeur, far-sightedness and roomy reach of works like the *Eroica*. Concision, brevity, transience (as well as comedy) all have their place in Beethoven's art, in pieces which condense or abbreviate their musical material. We can see how this sonic shrinkage is achieved to great effect in a work like the second of the *Razumovsky* Quartets, as well as in the short sonatas opp.78 and 79, of late 1809. The Eighth Symphony, too, is another marvellous example of Beethoven's felicity in abridging ideas, giving them huge concentrated power – as well as often an amusing sense of play and dogged insistence.

Like the Fourth Symphony, from that annus mirabilis 1806, the Eighth can be a little forgotten, caught as it is between totemic giants, in its case the Seventh and Ninth. Noisy siblings and big brothers often obscure the more understated talents of diminutive family members, but the Eighth has a determined, unruly power all its own, maintaining a marvellously focused energy which exhibits a mind-blowing symphonic ability. It is also a work which pays a simultaneous affectionate tribute to the achievements of Haydn and Mozart as well as pushes the genre forward that little bit further, anticipating with a sly intelligence the succinct brilliance of Prokofiev's *Classical* Symphony (1917) or Webern's

shimmering miniature symphony, op.21 (1928). As ever, to listen to Beethoven is to enter a time machine.

The Eighth might be light-hearted, but it is certainly not lightweight, and although it is a lot more than a musical joke, Beethoven knew the power and value of humour, in both aesthetic and human terms. His sense of humour sustained him during the darkest hours of his existence (in addition to frequently alienating a good few acquaintances with its peculiarity) and provided a fascinating structural component and tonal quality to some of his most inventive works, including his very last string quartet, op.135. Frisky but not frivolous, comical but never trivial, the Eighth has an impetuosity and zeal which instantly endear it to the casual listener. But it also bears a devious acuity to appeal to the connoisseur, to confident and well-informed musical minds that can detect the recreational sport at work. It's almost Beethoven on holiday, having a splendid time of it, ambling about all over the place and jesting with his Classical Viennese kinfolk.

It launches, via lithe orchestral forces, with a squeal of lean joy, the material clipped and cut back to an agile shape with not an ounce of extraneous musical fat. All is athletic and nimble, with a chic, snappy vigour, a glittering wit. It bites and fizzes all over the place, before, midway through the first movement, ratcheting up the tension in a manner never previously attempted in a symphony: you can almost hear the tightening of the screws, before suddenly it releases like a sunrise, all that concision and concentration bursting forth in one of the most resplendent sounds of the entire nineteenth century.

The other movements are no less fun, being full of paradox, alarm and amusement, shifting between pithiness and prolixity – the very joke Beethoven also makes in the *Quartetto serioso*. Slender and then suddenly plump; laconic and long-winded: this is Beethoven at his most inexplicable, surprising and entertaining; his most quizzical, playing with us, with the form, and caring not a jot whether we get the jokes. It is Beethoven 'aufgeknöpft', in unbuttoned mood, tossing off his cares and relaxing into his genius.

Certainly the roughness of the humour, its occasional vulgarity, is both part of the charm and the source of some of the frustration many have found with Beethoven the composer and Beethoven the man. Decorum progresses only to be undone, splattered by droll, coarse and lurid effects, or hoisted off onto excursions we know not where. A certain kind of

insecure personality often feels it is being mocked by such games – and to an extent, of course, they are, as Beethoven teases those people that think great art must be all seriousness, excluding play. In the outrageously ebullient Eighth Symphony and, as we shall see, the op.95 string quartet, Beethoven combines gravity with levity, knowing how intimately they can be connected.



Humour and friendship mattered to Beethoven (almost as much as music and nature), and he had a great gift for them both, even as he also created art of the utmost weight and solemnity, and lived his life at times with a tiresome (if understandable) cantankerousness which has become almost a cliché.

Although by the early 1810s his deafness pained him dreadfully and caused problems both personally and professionally, it was not yet the cause of the isolation and frightening eccentricity it was to become in his later years. We noted in the previous chapter his little singing parties, but, at this time, Beethoven was also having quartet sessions in various private Viennese homes with friends or colleagues such as the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh and the playwright Heinrich von Collin (for whose *Coriolan* of 1804 Beethoven wrote his furiously compressed overture, op.62). These bustling days and evenings were sociable affairs, not simply work events, and Beethoven could be a bearish, boisterous and loyal friend – when he wanted to be. His sense of humour and the maintenance of chummy acquaintances were vital forces in Beethoven's life and, doubtless, prevented him from ever going entirely over the edge into insanity or suicide, despite peering over the precipice on multiple occasions.

One such close friend was a Hungarian named Baron Nikolaus Zmeskall von Domanovecz, whose day job was as an official in the Hungarian Court Chancellery in Vienna but who loved to play the cello and compose a little in his spare time (some string quartets and cello sonatas unlikely to be revived for mass public consumption<sup>43</sup>). They had met in the 1790s, probably at a gathering of Beethoven's patron Prince Lichnowsky, dedicatee of his op.1 trios, *Pathétique* Piano Sonata and Second Symphony.



Zmeskall himself had received the dedication of a new edition of Haydn's trailblazing op.20 quartets in 1800, and it was to this sympathetic friend that Beethoven dedicated his *Quartetto serio* when it was finally published in 1816. It was a rare and intimate personal dedication (unlike those expedient and necessary ones to Beethoven's patrons) which must have meant a great deal to them both and suggests that they both knew the origin of many of the quartet's musical and psychological jokes. Musical get-togethers often took place on Sundays at Zmeskall's house in Vienna – sort of informal jam sessions where new material could be tried out or old favourites revisited – and it was in this relaxed, spirited environment that many of the more playful elements of op.95 (including, perhaps, its nickname) were undoubtedly nurtured.

Beethoven would occasionally utilize Zmeskall for niggling tasks or petty chores which the Hungarian probably performed not out of reverence or sycophancy, for he was no fool, but love and respect for his friend, whose genius he admired and disability he kind-heartedly understood. He would lend him a pen, a watch or a looking glass, or track down and bring a book Beethoven needed, or deal with some bureaucratic nightmare that was causing his friend irritation and which the composer would find impossible to deal with without significant hardship or expenditure of time and emotion.

Along with, and closely connected to, their musical relationship, Zmeskall was also a ready source of obscene jocular and breezy good humour to help assuage the gloomier of Beethoven's many moods, and some one hundred letters survive (including a poignant one from the last few weeks of Beethoven's life) which provide many fascinating insights into the composer's lifestyle, habits and character. The correspondences are full of playful mockery – one from Beethoven opens 'My very dear Baron Muckcart-driver' – zany concocted idioms and bilingual puns, as well as oblique in-joke references to various musical pieces the pair would write or play together. One cites a perky piece for viola and cello from the mid-1790s, known as the 'Duet with Two Obligato Eyeglasses' (WoO 32), which required both participants to wear spectacles (it's not exactly clear why, though it is probably just a teasing reference to the slightly deficient vision of the two friends).

They would often meet in the Schwan tavern near Zmeskall's house, and even two centuries hence, one's toes curl at the crudeness of the gags and the abusive ribaldry which

must have taken place amid the gallons of beer and wine, for they seem to have had a magnificent time together. The letters, too, suggest they often wrote their communications to one another late at night, after partaking of some intoxicants following a day of hard work, and their friendship and humour allowed each to relax. Later on in their friendship, during the 1810s, we see allusions to Beethoven's predilection for using prostitutes. Here, we witness a persistent, quite voracious sexual hunger ('I am always ready for it [especially] around half past three or four in the afternoon'), as well as his moral disgust (both at himself and the unfortunate ladies engaged to temporarily sate these appetites).

Whatever the laxity of ethics, regular boozing and troubling misogyny that characterized this relationship, we can be grateful to Zmeskall (among other intimates) for the forbearance and kindness he showed Beethoven. It was a valuable, responsive companionship – a true brotherhood – amid the increasing darkness of Beethoven's deafness and provided the composer with an outlet and an audience for his strangeness, his wit and his clowning about, which we can perceive in the the quartet he dedicated to his friend: the *Quartetto serioso*, a work of great gravity and daft humour.



If comedy, in its various forms (both aesthetic and everyday), meant much to Beethoven, so too did tragedy. Drama in general, as well as wider literature, was a great source of pleasure and inspiration to him, from his childhood to his last bedridden months. He wrote only one opera, and struggled with it, but even his overtures are compressed dramas of immense power and compass – as are the piano sonatas and string quartets, for this was a man incapable of writing anything that did not express some sort of theatrical inclination. Indeed, in this central period of his life especially, the whole notion of the tragic experience in drama lay at the heart of his heroic method.<sup>44</sup>

Goethe and Shakespeare were the twin deities of Beethoven's literary-dramatic cosmos, and he needed them as a duck water, a bird sky. Shakespeare occupied a great deal of space in this composer's heart – just as he did, of course, for countless others, from Mozart to Sibelius, Wagner to Verdi, Berlioz to Britten, and in just about every other artistic sphere

imaginable. For Beethoven, Shakespeare was a bug caught young: during his childhood and teenage years in Bonn he would regularly attend the theatre whose company had the major tragedies and some of the histories in its repertoire – as well as the farcical Falstaffian comedy *Die lustigen Weiber von Windsor*.<sup>45</sup>

Over the years, Beethoven experienced the plays – whether on stage or page – in various inadequate translations (his English was never really up to reading them in the original), and he would spend his life either complaining about the insufficiency of German versions of Shakespeare or enthusing to friends about any admirable new ones which came out. His letters, notebooks and manuscripts are crammed and crowded with Shakespearean allusions, quotations and paraphrases: at one point, some associates are unfavourably compared to *Hamlet's* nefarious double act Rosencrantz and Guildenstern. Beethoven, especially in his youth, somewhat cultivated an image of himself as the brooding Danish prince, that Romantic archetype of the suffering intellectual. (Though, to be fair, which artistically minded young soul has not done this?)

Direct connections with Shakespeare, however, are relatively scarce in Beethoven's output. His *Coriolan* Overture was written not for the Bard's tragedy of 1608 but – as we saw above – his friend Collin's 1804 play (though, of course, this is not to suggest that elements of Shakespeare's dark majesty were not rolling about in his head, too, as he wrote it). According to Anton Schindler, the composer's notoriously unreliable secretary and biographer, when asked to explain the meaning of his D minor piano sonata, Beethoven is said to have casually replied 'read *The Tempest*.'<sup>46</sup> Now while that play's air of mystery and wild spectacle could easily pertain to this sonata, it could equally be applied to many of his other piano works: they simply abound in storms and squalls, secrecies and ambiguities.

We saw earlier how elements of *Romeo and Juliet* influenced the slow movement of the op.18/1 string quartet, and the inspiration for the eerie largo in the piano trio in D major, op.70/1 (1809), has been said to derive from Shakespeare – generating the work's nickname, the *Ghost* Trio. Some sources and scholars suggest it was the various phantom-father scenes in *Hamlet* which inspired the trio; others have claimed it was the Bard's 'Scottish play' which motivated the music and that some of it was a preparatory sketch for a *Macbeth* opera (a mouth-watering prospect). Listening to this chamber work, we can

imagine some of its spooky magic wafting and whispering through the banquet scene as the apparition of Banquo appears.

Other potential opera projects based on Shakespeare's plays tempt the imagination and tease our musical theatre fantasies. The vast cosmos of *King Lear* seems to demand the Beethovenian treatment – but, then, so too does a brazen early work like *The Comedy of Errors*, with its playful dissection of time and identity. The music for the villains Iago and Richard III would doubtless have chilled the blood, whereas Beethoven's gift for bucolic delight and pastoral pleasure makes the absence of his *As You Like It* a painful deficiency in the repertoire, as we drool at the prospect of Beethoven representing Rosalind in sound. *Fidelio's* blend of comedy/history/tragedy suggest a *Heinrich IV* opera would have been an admirable partnership, while *Timon von Athen* might have married the generosity and misanthropy within Beethoven's character.

In truth, though, however much the composer doubtless pondered such projects – as he read the plays or saw them in the theatre or contemplated them as he strolled the countryside – Beethoven was able to express himself perfectly well without hitching himself to the Bard. Besides, Shakespeare's art almost certainly influenced him in subtler, more organic and more powerful ways over the years, unearthing and confirming to him the energy of existence and the strange wonder of the universe. It has long been enticing to relate Shakespeare and Beethoven, since the universality of their appeal and the breadth of their art makes for a tempting comparison. But we don't need to: both are sufficient in themselves, the twin peaks of German music and English literature.

The other dramatist at the heart of Beethoven's literary life was Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1749–1832) – twenty-one when Beethoven was born, he would outlive him by five years – the great polymath whose poetry, novels and plays defined the literature of not just a region but an age. This was a figure who towered over German art and letters, as well as beyond in the realms of politics and science. Beethoven had read a great deal of Goethe's work in his youth, began to set some of his verses in the early 1790s, and would write to him in 1811 with the enthusiasm of a schoolboy and piety of a pilgrim: 'I am only able to approach you with the greatest veneration [and] with an inexpressibly deep feeling for your glorious creations.'

They met the following year in Teplitz, a Bohemian spa town.<sup>47</sup> It was not altogether a success. Although they spent most of a week together, walking and talking, Beethoven found the writer delighting too much in the glow of the court, deferring to nobility, while Goethe for his part considered the composer assailed by an uncontrollable personality. An alleged incident of dubious authenticity<sup>48</sup> nonetheless neatly illustrates their encounter. At one point during their time together, they were walking in the park behind the castle when Goethe spotted the empress walking with her retinue. He rushed over to see her, dragging Beethoven along with him. As she went past, Goethe executed a deep and frankly obsequious bow, while Beethoven the iconoclast pushed his hat to the back of his head, crossed his arms, and moved on. Their embryonic acquaintance never recovered. Later, Beethoven would write to Goethe, attempting to rekindle their relationship, but the writer never replied.<sup>49</sup>



The year 1810 was a lean one, musically speaking, for Beethoven. Aside from the completion of the *Les Adieux* Sonata and some songs, only two works stand out: the colossal overture (and incidental music) for Goethe's *Egmont* and the *Quartetto serioso*. Goethe's tragedy of 1788, heavily influenced by his own earlier play *Götz von Berlichingen* (1773), as well as by the weight of Shakespearean theatre, tells of a man's fateful downfall amid the chaos and calamity of the Eighty Years' War. A political manifesto, a condemnation of injustice and a petition for liberty, it is not hard to see how it appealed to Beethoven – and why it drew such extraordinary music from him.

In its eight and a half minutes of dense dramatic action, which for the most part tracks Goethe's narrative,<sup>50</sup> the *Egmont* Overture packs in more vitality, dynamism, excitement, jittery tension and pure musical splendour than many a symphony or opera several times its size. It has a unique orchestral sound – majestic, opulent and colourful – and is a perfect example of the way Beethoven didn't need superlative melodic gifts to capture attention: the sheer force of his musical personality, as well as sense of structure and dramatic pacing, does all the work. And the thrusting exertions of the *Egmont* Overture are considerable: from the

granite grandeur of its solemn, oppressive opening; to the lonely, interjecting woodwinds and yearning violins; to its uncompromising, malevolent brass; and finally to the peerless moment when it explodes in death and glory at the climax, with furious scurrying motifs on the strings and a blazing, delighted, screaming conclusion.

*Egmont* is a restless, rebellious, burnished piece of musical drama, comparable in scope to *Othello* or the *Oresteia* but with the compact intensity of Samuel Beckett. It is a piece of music almost impossible to hear without a frantic, voracious need to air conduct by means of any implement to hand, be it a pencil or a chopstick. It is a miracle, an addiction, a heroic statement of freedom, and one of the most bewilderingly severe statements in all Beethoven. To listen to it, to play it, is to experience a theatrical genius at full throttle, a rocket of noise, emotion and furious authority. It was influenced by the words and dramas which meant so much to him, and he poured his appreciation and genius into a symphonic tone poem which is light years ahead of its time.

The *Egmont* Overture's F minor sound world, as well as its dramatic background, would not only inspire generations of composers – from Liszt and Berlioz to Strauss and Tchaikovsky – but influence the only other major work from Beethoven's pen in 1810: the op.95 string quartet.



Comedy, drama, friendship and F minor – these were the vital ingredients that went into creating the astringent dish of the *Quartetto serioso*, written in October 1810.<sup>51</sup> So, too, did the continuing agonies of his love life: another broken relationship generated more sorrow around this time, though perhaps also a further defiance detectable in the quartet, as well as the empathy for humanity (if not local specimens thereof) which always sustained him.

A notebook of sketches contains work on all the movements of the op.95 quartet, many of them at a fairly developed stage, as well as some ideas for *Egmont*, along with – in Beethoven's usual mixture of bedlam and economy – drafts of a letter to his publisher, thoughts for an Iberian dance, and plans for some more Goethe songs. When the quartet was finished, Beethoven kept it to himself for a long time, and it would not be published

until the end of 1816 (hence the relatively high opus number for a work of 1810). It would bear the following inscription:

Eleventh Quartet for Two Violins, Viola and Violoncello, dedicated by Ludwig van Beethoven to his friend Nik. Zmeskall von Domanovecz, Court Secretary. Op.95.  
Copyright of the publishers, S.-A. Steiner & Co., Vienna.

To Zmeskall himself, Beethoven wrote:

Here, my dear Z., receive my loving dedication which I hope you will accept as a tender memento of our lengthy friendship, and as a gesture of my admiration, and not think it the conclusion of what is now a long drawn-out thread (for you are one among my oldest friends in Vienna...).

This letter and the intimacy of the dedication, as well as the pause in publication, indicate the importance of the piece to Beethoven: it was perhaps his most personal and distinctive quartet so far. It perhaps wants for the clarity and integrity of op.18, the vast symphonic reach of op.59, the sincerity of op.74, but the *Quartetto serioso* remains an idiosyncratic and impulsive sensation, expressing its ideas with a marvellous concision, mingling passion with restraint and wonderfully exploiting the string quartet form. Dynamics, schemes, textures, techniques and styles of expression – all are pitilessly and gleefully manipulated, ideas thrown about and restlessly played with.

Op.95, prelude to the Eighth Symphony, postlude to the *Egmont* Overture, unholy marriage of comedy and tragedy, is a compressed wonder, full of typical Beethovenian effects generated by contrast, so that we have teasing enlargements to offset the essential taut structure, a mix of rage and regret, severity and hilarity that is all concluded by a bark of delight which either undermines or confirms – depending on your point of view – the ‘serioso’ title of the quartet. Has the work been toying with us all along, only playing possum with its gravity and solemnity? Or is the comic ending part of the truth of the game, that comedy can always follow tragedy, that life is best laughed at, the universe a bit of a joke?

It is, of course, up to individual listeners and interpreters to make up their own mind as

to the authentic seriousness of the *Serioso*. But the slight oddity of the quartet's title (especially in a cycle of works most of which seem to demand the label) and the connection with Beethoven's mischievous partner in crime Zmeskall appear to urge us not to – in the end – take too earnestly its nickname.<sup>52</sup>

All this being said, there is a splendid darkness and urgency to this string quartet which we can also relish and appreciate. It snaps in prickly delight, then saunters off in breezy explorations, before biting back with a delectable caustic sting. Like the Eighth Symphony, op.95 is an out-and-out bacchanalia of ever-changing humours: turbulent and quarrelsome, then teeming with merriment and flashes of luminosity which are abruptly disturbed by monstrous intrusions. The sudden shifts in temperament feel less like mood swings than roguish games, the composer mocking his own personality – perhaps as he had done with Zmeskall during their Sunday-afternoon sessions, jesting and joking, experimenting and extemporizing.

It is a work possessed, full of quirks and quarks, as the composer jokes around and, perhaps, deals with some inner conflict, purging the quartet of unessential elements in order to leave behind dregs of impressive dilution and potency, tart and acidic. While concise and/or rancorous elements certainly exist in the earlier quartets, especially the E minor *Razumovsky*, here the tendency is taken to the extreme, becoming unconditionally vehement and domineering.

Particularly as a result of the compression, in op.95 we hear strident individual notes with a peculiar forcefulness and distinction; relationships between certain notes, chords or instruments are given a unique tang, obliging themselves upon our ears. Faddy, fastidious, exacting: it is compelling and alarming in equal measure. It is less that Beethoven seems to be trying to convince us of the rightness and validity of particular sonic affiliations; rather that he is asking us to question what we deem to be appropriate, interrogating our boundaries of decency and form in string quartet writing. Perhaps it is all a little puerile, a bit adolescent, but coming from a man of nearly forty, it has an engaging, eccentric charm. More crucially, this is part of the joke the quartet seems to be asserting, and of the wider, much more serious claims about comedy Beethoven was formulating in much of his music.

Op.95 is a wonderful enigma: a challenge and a puzzle which delights in its dead ends



and disguises. It does not seek to be an experiment as such (even this would be too formal), but it thrills in teasing, in trying out, in toying with expectation or sabotaging decorum. Gaps, jumps, lurches are the order of the day. Perhaps they and the quartet in general express the composer's frustrations in love; perhaps they represent his zany friendship with Zmeskall. Certainly it all communicates a superb refusal to rest on his laurels or provide music to order. Dangerous, ephemeral, dreamlike, it is a work which will never have the appeal of Beethoven's other quartets, but this is surely part of its fascination, its status as one of his most personal and emblematic creations.

After he completed the *Quartetto serio*, Beethoven wouldn't write another string quartet for fourteen years. When he returned to the medium, at the end of his life, it would be to create some of the greatest music the world has ever seen.

## No.11 in F minor

### 1. *Allegro con brio.*

The *Quartetto serioso* begins in brusque fashion with the four instruments together pronouncing part of the quartet's main subject in an extremely agitated voice. It is short-tempered, volatile and magnificently uninviting – like a hungover wasp.

Technically, it is the splinter of an F minor scale, spinning from F to C and back to F, and shrieking a furious rhythm. Then there is silence, which, coming so soon in the quartet, sounds eternal, devastating, frightening. A phrase in C replies to the angry opening, the instruments ricocheting against one another with jumps and strongly accented rhythms. Another silence, slightly shorter this time as the movement begins to compress itself, before the cello spontaneously modulates the main subject to G flat. It is a harmonic tactic of malign power, as the lowest instrument thrashes away with histrionic arpeggios and the higher ones offer simple, steady chords. Dense and weird, it is a tremendously concentrated game of variation flung out in the opening measures of the quartet.

From here the beginning returns to reassert itself. It tries to vanquish the movement, its tensions dominating the sound world, rarely pausing or giving way to other material. Phrases are abrupt, asymmetrical, unhinged and utterly vehement. Everything is telescoped with a fearful urgency, with a tight emphasis on the rigorous, incessant advance of a small number of motifs. Nowhere is allowed space to breathe or relax. The exposition is not repeated, and the development section is brief before a monstrously truncated recapitulation. Sonata form is sovereign, but compression is a despot in charge.

In the exposition, some scales lead to A flat, the relative major of F minor. It is a lovely and obvious key for the second subject, but Beethoven does not linger for long enough and instead hares off to D flat, where the viola and cello present the actual and lyrical new theme, which is, nonetheless, still worryingly compacted. Here the quartet offers a surprise: the energy to flee the forbidding F minor is now met by a determination to enjoy D flat, and the quartet does (for a time), before being ruthlessly cut down by a fortissimo scale in A. This shock gives way with dark humour to an extended repeat of D flat in an amiable, tranquil piano before a gruff, rude silence of characteristic Beethovenian disrespect.

The development is fleeting, obsessed with accented notes and flurries of sound that mainly serve as a thrilling groundwork for the abbreviated recapitulation, which contracts time and space in a carousel of confusion that eventually leads to F major. Here the music now remains in a gentle pianissimo, though with the occasional ill-mannered interruption – the second of which is in D flat and has the cello reminding us of the start of the first subject, deftly insinuating a shift of the movement back to F minor by playing its theme, but doing so in D flat. It is the perfect way to economically capture the two spheres of the movement. All is elision, combination, abridgement.

A feverish coda follows, all squawking sforzando stress and hysteria, which finally subsides into quiet.

## *2. Allegretto ma non troppo.*

The quartet is tired. And so are we. Now appears music bereft of strength, full only of lethargy and lassitude. Violence and tension give way to sighs and an insipid shrug of the shoulders. The movement is in D major, and it wearily, resignedly, explores its themes (which are not unrelated to those of the opening allegro), gradually weaving a web of ideas which slowly but surely complicate their harmonies and associations.

This is a very odd movement – a hallucination, a spider – but a gripping example of Beethoven's ability to heighten suspense. In this case, it does so through a ponderous meandering of contrapuntal ambiguity, a chromatic fugue which contrasts brilliantly with the density and ferocity of the opening. Like the analogous movements of its catalogue neighbours the op.92 and 93 symphonies and op.90 piano sonata, it is not really a slow movement but something curiously liminal, neither fast nor slow, hovering in the ether.

It begins with a jaded cello, which determines the harmonic setting, before the first violin begins a melancholic song, straight out of the Venetian lagoon. All is mood and mystery. Greys and blues. Nothing is strict or formal, and there is an air of looseness which anticipates Beethoven's later works. Instruments jerk and hesitate, with additional notes motioning the music towards the darkness of D minor. A silence is broken by the viola trying to breathe a stabilizing D major into the atmosphere, before it is dragged into a dissonant dialogue somewhere else (though it does eventually lead back to D).

The viola starts a tense fugue. The cello and violins act in response, but the venture evaporates, the journey weighed down by heavy instrumental accents. The cello reiterates its world-weary opening scale, but this time as far as possible from D major – in A flat. As it does so, the other instruments give a disillusioned commentary which eventually leads to another, successful, attempt at the fugue, which is now doubled, the first violin inserting a staccato appendage. Before long, the cello becomes particularly agitated, coaxing the other voices to return to earlier material. The first violin, however, decides to wander off of its own accord, before the movement begins to close with a succession of repeated, dislocating exhalations that fold into the quasi-scherzo.

It is a movement of great strangeness and fragility, op.95's second, laced with traces of Webern or the Wagner of *Parsifal* – the eponymous hero drifting lost in the act-three prelude – but nonetheless remaining vintage Beethoven. It is a space of emptiness, a barren panorama, but never quite desolation.

### 3. *Allegro assai vivace, ma serio.*

The third movement, bridged from the second, follows at once: a serious joke. It recommences the energy, power and stress of the first movement – though permitting itself a pair of poetic trios. It is either harsh sunlight after a hazy dawn or night-time shenanigans after the vague dusk and is marked by its relative simplicity, not least after the blurred opacities of the second movement.

Beethoven is careful not to designate it as a scherzo, instead dubbing it a 'lively but serious' allegro. It strides along, tough and tenacious, eager to assert itself despite – or is it because of? – its diminutive size (though relative to the other movements, this is in fact quite substantial). Part march, part minuet, it is a stunning exhibition of uncompromising energy anticipating the *alla marcia* of the op.132 quartet (which gruffly follows the serene song of the Heiliger Dankgesang).

Hostile, with unremitting accented rhythms and harsh, obstinate silences, this is a fabulously tense and anxious world. It grinds on in blunt pig-headedness, dogged and determined, so ruthless as to almost sound in denial as the relentless noises make their way to our ears. Often there are futile, fragmented unions: the cello in particular often refuses to

alight with its cohorts on the same note; or, if it does so, it is in tardy fashion.

Two lyrical trios puncture the movement. The first is in G flat and the second in D, tonalities which evoke memories of the gentler moments of the inexorable opening allegro, though they remain harmonically twitchy, unable to provide any real calm, being merely a pause as the gun reloads or the shark swallows what it has already bitten off. Ending in a remote and bewildering B minor, the first trio segues to a surly, formulaic repeat of the scherzo section; then comes the second trio in D, its size cut in half, before a final re-emergence of the initial material. This is now severely condensed and played even faster than before, a gruesome caricature, squashed out of shape.

#### *4. Larghetto espressivo – Allegretto agitato – Allegro.*

Op.95's finale emerges from a tender slow introduction which is funereal after the exertions that have preceded it. Full of bleak tragedy, it has an immense psychological impact despite not taking up much of our time, seeming to glance back at the dramas of Aeschylus and Sophocles, while also gazing towards the unhappy yearnings of *Tristan*. The prelude lingers uneasily for eight predawn bars before the emergence of the allegretto, which implores the quartet towards its conclusion, almost begging for some kind of normality to exist.

It doesn't get it, for the movement magnificently combines sonata and rondo features in a way all its own, sometimes otherworldly, sometimes turbulent, the motifs fusing both an aura of dismal misery and a sense of impulsive caprice, all of which can be magnificently exploited for development. That being said, in the finale we are not antagonized by the stabbing harmonic disturbances and weirdly contrasted cadences that have so ruthlessly inhabited the earlier movements: the variety here is less troubled, less harsh, and progressing more towards the Stravinskian realms of whim and twist.

Storms and struggles the movement does have, however. At one point, a powerful fortissimo D flat for all the instruments is followed by an enigmatic peace held in place by the pair of violins. The main theme, on viola and first violin, reappears in a lower guise, with a quivering figure on the second violin and a modest cello supplement that all leads to a blustery period which is eventually calmed via a new C minor theme from the second violin. This, though, is straightaway taken up by the first violin with a series of lightning sforzando

strikes, echoed like thunder on the viola and cello.

Anger and serenity, war and peace. But such scraps turn out to be petty, ephemeral, for there will be no race for the extinction of exhaustion or raging despair. A bright D-flat motif pirouettes through four bars before a downhearted theme returns, as does a brief unsettled interlude. The first violin offers the main theme (hanging above extended arpeggio swells from the lower instruments) before it enters into a dialogue with the cello in which they seem to agree to begin a coda. Here the *Quartetto serioso* plays its best hand, a sublime trick which leads us to quiz and question everything that has gone before.

The ironies of this epilogue-coda have flummoxed and bewildered (just as Beethoven – and probably Zmeskall too – intended), as this quartet of unrivalled curtness and concision ends with an agile little allegro. The coda opens with a brassy call to attention, heralding the conclusion and burial of the piece. Then the cello and violins weave some glorious counterpoint while the viola makes some suggestions for a way out. Liberty and captivity battle – just as they did in the *Egmont* Overture – and the quartet ends with the same victory of light over darkness. Or does it?

*Egmont* was truly triumphant. Op.95 is more reckless, more unreliable – more mischievous. A swift violin theme plays against a counterpoint from the rest of the quartet. The motif is then passed first to the viola, then the cello, then is given back to the first violin, joined now by its partner, before the four voices sing it out in a burst of fetching excitement to conclude the quartet.



Does the exuberant ending invalidate everything that has gone before? Does it revoke all the abrupt anger and poignant pain? Not necessarily. Perhaps Beethoven is exposing our gullibility, or undercutting our acceptance of his own crabby nature, divulging to us that amid the grumbling and gloom there is some hilarity too. Or is the ending of the quartet not simply a reminder that laughter always follows tears, that it is always darkest before the dawn, that tomorrow is another day? (Take your pick of platitudes.)

More significantly, if the *Quartetto serioso* will permit us, is the comic conclusion not a

philosophical world view of vital importance to Beethoven – the conception of the comedy of life, the great game of existence? Op.95 is undoubtedly the blackest of all Beethoven's string quartets, but it ends with the light of a vital sun. It is a light pursued by the preceding darkness, perhaps even feeling a little pallid, but a brightness which still shines in reassurance and potential.

Profundities, paradoxes, promises: op.95 is preparing the ground for the realm of the late quartets. But op.95 does not simply anticipate. It delivers. It consolidates. It intensifies and complicates the work of Beethoven's heroic middle period. It takes that heroism – the joyous triumph of the *Eroica*, the glorious charm of the *Emperor*, the vast symphonic reach of the *Razumovskys* – and shows us some of the terrible anguish, anger and uncertainty such heroism can involve (as well as the comedy needed to get through it).

The *Quartetto serioso* is as serious – and as humorous – as life itself.

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<sup>42</sup> The op.95 string quartet was not published until 1816, and the opus number dates from that time.

<sup>43</sup> Though an intriguing CD of two quartets does exist on the Hungaroton label, as does a 3-CD box set of all fifteen quartets known to have survived, on Pavlik Records.

<sup>44</sup> Beethoven's private library was an extensive one, and his personal collection included complete editions of Cicero, Euripides, Goethe, Höltz, Homer, Klopstock, La Fontaine, Schiller, Seume, Shakespeare and Tiedge. It also contained reference books on philosophy, history, literary criticism, and the natural sciences, as well as religious literature, among these books by Bode, Camphuysen, Gräffer, Kant, Kempen, Kotzebue, Plutarch, Sailer and Webb. Some cookbooks were apparently owned by the composer at one point, though they disappeared (possibly purloined by an irate dismissed cook; Beethoven himself is unlikely to have had any use for them). Beethoven also possessed several handbooks, such as travel guides for Upper Austria, Baden, and Paris; some medical books by Hufeland and Lichtenthal (which he must have pored over to self-diagnose his many maladies); and a number of Italian, Latin and French dictionaries. His music library was no less extensive: it contained piano works by Bach, Clementi and Reicha; string quartets by Haydn and Mozart; symphonies by Haydn; operas by Cherubini, Dalayrac, Gluck, Méhul, Monsigny, Mozart and Salieri; and oratorios and masses by Haydn, as well as Mozart's *Requiem* and the forty-volume complete works of Handel (which he received as a gift shortly before his death). Beethoven owned instructional books by C. P. E. Bach, Knecht, and von Türk, as well as a wonderful collection of music theory and history publications by Albrechtsberger, Burney, Forkel, Kirnberger, Koch, Marpurg, Mattheson, Riepel, Schubart, and Vogler. This personal library must have been a hellish burden to transport in his many house moves.

<sup>45</sup> Or, as we know it in English, *The Merry Wives of Windsor* (c.1597). Beethoven would frequently compare acquaintances and business partners to Shakespeare's great Fat Knight from the *Merry Wives* and two *Henry IV* plays: the music publisher Carlo Boldrini came in for particular attention, being habitually referred to as 'Sir John' or 'Falstaff'. Elsewhere, Beethoven wrote a canon, 'Falstaffere!', for his corpulent companion Ignaz Schuppanzigh, and sent the piece to his violinist friend in the post with the note 'To His Grace H. v. Schuppanzigh, sprung from the old English noble race of My Lord Falstaff'. Beethoven's mind was saturated with Shakespeare.

<sup>46</sup> No.17, op.31/2 (1802).

- 47 An evidently inspirational place: Beethoven began his Seventh Symphony there, and a few decades later, Richard Wagner would commence work on *Tannhäuser* in the town.
- 48 From a letter by the personality who had set up their meeting, the German novelist, composer and singer Bettina von Arnim, née Brentano.
- 49 Perhaps Beethoven had been distracted by his emotions at their Teplitz encounter. It was during this stay in 1812, mainly as a cure for his diverse and horrendous physical ailments, that he wrote a long and agonized letter to an unnamed woman whom history has christened the 'Immortal Beloved,' generating countless films, novels, poems and other assorted ephemera of varying and dubious quality speculating who this woman was and what she meant to him. No one denies the importance of love – and, especially, its absence – in Beethoven's life and art, but sometimes the conjecture and the gossip enter the realm of the lurid and the fantastical – as well as the plain nosy.
- 50 Arrest, trial, beheading – and then a typically Beethovenian reminder that good prevails over evil.
- 51 The manuscript, now in Vienna's Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, authorizes this exact dating, though ideas had clearly existed prior to the autumn.
- 52 Assigning titles or appellations to his works was a rare thing for Beethoven to do, though others, of course, have often done so. The *Pathétique* Piano Sonata and *Eroica* and *Pastoral* Symphonies are among the handful of names he wrote or sanctioned himself.



PART THREE

THE LATE QUARTETS

## Chapter Five

### Reaching into the Silence: *Introducing the Late Quartets*

**L**ateness in life can be an odd thing. In politics, proverbially all careers end in failure, whether early or late – though it is usually more complicated than that. American presidents (if they are not shot) tend to drift into plum financial jobs, humanitarian work or penning their memoirs, acquiring a strange quasi-mythical status often at odds with their actions in the White House.<sup>53</sup> British prime ministers incline to be troublemakers for their successors, though just occasionally gain far more respect out of office than ever they had in it. In sport, autumnal phases of majestic careers can add a special glow to stellar achievements (Roger Federer's three late slams after a lean spell before he retired in 2022; Jack Nicklaus's Masters win in '86; Paolo Maldini at A. C. Milan).

Over in the arts, the artist usually has more control over their occupation, allowing a distinct late phase to sometimes be detectable, and, with it, certain characteristics – be they prolixity, extravagance, brevity, desolation, regret, reflection, or profundity (and so on). Picasso, so famous for his youthful Blue and Rose Periods, entered a chapter of flux and miscellany at the end of his long life; El Greco had a fantastic(al) 'modernist' late stage, while J. M. W. Turner passed into an intriguingly innovative final phase (dubbed 'eccentric' by the reactionaries who lacked his vision). Victorians loved to argue Shakespeare's late romances were an attempt to atone (personally and professionally) for his tragic period, 'cheering

himself up' with the weird worlds of *Pericles*, *The Winter's Tale* and *The Tempest*.

In music, matters are no less varied. Some late periods are alarmingly youthful, and we tend to retrospectively project an element of melancholy onto these composers' final works. Mozart's twenty-seventh piano concerto, clarinet concerto and E-flat quintet feel sadder because he died (at just thirty-five) the year they were composed – yet he didn't know he was about to expire when he wrote them. Schubert, dead at thirty-one, is different: he *did* know he was dying, and his late masterpieces (the C major quintet, the last three piano sonatas, *Winterreise*) are suffused with the grief of imminent departure and longing for the life to be lost (but, there again, much the same could be said of a great deal of Schubert's output). Drinking and insanity took Mussorgsky and Robert Schumann in early middle age, preventing either from having any sort of late period, even if the very conditions that ultimately killed them imbue their final works with a touching strangeness and sorrow.

Many composers lived to a ripe old age – though Sibelius's 'late period' (the Seventh Symphony; *Tapiola*; *The Tempest*) was thirty years prior to his death at ninety-one, the self-conscious, largely deliberate (and slightly misleading) 'silence of Järvenpää' intervening. On the other hand, before he died aged eighty-three, Messiaen saw new opportunities to explore the faith which had sustained him all his life, creating in his later years pieces of astounding transcendence, such as his great opera *Saint François d'Assise* and the extraordinary *Éclairs sur l'Au-delà*. Janáček arguably only achieved his global eminence in his final decade, writing most of his greatest masterworks – *Brouček*, *Káťa Kabanová*, *Vixen*, *Makropulos*, *House of the Dead* – after the age of sixty. Aaron Copland became ravaged by dementia, ending his composing career many years prior to his departure at ninety, while Elliott Carter – born the year Mahler's Seventh was premiered<sup>54</sup> and dying the year of Taylor Swift's first number one hit<sup>55</sup> – wrote his final work, *Epigrams* for piano trio, only a few months before his death at 103.

Richard Strauss (85), Giuseppe Verdi (87) and Ralph Vaughan Williams (85) all continued to compose at the end of their long lives – and produced, respectively, wildly differing works (the *Four Last Songs*, *Falstaff*, the Ninth Symphony). These latter two give the lie to the cliché that late works or phases are saturated with sadness: *Falstaff* is Verdi's only comedy, RVW 9 a symphony of astonishing energy and vivacity (though it has room for majesty and mourning too). Strauss's *Four Last Songs*, however, seem almost the archetype of

our truisms about late art: they are imbued with a rich, ripe melancholy, radiant and smouldering.

Aesthetic lateness can be personally informed by isolation, depression, passion, fear or urgency, but always when we examine late art, it tends to inform (or reform) our view of what preceded it (and vice versa). Artists can become more individualistic, more characteristic, more *distinctive* as they age, though they can also become repetitive or derivative (the youthful flare of originality lost). Consolidation and expertise accompany the passage of time, but often so too does regret, withdrawal or reactionary inclinations. Some people pass into serenity or senility, others find only wrath and rage; many, like Lear, find a mixture of them all.

In short, late art, late style or late phases are a complex affair. Generalizations or oversimplifications are to be discouraged: they're potentially dangerous – and frequently are as lazy or misleading as assumptions about early works and early periods.



Where does all this leave Beethoven's later oeuvre, and especially his late quartets, those five closing works from his imagination? Beethoven was fifty-seven when he died – certainly not young but hardly old, though older by the standards of his age than he might seem to us now. Old enough, at any rate, for three distinct biographic-stylistic phases to have been imposed on his life: early, middle, late.

In biography, or analysis more broadly, periodization often becomes regrettably unavoidable (lives, after all, do have beginnings, middles and ends). But, in Beethoven, we saw both in the introduction and chapter on op.18 the problems (and mistakes) in presupposing or blindly accepting that 'early' means 'simple' and 'late' means 'complex' – and urged such chronology-based labels to be merely descriptive rather than evaluative. We need to shun both romanticization and trivialization when assessing different phases of Beethoven's career.

And yet there *is* something particular and peculiar about Beethoven's final creative period which seems to set it apart from everything that went before. And this is especially

true of the late string quartets, his final major works, which seem to demand special treatment. In the late quartets, things become more extreme: movements multiply, variations proliferate, paradoxes flourish, conflicts thrive, dualities twist in more violent opposition, while unities cohere with even greater strength. Here Beethoven creates music of astounding balance and organization as well as quartets of immense variability and instability, daring precarity and frightening ambiguity. The chemistry and interaction between divergent forces in the late quartets is as insightful, and overwhelming, as anything attained by his great peers, the farthest extremities of the classical style ripped apart but then strengthened in their reforging.

These are works that have been described as 'straightforward', 'beautiful' and 'humble' as well as 'convoluted', 'ugly' and 'ostentatious'. The late quartets are, of course, both challenging and tranquil, utterly frank and yet entirely impossible, obedient and insubordinate – following the rules while simultaneously rewriting them. Everything about Beethoven resides within the late quartets, and often in its richest (if not clearest) configuration, making them perhaps his most characteristic, significant and – ultimately – rewarding music.

Although they are his last works, until the very end (and after he had written them), Beethoven didn't know he was going to die. He had long suffered ailments and disorders, and his final illness was, in many respects, simply another one to be endured and overcome: plans for further works, including a tenth symphony, were well underway. This new focus on quartets was to be (as with opp.18 and 59) only temporary – partly as a result of a commission, partly a personal predisposition – before a return to other forms.<sup>56</sup> Therefore, we have to be cautious about saying these late quartets were a conscious summative or closing statement, a deliberate concluding testament – though elements of Beethoven's attitude to them, as well as their content, do suggest this notion of finality was not entirely absent from his thoughts.

When, in the mid-1820s, Beethoven began to write string quartets again, after an interval of over a decade, he had become ever more withdrawn and isolated, though perhaps not quite the reclusive hermit he is sometimes characterized as being. For the last few years, he had been working fiendishly hard, inflicting huge intellectual and emotional strains on himself with his workload (the last piano sonatas, the Ninth Symphony, the *Missa solemnis*).

And life beyond composing was tough: his chronic gastrointestinal problems refused to go away while other ailments began to accumulate; financial and rights issues persisted; tensions with his family over the guardianship and life of his nephew Karl caused immense distress – for everyone concerned. And, of course, Beethoven's deafness had continued to worsen so that he was now, for the most part, completely unable to hear, save the capacity to distinguish some extreme sounds, as well as enduring a disorientating jumble of terrifying internal noises.

The 'heroic' phase of his composing career had reached its zenith during 1809 with the *Emperor Concerto* and *Harp Quartet*, and had then presented a marvellous postscript in 1810–12 via the *Quartetto serioso*, *Archduke Piano Trio*, and *Seventh and Eighth Symphonies*. Then came *Wellington's Victory*, written for money, not art, in 1813, which perhaps stands as the nadir before a phase mixing both silence and discovery.<sup>57</sup> The final piano sonatas were begun; two more cello sonatas (op.102), a song cycle (*An die ferne Geliebte*) and twenty-five Scottish songs (op.108) were written. But this was known as the 'fallow period' for a reason: compared to the fertile years of before, the pace of productivity severely slackened.

Can we be surprised? Beethoven was descending into a soundless world, into emptiness and loneliness like nothing even he had ever experienced before. Socially and psychologically this was immensely harmful; practically, as a composer, it must have been devastating, however prolonged the terminal decline to his hearing had been. And yet, from this lowest point, from the vacuum and anguish, came hope and determination. The barren years were beneficial, too, in allowing Beethoven the time and space to think not only of new things to disclose but new ways of disclosing them. Fallow periods, after all, exist to allow the soil time to recover and to store organic matter: to enrich the land.

From now on, his works become both bigger and smaller, more public and more private, more inward and more extravagant – and with very little in between. Partly because of Beethoven's deafness, but also because of the strength of his imagination and resolution, the physical limits of both form and technique are not just stretched or ignored but actively eschewed. Unheard of new possibilities and opportunities are sought, novel ways of asserting, articulating or solving problems pursued and hunted down with a carefree elan as

well as a brutal determination.

The autonomy and speculation, the generosity and otherworldly reach, of late Beethoven are one of art's greatest gifts, a simultaneous turn inward and outward of magnificent paradox and audacity. This is music which combines the vastest scope and scale – the cosmos itself seems too small to contain it – with the utmost intimacy and immediacy: folk tunes, playful humour, simple joys, though hardly absent from earlier Beethoven, now mix with luminous variations and ecstatic revelations. Struggle coalesces with concord, ferocity and grandeur with self-effacing tenderness.

And all this, all this groundbreaking, delicate and dangerous music amid immense pain and misery so that it becomes art borne of sorrow. The five late string quartets are intimately, excruciatingly, connected with the day-to-day suffering – the long agony – of the final years. Few lives have been less of a failure than Ludwig van Beethoven's: his is the very embodiment of success and accomplishment. Nonetheless the atmosphere, the deplorable conditions, of those final years must have, at times, made his life seem a terrible burden and waste, a test too far of his spirit – one of the greatest and most celebrated figures in human history, wretched and forlorn.

But amid this suffering, he located an outlet for his torment in angry allegros and exquisite slow movements, his disclosures inspiring a compassion and admiration, pity and veneration. Beethoven would often weep as he wrote, and our tears merge with his across the centuries: for the late quartets can allow us to come to terms with our own mortality, or illness, or misunderstanding, conflict and despair. If we listen to them, and permit their magic and wisdom to work on us, they can help us understand each other and ourselves, their abstractions becoming of tangible benefit, their insight, tenderness and stabs of pain reaching out in hope and humility.



If Beethoven's earlier string quartets had combined classicism with dangerous elements of Romanticism, pushing the boundaries of the form into the turbulent emotional storms of the nineteenth century, his late quartets (and especially movements like the Große Fuge)

seem to sometimes go even further: into a tentative modernism. For Wagner and Victor Hugo, Beethoven was a pure Romantic; for Stravinsky, he was an urgent, embryonic modern; others have justifiably sought to stress the classical lineage Beethoven inherited, consolidated and developed.

Truth be told, Beethoven is all three – impatient Classicist, reluctant, liminal Romantic and proto-Modern. (Beethoven himself was wary, even dismissive, of many trends in Romanticism – such as its embrace of the supernatural or fragmentation into expressive mood pieces – even as he himself helped usher them forth.) We tend to hear in Beethoven what we wish to find, interpreting and reinterpreting him in light of our own concerns and perspectives.

The strangeness of Beethoven's late quartets can make them seem more modern – and more detached from classicism – than they are, and we need to be cautious about ignoring the principles which still guided much of his quartet writing, even as he toyed with them or rapidly expanded others (such as tonality). Pioneering works like Beethoven's do not fit conveniently into any category – by their nature they insist against labelling – so that while sober attempts to classify Beethoven have their vital place (in library or lecture hall), the heard reality for many is much more varied, much more complex and unusual. Criticism is clearly helpful in comprehending where Beethoven came from, as well as the environment in which he conceived and wrote his music. Nevertheless, the power and influence of Beethoven can be impervious to evaluation by the usual implements of analysis, the works shrunk or shrivelled by any excessively scholarly approach.

Beethoven's late quartets baffled many from their first appearance. They were brash, harsh, unpredictable, full of mischief and mystery – surely for most of us the very things which make them so enjoyable and inexhaustible. Early critics resorted to their own prejudices and ignorance: the quartets were 'incomprehensible, like Chinese' or 'a confusion of babel' or 'something only the Moroccans might enjoy'. Such reactionary, racist voices were, of course, measuring Beethoven against what they saw as the balanced models of an earlier art form, the very one Beethoven had expanded (even begun to rip asunder). It would be the same backward-looking gaze many twentieth-century critics would cast upon Mahler or Schoenberg or Boulez, in a desperate bid to retain or resurrect a perceived Eden, a realm of



perfection and harmony with convenient rules and agreeable styles.

Beethoven learned from and respected classicism, strengthening and advancing it further even as he knew its limitations for him, as both a system and a world view. He was attracted to some of the extremities and images of what would become Romanticism, even though he resisted some of its more bizarre, fanciful or sentimental manifestations. For Beethoven, the world was one of Arcadia and Elysium, the unusual and idiosyncratic against and amid the cosmos; it had longing and desire, and the need for contentment, gratification; it was liberty battling fate and inevitability. Beethoven perceived and interacted with the world in a voracious, sharp and responsive way, taking in a huge range of ideas and possibilities to further his imperative enterprises, which were utterly contemporary and urgently modern(ist). Much Beethoven could not reach, and we sometimes hear only his grasp (at Romanticism, at modernism). But that reaching, that grasping, is part of the project itself.

One other, crucial, way in which Beethoven – paradoxical as ever – sought to embrace the future, was by turning to the past, and nowhere is this done with more vigour than in his later pieces. Here he was seeking to sculpt grander works that would succeed, and perhaps even supersede, the energetic principles of his earlier periods to generate both a greater equilibrium and a more comprehensive gaze than ever before. He not only wanted to go beyond Haydn and Mozart, he wanted to forge new perspectives on himself by looking to the work of Bach and Handel in order to reconsider his own development. In older music, he felt, lay the future, at least for his own art. It offered solutions to many of the problems his expanded art presented and would allow him to resolve and integrate so many of the innovative new styles, forms and techniques he was now investigating.

Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* – those forty-eight preludes and fugues – exemplified a critical contrapuntal art form Beethoven had known well since he was a boy, and by his final years the music of the late Renaissance and early Baroque was almost an obsession for him, as were obscure musical treatises forgotten by all but the most devoted scholars. All this offered experimentation with harmony and form which were free from the strictures of classicism, granting Beethoven possibilities to fundamentally extend his own musical practice.

Along with introducing pervasive and dangerous tonalities, and reviving earlier modes,

Beethoven achieved much of his later style via a new-found lyricism, implementing a more direct appreciation for employing melodic creativity, with a profound honesty and integrity. Feeling would supplant rules, and Beethoven's more complex appreciation of time and space would both expand and shrink their spheres in his music. Works would vastly increase in length and yet sometimes be subject to greater brevity than before. The schemes for his music, and their constituent movements, would be drastic, innovative, experimenting with proportion and form; poetic and mystical traits would become more important, especially for the quartets, their textures bringing in more demanding and powerful counterpoint.

Now there would be an enlarged use of fugue and fugato, beyond its more limited application in his earlier work, as well as a heightened employment of variations: sonata form was simply unable to cope with the expansions and transformations Beethoven required. The way he shaped, framed and advanced his thematic material now needed the flexibility fugue and variation offered him, and which sonata form could not – he had already subjected it to immense pressures, almost tearing it apart in the process. Older practices and forms would prove the unexpected means by which Beethoven could integrate and assimilate his radical future.



Along with Beethoven's enthusiastic embrace of the past, as well as his nascent forging of Romanticism and furtive glances at modernism, another imperative, agonizing factor informs the sound of the late quartets. When we are moved by the wonder of these works – their beauty, their strangeness, their energy – we need to remind ourselves that their creator never did what we usually take for granted: simply hear them.

Beethoven's deafness plays a role in the sound and structure of his late works, but the human element should be foremost in our mind, before we investigate any influence on the musical aspects. We are drawn to Beethoven's music (and, presumably, books about his music) largely, though perhaps not exclusively, because we can hear that music. It makes us feel things that no other art form, possibly no other composer, can make us feel. That these works' maker should have been denied sharing in this experience should be a cause of

immense sadness and poignant reflection, as well as gratitude and appreciation. Play the Cavatina from op.130, or the Heiliger Dankgesang from op.132, and be forever thankful you can, at least for the time being, hear their consoling beauty, their emotional profundities, their exquisitely proportioned form.

The textures and tonalities of the late quartets, as well as the other works from the final part of Beethoven's career, were, as we have said, informed by definite and deliberate musico-historical concerns. Yet they were also influenced, arguably for the better – a supreme and cruel irony of fate – by the devastation of Beethoven's deafness. The severity and desolation of his hearing loss led Beethoven to investigate new sonic realms, new spheres of sound, new musical depths, all of which helped shape an extraordinary closing path for his art.

By the mid-1810s, Beethoven's deafness was near total. But it never stopped him from composing music. Music exists beyond sound – in touch, in sight, in imagination – and Beethoven could still conceive and interact with the world of music, despite his isolation and very often despair, by reading scores, especially in his later years those of Bach and Handel. Moreover, the physicality of music, developing from the corporeal body and via instruments that shift, move and vibrate, was something Beethoven never lost contact with, and he adapted to changes in his life accordingly, just as he had done earlier, as he pushed the boundaries of music, and musical possibility, further and further.

One of the easiest (and meanest) things for the first reviewers of Beethoven's late quartets (and countless since) to claim was that they were the insane, incomprehensible ramblings of someone unable to hear what lunacy he had authored. Of course, Beethoven was well aware of the challenges he had laid down, as well as knowing how many of them had been generated from and informed by changes to the way he heard sound. (Moreover, needless to say, his earlier works, written when he could hear, had created equal puzzlement from the more backward-looking, torpid and mundane end of musical criticism.)

The visual and physical processes of music – as he tested the limits of the piano, say, or created near-indecipherable drafts for string quartets – are something we can see, hear and feel to this day, bringing us, in tactile terms, quite close to Beethoven's creative procedures and artistic practices. For the deaf Beethoven, music was far more than simply hearing it in his head. He allowed it to take optical, pictorial, concrete shape on the page, or via the

somatic sensations and intimate pulsations he could still feel, making it far more tangible, far more 'real', than the abstract phenomenon it has often been characterized as.

Beethoven's compositional practice was one of immense physicality: stomping the streets, forests and fields; thrashing away at the piano; furiously sketching on endless piles of paper. It was something which went beyond sound and couldn't be taken away by increasing, or total, deafness. He embraced technology too – resonators, ear trumpets – working with and acknowledging his impoverished hearing as a deficiency that could nonetheless be challenged. That we can hear his quartets is testimony to Beethoven's refusal to give up, his desire to reclaim and reassert his occupation, despite the colossal pain, desolation and depression deafness caused him (as well as allowing him to acquire a greater capacity to embrace the whole human experience and alter his musical perspectives). We can never forget the suffering, but the very particular, not to say peculiar, conditions of Beethoven's final years – and the extraordinary music which came from them – are absolutely captivating, as a creative setting and music-making environment.

Hearing loss had stalked and disturbed Beethoven since his twenties. It was something which we know – justifiably – obsessed him. But by the 1820s, it was also something he had, to some extent, learned to live with, in both his daily and composing lives (such as those two things can be separated). Nonetheless, the chapters on the late quartets which follow will try to capture some of the oddity and terror of his situation, which – despite its fruitfulness – at times almost feels like a body horror subgenre of composer biography.



Beethoven's string quartets in general, and the late quartets in particular, have been assigned some grand and extravagant analogies over the years (many of them have doubtless already been voiced by the book in your hands). We hear talk of them as the 'Himalayas' of the repertoire: the tallest, toughest peaks for players to climb and conquer, the works which are set apart and tower above all others. They are at once described as a mountain range, an ocean, a river, a forest, a jungle, a desert – and all the awe, majesty and mystery of nature are apposite images for these magnificent works of art. But Beethoven's late quartets remain

*human* artefacts, human responses to the world and our experience of it, our suffering in it, rather than sonic representations of the world itself, just as the *Pastoral* Symphony is not a depiction of nature but an evocation of our relationship with it.<sup>58</sup>

Whatever deep poignancy and personal pain are expressed in the first eleven string quartets, the final five seem to discuss suffering in a more complex, deliberately juxtaposed way, mixing paradox with profundity, seeing pain both as a deeply individual experience and as a universal condition of the indifferent cosmos we find ourselves in. Embracing a fierce indigenous colour all their own, the late quartets are imposing and ostentatious, yet include nonchalant repartee, too, a gentle informality. They are both meek and grand, imperious and intimate. They are selfish, even and especially when offering us their gifts: self-pleasing and demanding even as they present their soul's humblest submissions. At times transparently disingenuous, yet the most private, honest, daring sounds and structures Beethoven ever wrote. Their economy displays a master dramatist and great storyteller at the very height of his power, able to convey character and narrative, mood and atmosphere, with the slenderest strokes.

The string quartet form, shorn of additions and orchestral embellishments, exposes a composer like Lear on the heath. Stripped first of his kingdom (by himself), then his hundred knights (by others), the ex-monarch has become separated from everything:

Blow winds and crack your cheeks! Rage, blow!  
You cataracts and hurricanoes, spout  
Till you have drenched our steeples, drowned the cocks!

(III.ii.1–3)

The apocalyptic yet intensely intimate language of *King Lear* in many ways matches the world of the late quartets, as Beethoven lies before us: unprotected, unadorned, vulnerable. He is, like Lear, at his most pathetic and isolated but, by the swift irony of great art, at his most powerful, his most insightful, his most compassionate, his most *legitimate*.

Like the language of *King Lear*, the music of the late quartets always feels modern, always seems to inhabit a contemporary space. Just as *Lear* persistently gives the impression it is anticipating Samuel Beckett (in language, theme and oddity), Beethoven's late quartets

appear to prophesy many of the peculiar and frightening musical advances of the twentieth century – as well as sharing so many of Beckett's own attributes and comparable techniques. Even a list of Beckett's titles serves as a kind of haphazard commentary on, or surreal summary of, the late quartets: *Happy Days*, *Ill Seen Ill Said*, *Act Without Words*, *Play*, *Not I*, *A Piece of Monologue*, *Catastrophe*, *All That Fall*, 'Echo's Bones', 'First Love', *Endgame*...

Beethoven, like Beckett, is a master of melancholy, malfunction and desolate wit, an innovator of form, feeling and revolutionary aesthetic procedures. The late quartets repeatedly defy the temperament or dimensions expected of them: they twist, constrict and intensify; they fidget, writhe and absquatulate, detouring themselves of undesirable material; they present rapid and frequent tonal shifts, with injections of black humour amid the sorrow. Beethoven, like Beckett, is a tutor in tension, confusion, repetition, omission, elision, with passages of unnerving poetry and consoling incongruence. Beethoven, like Beckett, seems to write at times in a form of musical telegraphese: terse, unpunctuated, abbreviated, packing a huge amount of information into very small spaces, while also being full of pauses, gaps, silences. And Beethoven, like Beckett, knows that nothing is funnier than unhappiness: comedy, joy, and the sheer will to survive flood these complex, dumbfounding and humorous scores just as much as the bleak urges towards reticence and oblivion, and the resolve to endure wins out in the end. As Beckett put it in *The Unnamable* (1953): 'I can't go on. I'll go on.'<sup>59</sup>

To switch from a literary to a painterly analogy, and from modernity to a deeper past, the ambitious yet intimate quality of the late quartets seems to suggest, too, the work of the old masters, particularly the series of self-portraits by Rembrandt. This astonishing sequence of (approaching) one hundred images – including etchings, drawings and about forty paintings – acts as a kind of artistic autobiography or visual diary undertaken throughout the artist's life, with a marked move from the more exuberant, youthful etchings<sup>60</sup> towards the poignant and acutely thoughtful paintings later on. Like Beethoven's closing shift to the string quartet as his principal and supreme means of self-expression, Rembrandt clearly felt that oil on canvas was better able to capture the textures and ambiguities of time, age and the soul.

Warm but quizzical, profound but troubling, Rembrandt's late self-portraits are a remarkable record not just of the artist's physical appearance but his psychological

disposition too. We see his richly weathered face, his wry humour, his perturbed spirit – the playful painter as well as the deep thinker beneath. Yet, like Beethoven's late quartets, Rembrandt's late self-portraits are both an unsettled introspective journey *and* merely creations to satisfy the market or a commission. They convey the utmost profundity and philosophical wisdom but seem also to contain their own intrinsic warnings against our overindulgence or any excessively affected analysis. Beethoven's late quartets and Rembrandt's late self-portraits are the handiwork of mature, immensely experienced artists undergoing great sorrow, looking in the literal and metaphorical mirror, offering us both truth and a reversal, reality and discovery, insight and amusement.

These late paintings are exceptionally tactile, showing us the physical processes of both painting and ageing. Beethoven's late quartets, too, throng with the brute, material and graphic practices of composition, exposing the effort and sinew that went into them, as he felt and imagined his way to new worlds of sound, amid the sadness and confusion of his soundless life. In his anarchic, unruly sketches, and the daring, audacious scores which came from them, we can see and hear Beethoven at work, forging and struggling, inventive and afraid, lonely and courageous – reaching into the silence.

## *A Note on Methodology*

Throughout this book, we have been considering, with each quartet, some of Beethoven's works which were written roughly contemporaneously, as a means to understanding both them and the composer's wider musico-cultural situation at the time. With the late quartets this becomes a little problematical: they were all written almost consecutively at the very end, after Beethoven had completed his final works in other genres.

Therefore, in order to both be able to explore the later, non-quartet, Beethoven and allow these works to illuminate the final quartets as well, we will take five of his late pieces (one is a triptych we will regard as a semi-unified work) and pair them with the five late quartets. Strict chronology will not be a necessary factor here, only the works' 'lateness.' The five late works, and their respective late quartets, are as follows:

### **Quartet Non-Quartet**

Op.127 in E flat — 3 piano sonatas, opp.109–111

Op.132 in A minor — Ninth Symphony, op.125

Op.130 in B flat — *Hammerklavier* Piano Sonata, op.106

Op.131 in C-sharp minor — *Missa solemnis*, op.123

Op.135 in F — *Diabelli* Variations, op.120

Obviously this is hardly intended to be either binding or definitive (though hopefully some significant, and revealing, points of contact will be made – op.135 and the *Diabelli* sharing a great final sense of humour, and so on). Rather, it is for a mixture of pragmatism and instruction – to illuminate and elucidate, not chain or constrain – that we tentatively, rather than provocatively, link these last great statements of Beethoven's musical career.

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<sup>53</sup> George Washington, the first holder of the office, probably had the best idea: he went into the whisky business.

<sup>54</sup> In Prague, on 19 September 1908.

<sup>55</sup> 'We Are Never Ever Getting Back Together', which topped the Billboard Hot 100 on 1 September 2012.

<sup>56</sup> Including, tantalizingly, thoughts of future oratorios that surely would have surpassed (whatever its undoubted merits) his sole essay in the medium, *Christ on the Mount of Olives*.



57 How bad is it, really, *Wellington's Victory*? Taken with a pinch – no, a firm fistful – of salt and the right attitude, it is a diverting, beguiling bit of fun. A slight embarrassment, perhaps, but hindsight can do that to art. And Beethoven had bills to pay.

58 As Beethoven himself said, '[it is] more the expression of feeling than painting.'

59 Beckett himself, his voluminous letters in particular reveal, was more a fan of Schubert than Beethoven, finding works like *Winterreise* and the *Tod und das Mädchen* Quartet, D.810, unrivalled expressions of humanity's forlorn suffering, as well as offering opportunities for incomparable consolation. Beethoven's quartets he – reasonably – found more difficult to like. Hearing op.127 in 1931, he wrote: 'I feel that Beethoven's quartets are a waste of time. His pig-headed refusal to make the most of a rather pettifogging convention annoys me. He needed a piano or an orchestra.' A few years later, however, he heard the legendary Busch Quartet play op.130 and was more keen: 'Although it is only his penultimate [actually, it is his third-last] quartet, it has as its finale the last composition we have from his hand, an incomparably beautiful Allegro. But it is the Cavatina that immediately precedes that Allegro that made the greatest impression on me. A movement which in calm finality and intensity goes beyond anything I have ever heard by the venerable Ludwig.' Beckett's most fascinating engagement with Beethoven occurs in his late television play *Ghost Trio* (1977), which directly incorporates music from the composer's op.70/1, in addition to reflecting – via its three acts – some of the three-movement piano trio's ideas more generally.

60 Known as 'trionies', these light-hearted etchings were likenesses with lively, exaggerated facial characteristics, intended not as portraits as such but studies of expression – to some extent, perhaps, not unlike Beethoven's op.18 quartets.

## Chapter Six

### Experience: *Op.127 in E-flat major*

An early performance of the first of the late quartets, op.127, tells us much about the strange world Beethoven inhabited in his final years, a domain which was a mixture of creativity, seclusion, collaboration and determination. An initial presentation of the work on 6 March 1825, led by Beethoven's old friend Ignaz Schuppanzigh, had not been a success, but it was attempted again, this time with the composer in attendance, and with violinist Joseph Böhm heading the group.

Beethoven, of course, could barely hear a thing, but he watched the rehearsal like a raptor eyeing a rodent, making the players as uneasy as a hawk's elected supper. He followed the movements of the four instrumentalists with immense care and attention, tracking their every bow, oscillation and inflection, detecting the smallest fluctuation in speed or rhythm, alerting them without delay to their manifest shortcomings, to any deviation from either his intentions or the score in front of them (which were not necessarily the same thing). He would leap up, shouting at the cellist for entering too soon or yelling at the second violin for failing to notice some minutiae or other. As filmmakers would discover in the next century, having the writer 'on set' was not always beneficial.

But it could be. The conclusion of the quartet had a *meno vivace* ('not so fast') tempo marking, which Böhm felt diminished the general effect, so the violinist – without telling

Beethoven – advised his players to perform it at a different pace during the run-through, overruling the composer’s instruction in the score. At the end of their performance, Beethoven, who had been sitting by himself in the corner, went over to the players’ desks and crossed out all four of the *meno vivace* markings. ‘Let it remain as you played it,’ he said curtly. Deaf he might have been, but he had missed not a thing.

Beethoven was down, but he was far from out, and op.127 would be the first in a closely interlocked series of five final works that not only crowned his extraordinary, world-shattering career, but which – two centuries hence – remain unsurpassed. Many composers (including Antonín Dvořák, Béla Bartók, Heitor Villa-Lobos, Rued Langgaard, Paul Hindemith, Dmitri Shostakovich, Elizabeth Maconchy, Grażyna Bacewicz, Vagn Holmboe, Benjamin Britten, Robert Simpson, Per Nørgård, Peter Maxwell Davies and Brian Ferneyhough) would come to write great sequences of string quartets, but none would better the wisdom, range and sheer musical felicity of Beethoven’s cycle of sixteen, and especially his closing quintet of quartets. Indeed, it is hard to argue that any grouping of music – even Bach’s cantatas, Haydn’s quartets, Mozart’s piano concertos, Wagner’s musikdramas or Mahler’s symphonies – has managed to exceed in intellectual content, emotional expression and idiosyncratic distinction what op.127 began (though it is, of course, a pointless comparison).

The twelfth string quartet from Beethoven is an Olympian work of majestic breadth and disturbing depth. Intimate but aloof, it surges forth with an imperial grandeur that marries defiance with lyrical charm, dignity with vulnerability, audacity with lucidity. It retains the classical four-movement plan – something the next three quartets would radically extend into five, six and then an astonishing seven – but nothing else about this piece is either orthodox or conservative, and it at one time or another even had a planned six movements. Variations form the heart of the work, as they will in the quartets to come, but they are never merely formulaic or tidily episodic. Integrating sonata-form characteristics, they also anticipate both the technique and emotional effect of Wagner’s ‘unending melody’ in their astounding scope and psychological penetration, transcending the periodic altered repeats of so much earlier music just as the creator of the musikdrama outshone the recitative/aria prescriptions of his predecessors.<sup>61</sup>

Many of the traits and characteristics of op.127 – rapidly shifting moods, restatements of material in different keys, an intensification of contrast – perhaps do not seem fundamentally new, at least for Beethoven. But the mould in which he cast these practices, and the voice in which he speaks them, is utterly original and characterized by a degree of assimilation he had never previously realized. There is an understated but captivating theatricalism to this quartet, as Beethoven's attitude towards sonata and variation form evolves, and the subtlety and complexity of his contrapuntal writing for all four instruments takes on new levels of power and sophistication. Profoundly personal, yet with an otherworldly spirit that reaches around the cosmos, in op.127 hope meets daring; expectation, execution.



Great art, of course, can have mundane, even somewhat tawdry, origins. Artists must eat, after all, as well as having reputations to make or maintain. What is more, art often serves a practical, pragmatic or simply undesirable function far beyond its subsequent elevation or deification, and we shouldn't be squeamish about the commercial or everyday provenance of works of unearthly genius and momentous significance.

In the first half of 1822, Beethoven mentioned in a letter that he had been toying with a new string quartet, the first – apart from some minor abortive attempts – since the *Quartetto serio* in the autumn of 1810. Twice that summer, he offered this work, along with the *Missa solennis*, to the Leipzig publisher C. F. Peters – though neither was in anywhere near a state of completion. Peters in principle accepted the mass (though unbeknownst to him, Beethoven had already tendered it to numerous other firms) but not the quartet, and the latter composition was put aside as Beethoven resumed his toil on the choral piece, as well as another work in progress, the *Diabelli Variations*.

Before the end of the year, however, another Russian nobleman – joining op.59's Count Razumovsky – enters the story of Beethoven's string quartet career: Prince Nikolai Galitzin (variously Golitsyn and Golitsin). Writing, en français, from Saint Petersburg in November, this wealthy amateur cellist, and trouper in some fifty-five battles, asked Beethoven for 'un,

deux, ou trois nouveaux quarttuors.' As with Razumovsky, with quartets back in the composer's mind, it was the right bait at the right time. Beethoven happily accepted the commission – along with the prince's generous offer to pay whatever he wished.<sup>62</sup>

Galitzin was then twenty-seven, had spent considerable time in Vienna, and was very familiar with the work of Haydn and Mozart, as well as Beethoven himself. He was married to a pianist and, along with his own cello playing, had made transcriptions of Beethoven's sonatas for quartet and quintet. Enthusiast he might have been, but he was an extremely accomplished one, no rich amateur simply looking to advance his status among his peers. He believed in and understood Beethoven's music, and we should be thankful for his insight as well as his inducement. (It was also Galitzin who funded and organized the full premiere of the *Missa solennis*, in Saint Petersburg, on 7 April 1824.)

Beethoven, after agreeing to the truly princely sum of fifty ducats for the quartets, naturally moved back to his other projects, and 1822–24 was mainly taken up with the gargantuan tasks of finishing the *Missa*, Ninth Symphony and *Diabelli Variations* (though he would speak excitedly about the quartet enterprise to many friends and occasionally distract himself by digging out some sketches). Galitzin wasn't going to let his prize disappear, however, and he persisted, patiently writing to the composer in psychologically astute terms which it would be unfair to brand as mere flattery:

Your genius is centuries in advance and at the current time there is hardly one listener who is appropriately enlightened to appreciate the full splendour of your music. But later generations will pay homage to you and sanctify your memory more than your contemporaries are at present able to do.

Galitzin perceived the predicament Beethoven was in at the time: audiences and critics did find his quartets hard to fathom, but this was no reason not to persevere with their creation. They were simply too important to be merely cast aside on the whims of the unimaginative or short-sighted.

The premiere of the Ninth out of the way in May 1824, Beethoven could, at last, set to serious work on the three *Galitzin Quartets*, which he would write over the next eighteen

months. For his Russian backer, he completed op.127 (No.12) in February 1825, op.132 (No.15) in July (after a delay due to an illness which the work itself would immortalize), and finally op.130 (No.13) in November – though this work would, as we shall see, need a new finale because of the difficulty of the one Beethoven originally conceived for it (now known, of course, as the *Große Fuge*, and eventually to be published separately as op.133).

With these three huge and pioneering pieces, it is hard to argue that Galitzin did not get what he paid for. But Beethoven was not yet done. During the next twelve months, two more quartets, opp.131 (No.14) and 135 (No.16), were written, completing the famous five, along with that new conclusion to op.130. Given the colossal labour that had already gone into composing the *Missa* and Ninth, as well as his appalling health troubles, not to mention his deafness, Beethoven's achievements here deserve nothing but our praise and astonishment.<sup>63</sup>



The violinist Karl Holz – a member of the germinal Schuppanzigh Quartet, which rehearsed or premiered so many of Beethoven's works – when discussing his life in Vienna many decades later with Wilhelm von Lenz passed on many precious insights about the origin and growth of the late quartets. He had joined the Schuppanzigh as second violin in 1824, when Beethoven was hard at work on op.127, and the following year became first his copyist, then secretary and confidant when the self-important, meddlesome Anton Schindler was (temporarily, as it transpired) out of favour with the composer.

Writing to Lenz, Holz relates how ideas for quartets gushed forth from Beethoven's brain, his 'inexhaustible imagination' almost involuntarily compelling him to conceive opp.131 and 135, even as he was in the middle of the earlier works. They would be out on a walk together when Beethoven – with an apparent twinkle and sparkle in his eyes – would claim to have had yet another brilliant notion for a string quartet. Down it would go into the ever-present pocketbook. One such idea became op.131, since Beethoven claimed the quartet he was chiefly working on at the time, op.130, already had too many movements (six). Holz mentioned to Beethoven, when it was complete, that he thought op.130 the best

of all his quartets, to which the composer readily agreed, before claiming that each of them was in its own way: 'art demands,' he said, 'that we don't stand still!' He would joke that his next quartet – op.131 – would be 'less lacking [in imagination] than before!', hardly false modesty but surely simply a recognition of his own restless need to push his art further and further with every new work.

Of course, Holz's recollections might be fabricated or misleading, and doubtless they are embellished through a mixture of fondness, age, indulgence and wishful thinking. Holz, much younger than Beethoven, was pleased to be in the company of so great a man, enjoying taking him out for often dangerous drinking sessions, as well as their more work-related activities – though clearly with people like this, the border between work and play is fairly fuzzy.

Nevertheless, Holz's descriptions do seem to corroborate numerous other accounts we have, as well as the composer's own evidence, telling us something of the agitated abundance and ordered chaos of Beethoven's musical mind, not least at this very late stage of his life. Ideas and quartets overlapped in Beethoven's head and on the pages of his sketches, showing us not only the ridiculous fertility of his imagination but also the interconnectivity of these five works. Each stands impressively on its own, but nonetheless all are richly related, existing both in Beethoven's mind and now as a cumulative, aggregate work of art, a musical polyptych divided in five parts.

As we saw in earlier chapters, this wasn't a new thing. Not only did works of many genres compete for space in Beethoven's imagination and sketchbooks, but earlier quartets had been conceived as associated, even allied, sets and cycles. Yet for these immensely complex later works to coexist in this way is remarkable. Each is as different in conception and execution from the other as might be possible from the same mind. Each raises and solves its own problems in its own way. Each has a flavour and temperament all of its own. But Beethoven's late quartets are five works that share much more than they lack, including, in some cases, the same genetic or geological material – though, more often, they simply maintain similar characteristics, mannerisms or features. Whatever image we employ for them – gangster brothers? a mountain range? – they are bound together, but in support and mutual strength rather than constraint or burden.

Beyond his insights into the world of the string quartet, which Beethoven had now manacled himself to, Holz also gives us a brief but valuable look at Beethoven the man. Although these years were marked not only by ill health and deafness but by financial worries, familial and domestic strife, he still retained his sense of humour and occasional sociability, especially when it came to his work. He was ageing dreadfully, he was an unyielding – even escalating – misanthrope, but he still found time for jokes, self-deprecation and opportunities to be among friends (or, at least, trusted colleagues).

With near-total deafness, there had come, too, a more dishevelled and untidy look. Although Beethoven's demeanour had always been a little coarse – the rough Rhineland in imperial Vienna – until the isolation and depression of his deafness he tended to dress in a fairly neat, even fashionable, style. Now, table manners, public interaction, personal appearance and the state of his apartment (always appalling) fell even further by the wayside. Yet, for all this, he still met comrades, associates and acquaintances for walks and rehearsals, drinks and suppers, all of which meant endless discussion about politics, love, sex, wine and music, as well as the more humdrum but imperative affairs of business and publishing. Beethoven was often isolated, anxious, sequestered by a mixture of his terrible physical constitution and his complex personality. It pushed him further into his art – and pushed that art further – and was a source of immense sorrow. But he was never entirely alone for long.

For one thing, his eminence precluded it. Countless visitors sought him out – either in Vienna or at the innumerable spas where he went for various treatments and an attempt at sanctuary. Whether due to musicians, noblemen, diplomats, sycophants, disciples or other assorted hangers-on, Beethoven at times could barely be alone, such was the magnitude of his reputation. But, of course, such celebrity carries its own solitude and seclusion, to go with that already generated by the composer's deafness and other maladies. It was a strange life, as all fame, myth and legend must be, even before the addition of that elusive, multifaceted ingredient: genius.

The triple images we have of Beethoven the lonely artist, lost in his silent world; Beethoven the vivacious clown; and Beethoven the choleric malcontent screaming at his fellow man are not in contradiction, even as they create the enigma. They explain one



another.



Of all the late quartets, op.127 took the longest to write, necessitating, once the serious work had started in May 1824, some nine or ten months to complete – and likely many more, given the probable earlier drafts. Although the evidence is a little patchy, it seems many of the initial, and lyrical, thoughts for the work come from the same period as the last three piano sonatas (the early 1820s), and the quartet shares many of their intimate, expressive impulses, which are worth exploring so that we can comprehend better where Beethoven's musical imagination was heading in its final phase.

After the far-reaching scope and massive proportions of the 1818 *Hammerklavier* (which we will explore more fully in the op.130 chapter), these final three piano sonatas – opp.109–111, in E major, A-flat major and C minor – returned to a more diminutive, less dramatic, more confidential sphere that anticipated the emotional poetic compass and melodic ornaments of Chopin. Although full of individual character, as with the late quartets there is a sense in which they are an amalgamated work, a sonic triptych of final piano sonata marvels that should be considered (if not always played) together. Each diverts from standard sonata practice, with harmonic and structural innovations that Beethoven was to some extent to carry over into his new quartet writing; the variations of opp.109 and 111 would be the most elaborate until those of op.127's slow movement.

These three late works are emblazoned with Beethoven's pianistic resourcefulness, inspiration and creativity. As well as using ear trumpets, by this time he had a resonance plate fitted on his pianos – an appliance which augmented and clarified certain individual sounds, though it probably muddled and cluttered chords. Beyond helpful tech, however, it was his fingers and his imagination which did the music making; he composed, as ever, at the keyboard, finding unheard of sonorities in addition to unprecedented structures to convey them in. Keys (tonal and physical) were exploited, as were the pedals and vocal effects, making some of his earlier innovations look and sound old-fashioned. Form here seems subservient to exploration, developing out of the sounds and techniques which Beethoven

ceaselessly created. Structure in these enchanting designs is so magical as to be almost entirely elusive, simply dispersing into the ether.

With these three works, Beethoven brought to an end his astonishing 'New Testament' of piano writing, to match the *Well-Tempered Clavier's* 'Old Testament', a fresh thirty-two to match Bach's incomparable forty-eight. Full of technical and spiritual wonders, at times opp.109–111 seem wholly improvised, innocent, simple, cosmic, rhapsodic. Their sense of intelligent play and controlled freedom is an important coda to Beethoven's long sonata-writing career, an insistence that, however great it was, the *Hammerklavier* could never be the final word.

Op.109, No.30 in E major, opens in casual fashion, with a carefree tune that speeds up before swerving into an enigmatic zone of improvisation and contemplation: it is the second subject of a violently compacted sonata form. Where the *Hammerklavier* was all vociferous physical assertion and sonic power, op.109 is impulsive, guileless, familiar, a nebulous idea that floats into its own development, its amiable disposition turning more intense before relaxing again into recapitulation (though most listeners would be hard-pressed to locate either the sections or transitions in this mercurial sonata-form movement, which lasts barely three minutes).

What follows is scarcely less peculiar, and is even more abrupt, as a loud (and speedy) outburst propels the second movement *prestissimo* into service as a thrusting, blazing tarantella-scherzo. Hardly has it begun than it has worn itself out, and the lugubriously exquisite third-movement sarabande begins, a set of gorgeous, expanding variations that were to become a trademark of late Beethoven. They unfurl, as if a kitten is toying with a bundle of wool, sometimes swift and playful, sometimes more solemn and pensive, the texture, tempo and temperament perpetually shifting – here jubilant, there more formal and restrained. At the end, a glittering series of trills initiate a euphoric phase, a shower of dazzling stars and festive fireworks, before a modest reprise of the preliminary theme.

Op.110, No.31 in A flat, begins in childhood: tender, clear, and immaculate. It is pure Beethoven, yet like so many of his works, especially in this late stage, utterly novel and fresh, a sound unlike any heard before. There is a wholesomeness to this sonata's deliberate and direct manner which is, as with op.109, fairly compressed, though not to the same extent.

The gentle opening, nursery lullabies which foresee Brahms, develops into equally warm, undulating arpeggios which permit a pulsing second subject to enter. Musical caprice and impulse show Beethoven considering several ideas, collecting them for inspection, before discarding them for brighter baubles he sees along the way. Yet this fancy is never loose, never unruly, but all magically preordained – the mixture of liberty and reassurance only infancy can offer.

From childhood simplicity to the tempest of adolescence: the second movement is a terse F minor scherzo based on a pair of rowdy, humorous German folk songs. It's a bit rough and shows us the intermittent good spirits of Beethoven's later years – still that boisterous, disruptive boy from Bonn with his beer and bawdy jokes. A trio in D flat contrasts jumps and plunges before a repeat of the scherzo material and a syncopated coda. For the third movement, the sonata sings again, but this time in pain, with a slow, long-breathed adagio in A-flat minor, which arches into space and melancholy. Beethoven's pain here becomes something more overwhelmingly collective, the sorrow of the species, before fading into silence.

After a short-lived pause, the fugal finale<sup>64</sup> meanders into action, with material based on the first movement's primary subject. Other fugues – especially, of course, in the *Hammerklavier* – tended to be antagonistic, even hostile; op.110's is more thoughtful, insecure, a Hamlet to the *Hammerklavier's* Macbeth. It wanders in doubt and diffidence, a fugue nonetheless the ideal form for such hesitation, before reaching a point of disintegration, collapsing back into the third-movement material, but now cast in a shocking G minor. Lamenting, it seems to evaporate into its own tears before a second fugue – actually an inversion of the first – seizes the movement, breathing new life back into its shattered bones.<sup>65</sup> The rest, it turns out, is not silence, and the world-weary prince appears to be theatrically, victoriously, reborn. We have travelled from the nursery – and, perhaps, frolics of infinite jest with Yorick – through the blizzard of youth to the exhaustion of maturity, before death and (contra Shakespeare) revival, as Beethoven tracks and rewrites the Danish play...

Op.111 is in C minor – what else, for Beethoven's thirty-second and concluding piano sonata? Shaped in just two severely contrasting movements, it is one of Beethoven's supreme

achievements in piano writing. Whether he intended it to be his last essay in the form, we will never quite know; in all likelihood had he lived he would have returned to this limitless genre. As it stands, however, op.111 is a perfect précis of his lifelong attainments, a fitting conclusion to his stratospheric cycle, and a foretaste of what was to come in the late quartets, combining a wealth of forms – sonata, fugue, variation – in a typically Beethovenian fashion: distinctive, inimitable, mesmerizing.

We begin in crisis and catastrophe, with a *maestoso* in harmonic calamity which has to lurch its way to locate C minor and an opening *allegro* which fuses sonata form with a fugue. It is deliciously demonic, Beethoven revelling in the key which was emblematic and totemic for him – yet there is nothing of the parody about any of its brilliant anger and belligerence, even if it appears highly self-aware too. We can see from his drafts and sketches that fugal subjects from Mozart's *Requiem* in D minor, K.626, were much in Beethoven's mind as he wrote the movement – turning again to the past to shape the future in his own uncompromising terms.

The beginning sounds like cacophonous bells; it then shrinks to sneers and grimaces before a bellowing subject in C minor is allowed to storm the stage. Once there, however, it cannot find its voice, stuttering and muttering in renewed attempts to perform its fugue, then weird intimations of a second subject and a reprise of the exposition, before eventually deteriorating into another vehement fugue in the development section. It is all loud and chaotic, a frantic expression of ferocity and turmoil, with Beethoven appearing to pulverize sonata form with a fugal hammer, before a palliative coda that seems to mournfully gather the shards together.

But from these accumulated fragments, Beethoven forges a transcendent *adagio*, his last and perhaps most poignant piano sonata movement. It encapsulates the composer – and the final works still ahead – so well: otherworldliness following violence, unity after division. This second movement, an *arietta* of variations, is an agonizing, resolute song constructed from chaos and despair. It locates the beauty and peace of C major like a vagabond finding warmth; a nomad, water. The familiar and recognizable, the hackneyed and timeworn, is suddenly a revelation, a sunrise.

Both the theme itself and the variations which pour so fluently from it are simple but

unceasingly insightful. Philosophy is spun from the straightforward subject with an effortless charm, flowing and graceful, with minute escalations in tempo, jubilant and swirling. It is a slow movement that is also, unquestionably, a finale. This is no unfinished sonata but one knowing with absolute clarity and dignity how to reach its end.

The movement spins out for nearly twenty minutes, with majestic, tender flights into E-flat major and C minor, before the theme is reprised wearing a new coat of stunning colours and iridescent light. Then comes a moment of superlative nobility: a tiny inflection to C sharp. Here, all the vast and stormy seas of Beethoven's piano sonatas – from the first in F minor through the *Pathétique*, *Waldstein*, *Appassionata* and *Hammerklavier* – seem to find peace and reconciliation. It is a gesture of loving farewell and closure, pure poetry, as well as a quiet, celestial preparation for the quartets to come.<sup>66</sup>



The maximization of contrast, but with a sublime and simultaneous sense of coherence, so prevalent in the opp.109–111 triptych is something Beethoven keenly carried over into his op.127 quartet and is, indeed, one of the most useful ways of beginning to comprehend both the quartet and its subsequent companions. Beethoven's late quartets achieve integrity and individuality through realizing the unity of fierce disparities, for these compositions assert the huge range of intellectual and emotional scope needed in certain great works of art, yet they never disintegrate or degenerate. They cohere magnificently, asserting a logic and lucidity that allows, even encourages, their diversity and strangeness.

Yet the E-flat quartet is patient with its theatrical ideas. After a snugly abbreviated slow introduction, it opens with a movement which relies on lyricism, on the intrinsic beauty of its phrases, on its capacity to be both intimate and imposing. This impression is attained partly through the sheer spatial expansion it levies on our ears, the sense of doors being flung open and secrets revealed. Yet it also achieves quiet tension through its ability to sing, for all songs tend to be at once introverted and extroverted, reclusive and outgoing: the very act of singing is a demonstrative undertaking, however personal or intimate the song. Singing is sharing, making the internal external. Thus op.127 is straight away cultivating its sense of contrast, of

paradox (though not incongruity), even before it consents to a more overt kind of drama.

Song guides and grounds the affectionate, compassionate opening of this quartet, as well as stimulating its theme-and-variations slow movement, just as had occurred in the three final piano sonatas. Op.109 has a variations andante labelled 'Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung' ('Songlike, with the greatest inwardness of feeling'); op.110's opening is similarly marked 'very songlike', and has a scherzo based on German folk songs, before turning to a 'Klagender Gesang' ('Song of lament'), an arioso of gentle, mournful reflection and quiet wisdom which will also return in the finale; op.111 closes with an arietta with variations which Beethoven asks to be played 'very simply and in a singing manner'. Various songs or songlike passages, with their innate beauty and inherent tension, will shape many elements of the late quartets, giving voice to many of their mysteries, charms and surprises.

Further subtle tension, and a superb, enigmatic technique that is characteristic of Beethoven's late style, is generated by the way, in the first movement of op.127, the main maestoso theme is repeated three times in three different keys. This occurs in order to execute three different organizational purposes: to open the quartet (in E flat); to begin the development (in G); to indicate a crossroads in the development (a shift to C major). It is a magnificent method of combining unity and diversity: a repetition that is not a straightforward repeat; a modification that nonetheless preserves much of what went before. Brilliantly, it allows for friction, variation and direction, but overall consensus and confederation are sustained.

The technique is also part of a wider, shrewder strategy, as custom is stretched and squeezed: Beethoven is adroitly altering conventional formal stages, as well as their intersections and signposts. Where before such landmarks might have been heralded by a familiar passage or theme, such crucial junctures are now never unerringly the same or are hidden entirely. We can see a similar leave-taking from tradition at work in the slow movement, too, as Beethoven (as he had also done in the finale to his op.74 quartet) removes the sequential numbering of the variations. The prescribed parade of numbered variations so familiar from, and typical of, classical form is ruthlessly undermined by this overt omission, allowing the movement more freedom – which Beethoven will also realize via tonal unchaining, rhythmical vigour and a range of other mischievous, ingenious devices. As we

saw earlier in the opp.109–111 piano sonatas, structure and form are now more flexible, more pliable, more elusive. Even variations, almost by definition diverse, are something the restless, inquisitive Beethoven cannot leave to a stolid convention: he must adopt, then adapt, adeptly.

Many of the glorious sound patterns Beethoven weaves in op.127, and especially in its first two movements, are produced via his progressively democratic implementation of the four string voices, allowing for a much more versatile course, management and texture to the quartet. Beethoven was clear – telling violinist Karl Holz – that with these new quartets there was to be a new kind of ‘voice-leading’, and this is immediately apparent from the very first movement of the first of them. Throughout Beethoven’s string quartets, as we have seen, a new kind of chamber music republic was born, with material, responsibility and action more fairly distributed among the four instruments: the first violin didn’t get all the best parts, nor all the best lines. Yet in the late quartets, this sense of egalitarianism and diversity is taken even further, so that in op.127, while the first violin often conveys the most distinctive musical material, the other voices down below are no mere subordinates or secondary supplements.

Each instrument has a vital role to play in the new democracy, and from the outset the second violin, viola and cello each have well written, steady and distinct voices. They form formidable individual influences which even occasionally seem to take control of the quartet, asserting their own point of view on the direction or discussion the work is to have, moderating the upper precedents from the first violin, preventing dictatorship, and nurturing, then developing debate, in addition to breathing a range of colour and variety into the musical textures. It is here, in the textures, that so much of Beethoven’s extraordinary advancement takes place. The music brims with a huge amount of either explicit or covert musical material; motifs come fast and furious from all the instruments, with each line sustaining a strong individual personality – which not only adds to the subject’s own personal power but to the general harmonic sense, which is rich and fascinating, dense but clear.

This density derives from the multitude – the swarm – of different voices which now create op.127. A string quartet might be just four instruments, but Beethoven is able to

utilize and manipulate them to such a severe degree that dozens seem to proliferate like a harmonious virus. Particular string parts leap about all over their own register. Unexpected, brusque shifts switch the leading voice from one instrument to another – lines might begin in one place but are continued or concluded elsewhere, even as other musical ideas have already begun on the original instrument. It is not just democracy, it is a form of splendid anarchy, the authoritarian rule of the first violin sabotaged and sunk from within.

Wagner, via the vast orchestral forces (and four parts) of the *Ring*, would magnificently enrich and exploit these contrapuntal textures as well as the extended art of transition. But there, the opera composer was working with a massive ensemble of instruments, as well as having the luxury of motivic material with clear musico-dramatic associations (to characters, objects, events, emotions) generated over the course of many hours. Here, Beethoven is achieving comparable power with just four string instruments and the strength of his own tight musical argument.

Beethoven makes his voices cajole and insinuate, wheedle and whisper. The quartet becomes a teasing palace and lyric dungeon, with shadowy corridors and surprising trapdoors. Voices ebb and flow like spirits, appear and disappear like spies. The content is alive, allusive, giving the impression of having far more basic musical material (especially in melodic terms) than it actually has. It is a magnificent trick, a theatrical illusion – the string quartet as playhouse or diorama.



With op.127, and the four quartets that followed it, Beethoven increasingly changed course from the logic of the classical tradition he had consolidated and surmounted, playing with ideas of contrast, connection and dislocation, shoving the development of music into new regions and innovative spaces. Everything here is more intense, more simultaneously explicit and more veiled: pure biography and yet utterly elusive. Sardonic juxtapositions and elaborations tease our sense of reality and personality, as Beethoven enters a phase of irony, echo and reflection so that music deliberates music – a theme imitates a theme, then digresses and discusses it. Formality (either as custom or propriety) is chucked out of the



window, and eccentricity – volcanic, ill-behaved – is allowed to rule the roost, with caprice and invention as twin consorts.

For the late quartets, and starting with op.127, Beethoven slightly modified his composing practice. This was partly out of a need closely connected with the new vision he had for his art, but it was also a necessity related to his increasing deafness: things were significantly worse than when he had last seriously worked on string quartets. Most of his sketches hitherto had been on a single line, but now he took four staves: the complexity, especially in contrapuntal and textural terms, as we have seen, meant that even initial ideas needed to be expressed in a fairly advanced and intricate form.

On the sketches, we can see the immense detail and attention Beethoven gave to the four individual voices of the quartet, and which is fully borne out in the eventual product the outlines develop into. New ways of making the instruments play and sound collectively went together with new tonal colours, rhythmical expressions and melodic ideas, along with new ways of constructing the shape of movements, the design and identity of entire quartets. Every facet and feature of string quartet writing would continue to progress under Beethoven's guardianship.

Many of the early plans for op.127 romp beside the last of those for the Ninth Symphony (of which more in the next chapter). We can see Beethoven's imagination at furious work as thoughts jumble and then cohere before darting off in a new direction – so much of which quirk and impulse he maintained in the final scripts. Ideas for all four movements can be found muddled together in the drafts before some – like the expansive unfolding tune for the adagio – burst through the bedlam like a sunrise.

But even this hides the headaches. Although in its final version the melody for the slow movement looks fresh, bright and instinctive, it actually took Beethoven considerable effort, struggles we can see in several almost isolated fragments which, after repeated tries, were eventually pieced together. The gorgeous final shape took time and immense determination to get just right, its eventual breadth, expanding charm and poignant tranquillity the result only of Beethoven patiently working and reworking his musical jigsaw. In the sketches we can observe him trying out different ideas, seeing if they might work better, rejecting or accepting his new thoughts – for instance, endlessly altering the rhythm or tonality for a

minute section on the page.

On the page. This was the reality for Beethoven now. Where before he might use the keyboard or another instrument, or his own voice, to try out an idea, now it was often only the sight of the music down on paper that allowed him to decide if something worked or not. It is a touching reminder of the deaf composer's new reality, but his sketches are also a magnificent witness to his purpose and perseverance, his refusal to let any impairment, problem or condition hamper him, and his resolution to expand his abilities by other means.



Being inside Beethoven's brain is an enormous privilege, however trying and unfathomable it can seem at times. Being inside Beethoven's soul, with its boundless generosity and pain, is a pleasure as great as any the world has to offer. And nowhere do we enter his head and his heart more completely than in his late string quartets.

Beethoven believed in humanity. He believed in the wonder and tenacity of the human spirit, in the fundamental goodness of the species, as well as in the essential strangeness of the human condition: its mixture of body and brain, concrete and abstract, spiritual and instinctual. The late quartets are Beethoven's final testimony and celebration of these convictions, which had been as sorely tested as any. They stand, too, as a refusal to submit to the nightmare so much of his existence had become, a refusal to allow that most Beethovenian of concepts – fate – to dictate to him how his life would pan out. Starting with op.127, he would control his own destiny, conjuring and upholding transcendence, pushing and eliminating boundaries, disputing disorder and overpowering affliction.

## No.12 in E-flat major

### 1. *Maestoso – Allegro.*

The late quartets begin with a sound of stately majestic wonder, a *maestoso* of supreme dignity that manages to impose itself on us without ever seeming hostile. It is E flat – that key of heroic rhetoric which furnished the *Emperor* and *Eroica* – but with the epic anger and intrepid antagonism removed. This is a majesty more intimate, more genial, more pensive, more studious, and it is this relative delicacy which allows the subtle, lyrical theatre of the movement (as well as the quartet as a whole) to operate.

To kick off there are six bars of hearty, full-bodied regal charm before the first subject begins. This opening, with its compacted opulence, has long foxed listeners. Is it a micro-introduction – it is surely too short for a real introduction – or a game? Its subject reappears, in different guises, later in the movement, which suggests some sort of motto theme, but it is both more elusive and more capricious than this. It is a call to attention, a reminder that Beethoven is still here and still composing string quartets. Yet it is also a means of outwitting auditors, of reminding them that this composer is never going to simply write to order.

In these first moments of the quartet, we witness Beethoven's dazzling flair for making perfectly plain chords astonishing. Take your pick from his major works – *Eroica*, *Emperor*, Seventh Symphony, *Missa solemnis* – and behold the way he takes entirely commonplace groups of notes but makes you sit up as if you've had an electric shock to the ears. Occasionally this is due to a minute modification; often it is either the orchestration or the protraction of the chord; but usually it is simply the audacity of placing such normality at the front of the work. It is an entirely Beethovenian paradox (and a useful definition of genius).

The inaugural half dozen bars of op.127 are wily, sly – loud but not very – allowing their richness to resonate but never overwhelm. These bars seize and detain us but are undemanding, uncomplicated: blithely majestic and majestically blithe. Part of the effect is achieved by having each of the four instruments perform their part in the drama, shaping and colouring what we hear, giving it the mixture of mystery and surface charm which will dominate this quartet. Dynamics are vital too: *sforzandos* scuffle, downbeats and offbeats stun and jerk through the material, fooling us, but it's all part of the charm, like a slightly odd

handshake.

Elsewhere, a climb up the E-flat scale proclaims direction wonderfully, but we must patiently wait for it to be properly resolved – the suspense is heightened while also allowing the music to elide more easily into its main subject. Whatever he is up to here, Beethoven has a wonderful sense of leadership, command and objective: he knows exactly where he is going, even if we don't. And we're still only six bars in. This captivating preamble eventually merges into what is to follow, becoming slightly upstaged by the heartfelt, graceful main theme, but its importance lingers, patiently biding its time.

A poignant tune from the first violin emerges from the dying sounds of the introduction, and in a sweet and tender mood, the allegro begins with a contemplative air, its warmth checked by experience. Part of this reality is provided by the lower voices beneath, as all three spin a gossamer network of counterpoint (which will return again and again in innumerable manifestations). The main theme is taken up and repeated by the different instruments, so that each time it changes its appearance and is given more and more intricate textural expressions. The music is moving magnificently forward, and away from the home key, while simultaneously thickening its polyphony, a remarkable linear fattening.

Like its predecessor, op.95, op.127 performs trickeries with time and space, contracting its material while also giving the appearance of spatial growth. Amid its gratifying viscosity, the condensed exposition soon turns to a plaintive second theme, in G minor, which emanates nostalgically before swiftly returning to the main subject and the close of the exposition.

We then hear a recurrence of the very opening *maestoso* of the quartet – as if the exposition is making a familiar, conventional repeat to the beginning. But no. Beethoven is not so straightforward, and no true repeat of the exposition is to take place. Moreover, this time the *maestoso* material is in G major, the instruments exploiting their open strings and bestowing an even more plangently impressive sound than the opening (though still *forte*, not *fortissimo*). With this sonorous statement we move directly to the development since, after the six bars of *maestoso* and a reminder of the opening allegro tune (now also in G) we move immediately onto new material.

Or do we? In fact, Beethoven's development is a mischievous, and at times even

malicious, commentary on the very opening allegro's main theme, especially its first three notes. Still in G, the viola offers a dark reinterpretation by advocating G minor, which is seconded by the cello, before the first violin strongly urges a return to E flat. From here vivid, violent storm clouds in B-flat minor gather – about as far from sunlit G major as you can get – before we find ourselves suddenly in a new key but familiar territory.

It is time for the third appearance of the *maestoso*, this time in C and this time *fortissimo*, with all the strength and drive the four players can muster. The re-emergence of the ensuing allegro is made a little quicker this time, adding to the mounting punch and *gusto* on display. Energy and density follow, the textures jam-packed and robust, before we realize we are actually in the recapitulation – which commenced when the first violin brought back the sweet main allegro theme.

Recapitulation has been masquerading as development, and now, its cover blown, it pulls itself together to try to look like the exposition in personality and outline, though the digressions to G and C are slightly trampled. Accordingly, the movement can now more subtly slip into its coda, doing so not with the *maestoso* – which has been such a keen marker of sections – but with the sweet violin theme, reprised in A-flat major, a change of temper and key which serves as a marvellous (and astute) preparation for the slow movement (a set of variations in A flat). The mood now is moderate, placid, almost resigned: the notes are lengthened, the music maintains a *piano* dynamic, and there are only mild harmonic flirtations.

It is a shrewd and delicate end to an astounding movement, one of the greatest in Beethoven's entire career, where an unbroken line of supreme theatrical capacity, psychological insight and philosophical depth has been unfurled. It is pure Wagnerian *musikdrama*, in tone and technique, decades early. Sonata form seems light years away but has been ever present, Beethoven manipulating the arrangement, showing it some new tricks, but never entirely destroying it. As a musical construction it is stunning – in power, proportion and dexterity. But Beethoven has also invented a form of fluid unity that he will explore and exploit further in the quartets to come – and which the next generations of composers, including and especially the writer of *Tristan* and the *Ring*, will develop to extraordinary levels of dramatic power.

## 2. *Adagio, ma non troppo e molto cantabile.*

Prudently, agreeably, prepared for by the allegro's coda, we arrive at the slow movement and its gentle unfolding of several gorgeous variations. By now, variation form was something Beethoven was making a vital feature of his late style. We saw it in the opp.109 and 111 piano sonatas; the Ninth Symphony, too, has it at its heart, in its singing adagio. The thrust and ambition of his manipulated sonata forms, not least in op.127, seem to demand a palliative in return by way of these ecstatic, expansive movements.

Before these excursions, however, there is a further double preparation. Not only is there a mandatory thematic basis for the variations, but this itself is gently groomed by a mysterious opening: the elusive cello, at its softest and on a gorgeous low E flat, is joined – one after the other – by the voices of the viola, second violin and finally first violin, each, like the cello, in their lowest registers. It is a magical opening, with a long, slow grace, like a vaulted ceiling gradually being revealed: ambiguous, nebulous, full of suspense, imperceptibly arching and building before our ears, before an upbeat crescendo leads us into the main theme itself.

Texture is everything in this adagio, and Beethoven is meticulous in the way he writes for each part and the way they combine in sound. Again, as with the opening allegro, it feels like a proto-Wagnerian movement – in inspiration, construction, technique and effect. For the theme, the first violin plays a spacious, aquiline measure, which is then restated by the cello but with an alternative ending. The violin then answers in imitation – another kind of preparation for the variations – before the cello begins to move off in a new direction, duetting with the second violin as the viola supplies some harmony, while the first violin adds some observations on the main theme. Restless as ever, Beethoven has begun varying the main theme even before he has finished asserting it.

The first variation – though as we saw earlier, Beethoven does not number them, and, indeed, distinguishing where they start and stop can be a tricky task at times – has a covert energy. It complicates the rhythm and texture of the main theme, darkening its tonal colours, disrupting its dynamic tranquillity. In the next variation, Beethoven speeds things up, adding a tighter rhythm which allows the cello and viola to provide a noble, almost martial staccato drum-beat accompaniment below a witty negotiation between the pair of violins. It is all

taking place in a subdued twilight when suddenly, out of nowhere, the music turns into a new key. It doesn't shift there, moving in modulation, but via an abrupt, high-handed gesture into E major, a huge sonic distance. We have entered a new world, as if we have been plunged into a heavenly cave filled with lights.

For the following variation we drop, unobtrusively, into E flat, a close relation of A flat, so we're back in the same neighbourhood after our otherworldly detour, but its memory remains for a song of divine transcendence from the cello and first violin, in alternation. Each escorts the other, with long broad strokes and arpeggios before the second violin and viola eventually join in for a united chorus from all four voices. A new variation in D flat emerges quietly and continues mysteriously, with a subtle shift to the minor halfway through,<sup>67</sup> a mood of ambiguity and restraint in contrast to the candour of the preceding one.

The final variation begins with the first violin soaring aloft, the theme transformed into a torrent of notes and with slow, simple notes below on the second violin, viola and cello. Lest this sound too straightforward for Beethoven, these lower voices play in different beats, giving a magnificent continuous pulse. Stopping mid-phrase, there is a silence, before the throb restarts from the second violin and viola, while the first violin tries to push the quartet towards G flat (meanwhile, not to be left out, the cello offers some darker pizzicato). We drift back towards the peculiar hypnotic realms of D flat and C-sharp minor, before the cello and viola modulate to E major – the key of the heavenly cave. It is a flash, a momentary flicker, of that celestial wonder again, before the first violin – with great assurance – returns the quartet to A-flat major, where the adagio closes.

Built on firm but flexible principles, it is a movement of immense consoling spiritual power, from a composer at the absolute height of his powers, using his technical prowess and imaginative resources in perfect union. In the slow movements of the quartets which followed op.127, Beethoven would perhaps match – but surely never exceed – this extraordinary adagio, which breathes the timeless sounds of hope and mercy.

### 3. *Scherzando vivace.*

An ethereal wonder, the adagio seems to last forever, lingering in perpetuity. But end it must, and in comes a scherzo so advanced it almost physically yanks us from our blissful reveries. It

is a ruthless, restless crusade, parodying a fugue (and the whole concept of counterpoint) in a manner akin to Mahler's satirical antics in the Rondo-Burleske of his Ninth Symphony (1909).

The four instruments, playing pizzicato, get things underway with four immaculate chords that set the parameters (of tempo, tone and disposition) for the movement. All is relatively simple, a summons like the opening of the quartet, but again it is only the better to be able to develop from this kernel.

Hopping whimsically about with a patchy, incomplete theme, the cello is answered tersely by the viola while the violins remain initially silent. (Silences, gaps, interruptions and rapid changes of direction form a vital part of this movement's character, just as they did the opp.109–111 piano sonatas.) This material will undergo boundless thematic and rhythmical changes, each new idea generating the next, so that not only is the accumulated effect mesmerizing but the progression is intimately bound together, both coherent and dynamic. Contrast and unity, as ever in Beethoven, but especially in late Beethoven, form the basis of the music.

For all its forward-thinking repute, and the fact that it doesn't really *sound* like a scherzo, the third movement retains a recognizable scherzo-trio-scherzo inheritance, as well as further minor subdivisions. The trio, in E-flat minor, twitches like a deranged badger, manic and overexcited, before the scherzo returns, brisk, brusque and sardonic, at times resembling the Nürnberg of Wagner's *Meistersinger* (1868).

#### 4. *Finale*.

(Beethoven gives no indication of the tempo, leaving it to the players' discretion, but things seem unambiguously *allegro*.)

The first three movements have each begun with a short quasi-introduction, and the fourth and final movement is no different: a subject begins in an apparent C minor, but everything is cleared up before too long, and E-flat major is asserted as the true main theme turns up, one obviously related to the principal subject of the first movement. Such disorientation has a more comic effect here in the finale than in the false starts earlier in the quartet, and indeed a



circle of Haydnesque jocularly is sallied forth, a world which thrives on repetition and imitation, wit and joshing.

In a trusty sonata form, the movement begins to grow in both energy and relaxation, the air becoming wonderfully bucolic and pastoral, with first glances at, and then an adoption of, B flat, via string playing that at times sounds like horns or even the drone of bagpipes. Everything moves to a zesty climax, with some piquant dissonance and very strident playing, before the development section commences by impersonating the exposition, a charming joke which while teasing Haydn also seems to contain a little self-mockery of the opening movement's sonata-form jape as well.

This is crucial since, for all the neo-Haydnesque humour, there is more to this quartet than a little Beethovenian derision, a parody of his peers. Indeed, any fear that the movement is a mere relapse or retreat to an earlier, frothy, more flimsy style of finale – whether in caricature or not – is wholly dismissed by the protracted, provocative, but in due course heartening coda Beethoven appends to his quartet. Here he casts a long, loving gaze back over the unpredictable course of the work, uniting its many chapters and departures before a reassuring conclusion.

First, the recapitulation begins to slacken its advancing momentum, the music eventually dispersing onto a C major chord, from which materializes a reinvigorated feeling of energy and growth. Scales are strewn about like wildflowers at a pagan convention, mysteriously altering the main theme. We go to C major, then A-flat major, then a final journey to the heavenly cave's E major, before at last we return to E flat, gorgeously sounded on what else but a warm and festive cello. From here, op.127 can ease to its end, confident in its harmonic and rhythmical repatriation, devoid now of any sense of mockery or even play – just glad to be home and ready to put its feet up.

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<sup>61</sup> Wagner was, of course, a huge fan of Beethoven's quartets, studying them endlessly throughout his life.

<sup>62</sup> Rather sweetly, in his initial letter Galitzin asked for the name of Beethoven's bank in order to deposit the money directly: given the tardiness and amnesia of so many creditors when it came to freelancers' invoices, then as now, this was consideration and competence indeed. The upshot was more complex. At the end of 1826, Galitzin wrote to Beethoven apologizing for non-payment for two of the quartets, citing various bankruptcies and losses. The bill was eventually settled, acrimoniously, in 1852, long after it ceased to be of any use to Beethoven.

<sup>63</sup> The late quartets' opus numbers, and posthumous ordinal numberings, are out of sequence with the order of their composition because of complex issues relating to rights and publication, with nefarious and amusing behaviour on all

sides.

64 Or is it merely a continuation of the third-movement adagio? Beethoven makes it a little ambiguous, though the two movements are clearly fused in a very particular way, sharing material.

65 Beethoven's expressive designation in the score here actually reads 'little by little coming back to life.'

66 Only a few, smaller-scale, works for piano would follow, including the basket of jewels which is the op. 126 bagatelles.

67 With six flats and one double flat, the occult key signature of D-flat minor resembles a property empire, and Beethoven, for ease of his players' eyes, substitutes C sharp in the score.

## Chapter Seven

### Poet & Priest: *Op.132 in A minor*

**I**llness debilitates – and occasionally stimulates. Like the rest of humanity, artists suffer the slings of maladies and the arrows of ailments; but they can sometimes exploit that sickness and suffering to inspire, to invent, to drive the forces of agony and pain into the creation of aesthetic content, whether as dark as the condition itself or full of a corrective, even curative, intensity and illumination. Speaking broadly, art seems to stand as a defiance, an insolence, to the void and emptiness of death – the ultimate illness – and as a raging against the dying of the light.

Let's take some examples. Vincent van Gogh, Edvard Munch and Sonja Sekula all suffered from bipolar disorders which, to a significant degree, generated and altered their art – the yellows and blues in Van Gogh especially holding a symbolic and psychologically (de)stabilizing importance to him. Mark Rothko's shadowy, forbidding colour-field paintings are a graphic visual representation of his unbearable depression. Frida Kahlo's childhood polio and then a teenage bus crash left her with colossal orthopaedic impediments, resulting in long spells in bed and a rechanneling of her life towards her art, so much of which is an expression of, and dialogue with, her chronic pain.

Over in literature, Jorge Luis Borges and James Joyce both had atrocious ophthalmic problems. In Joyce's case this helped shape the sound and textures of his final masterpiece,

*Finnegans Wake*, just as John Milton's blindness centuries before had emboldened the opulence and complexity of the verbal-aural textures in *Paradise Lost* – two works arguably understood best when read aloud. In some instances, illness has become a key element of an artist's iconography: Thomas De Quincey's neuralgia led directly to both his opium use and his drug-fuelled writing; the work of Virginia Woolf, Sylvia Plath and David Foster Wallace is now – rightly or wrongly – often hard to isolate from their mental health problems. Marcel Proust's severe asthma led to not only seclusion and cosseting but an immense heightening of his senses and sensibility, as well as the socio-physical conditions for creating dense, large-scale literary works.

Throughout this book, we have occasionally touched on the mixture of digestive, gastrointestinal and – of course – auditory tribulations that afflicted Beethoven throughout his life and which likely affected his music in a variety of interrelated, though indistinct, ways. But now, in his thirteenth-written string quartet,<sup>68</sup> we see the influence and upshot of those illnesses in a dramatic, unambiguous way. At the literal centre of this work (something it was now possible to have, due to his pioneering expansion from four to five movements) lies a huge adagio of suffering, consolation and restoration, an agonizing, emancipating quarter-hour which communicates Beethoven's recovery from a severe, life-threatening illness.

The composer labelled the movement 'Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart' ('Holy song of thanksgiving of a convalescent to the deity, in the Lydian mode'), and we can be in no doubt about its poignant, excruciating provenance or deep meaning for him, a near-permanent convalescent and lifelong patient. Here was a person for whom illness was almost a daily burden, a chronic, protracted and relentless part of his being, a man whose body had let him down and refused to cooperate (though he didn't always help himself, with booze and overwork). Yet when we hear *Fidelio* or the Fifth, we tend to think of victory, fury, insurgence; even the funeral march of the *Eroica* is as much an expression of defiance as of grief and suffering. Beethoven's career was one of overcoming immense challenges and utilizing his titanic talents to produce an art which screams boldness and vivacity to the world.

Naturally, as we have seen in these pages, his music was more multifaceted than the Beethoven legend might suggest, and in his symphonies, sonatas and string quartets he is – if

we care to look – showcasing his vulnerability, his distress, his woe almost constantly. Nonetheless, it is with this third and innermost movement of his op.132 string quartet, written two years before his death, that we witness his suffering on an immense and personal scale – suffering which is also inextricably attached to hope and healing. In this adagio, we cannot disentangle the pain from the performance, the misery from the renewal or the gratitude: they are bound together – in origin, causation, activity and significance. If Beethoven's art is ultimately one of confrontation, of triumph wrought from anguish, then here, in one of his final creative acts, we observe a quiet victory, a solemn and sincere appreciation that he has remained alive and been granted the enduring ability to generate music (and astounding, world-changing music at that).

Lest we divorce the central movement from the four that enclose it, we need to remember the latter's own authority and magnificence, their mixture of solidity and flexibility, and the crucial way in which they allow the adagio's power to function. The outer movements of op.132 help define, structure and expand the meaning of the Heiliger Dankgesang, providing dances and marches, cyclones and nuisances; for this is a string quartet which explores body and soul, divinity and humanity, impulse and reflection, tumult and joy, as well as all the liminal zones in between.

In Beethoven's A minor string quartet, space becomes enigmatically expanded. Time, too, is given relative perspectives: suspended, speeded up – the full Einstein – since, for all its intimacy, this is also a truly cosmic, interstellar work, interweaving tempos and temperaments, muddying emotions, confusing genres. But amid all the bewilderment and uncertainty, all the impetuous, tempestuous passages, there lies a considerable unity which confers grace upon the whole, and upon existence itself.

Op.132 is a life-and-death drama told by four strings.



The first of the late quartets, op.127, was finished in February 1825, with work on the second, op.132, commencing immediately (if not slightly before, since these projects tended to overlap) and lasting until July. In the middle of this enormous, arduous labour, during

April, Beethoven fell victim to a serious abdominal illness, a more dangerous concern than the chronic stomach troubles that had dogged him for all his adult life. It lasted most of the month, and at times Beethoven feared he might not get out of this one alive.

By now, his health was in the stern, quackish hands of a new doctor, Anton Braunhofer, who bullied the composer into stubborn compliance with his recommended treatment – which seems to have worked, though correlation should not necessarily imply causality here. To Beethoven an immensely distinguished figure, Braunhofer was professor of medicine at the University of Vienna and a leading champion of the fashionable, questionable ‘Brunonian system,’ a therapy proposed (and loudly advertised) by the Scottish doctor John Brown (grandfather of the artist Ford Madox Brown and great-great-grandfather of the novelist Ford Madox Ford).

Brown himself drew on the theories of William Cullen, who strove to compile a methodical classification of diseases. Brown, however, wished to supersede the work of his mentor by creating a grand and unified system in which all maladies were related to stimulation. His magnum opus detailing all this, *Elementa medicinae* (1780), was largely ignored in Britain but became very popular in Austria, Germany and Italy.

The theory, in essence, argued that all illness is linked to an over- or under-stimulation by outside factors which excite the body, leading to various diseases (and their symptoms). Diagnosis didn’t require a great deal of medical or anatomical knowledge, or ability to connect outward indicators with inward diseases, and cure was simply a question of either getting stuff out or putting stuff in. Prescriptions included vomiting, enemas, and other purgings of the body, as well as the ominous ‘application’ of cold air. Other treatments were decidedly enticing, not to say delicious: there was not only opium but roast beef and alcoholic beverages. No wonder his method was so trendy and well-liked. At one point, Beethoven’s doctor Braunhofer ordered his patient to syringe himself several times a day with warm milk, as well as ‘cream of rice and cream of cereal.’ Going against his guru’s teachings, however, Braunhofer decreed that wine was to be avoided, as was coffee (a Beethoven favourite), since both exaggerated the nerves.

Fair enough, one might think. Caffeine and alcohol aren’t exactly beneficial for our bodies, and we all feel, in the long run, a bit better without them. It might be easy, from the

perspective of modern medicine, to ridicule Brown and Braunhofer, but they were only groping their way forward into scientific progress – though it wouldn't be a surprise if we learned that Brown had shares in the cattle industry or bonds connected to Far Eastern poppy markets. And people like Brown and Braunhofer, whatever goodwill they might have had, probably ended up killing more people than Napoleon's wars.

For our purposes, the key is that this was the world in which Beethoven, and his many maladies, existed. There were no aspirins, anti-inflammatories, antacids, steroids or antibiotics stored in the bathroom cupboard, never mind surgical techniques that might offer hope or a cure. For Beethoven, recuperation was typically a question of patience, endurance and fortitude.

Which takes us to the spring of 1825, and work on the op.132 string quartet (which, he wrote to his nephew Karl, was advancing 'tolerably well'). It was at this juncture that his belly began to misbehave far beyond the familiar, protracted occurrences of nausea, vomiting, diarrhoea and excruciating stomach pain. Normally, these would leave him either lying in agony in bed, utterly incapacitated, or else attempting to deal with the problem via tremendously deficient indoor plumbing facilities. Unlike most of us now, who can take hygienic, comfortable amenities for granted, Beethoven suffered his dreadful situation with little more than a wooden bucket. It was horrific, tedious, messy and embarrassing. His servants, who never stayed long, were doubtless tired and disconcerted, as was poor Beethoven, a man of immense pride and fame, reduced to some pitiful states, not only distressed and discomfited but filled with shame and humiliation.

By April 1825, amid his labours on op.132, he had developed a precarious inflammation of the bowel and had to stop work, something he hated (and was usually almost unable) to do. He had severe cramps, bloody stools, interminable tiredness, no appetite and endless pain. From Baden bei Wien,<sup>69</sup> where he often went for rest and treatments, he wrote to Braunhofer that he was also bleeding from both his nose and mouth. This was serious, beyond even the dreads and terrors that had become so much a part of his daily life: it was a real confrontation with death, a close encounter with the old enemy.

In May, however, Beethoven was able to send his doctor a letter of 'gratitude and respect'. He was feeling much improved, though still a little shaky. Beethoven being Beethoven, of

course, he couldn't resist a little music and comedy mixed in with the relief at his recovery, writing a rib-tickling, punning dialogue between a doctor and patient, accompanied by a jokey musical canon.<sup>70</sup> Amid the jests and fooling about, Beethoven's letter, and the text of the canon, also shows us his deep sense of vocation and musical purpose; his pressing, insistent need to finish these string quartets for Galitzin; his personal traumas and resilience, as well as his love for his nephew Karl (and a need for that love to be returned). It is an amusing item, witty and full of childish wordplay, but one full of longing, too, a sadness that never left Beethoven in these last years, as he realized how alone he was and how this situation would never change.

As we have said, that spring and summer, Beethoven was in Baden, his habitual local choice when he needed to escape the heat and gossip of Vienna, as well as take whatever cures were on offer. He rented a house and hired a servant whom he detested with a passion which seemed to outshine his hatred of all his other domestics put together. She was almost impossibly ancient, rude, illiterate – and as deaf as he was. Some of their domestic situations must have been a mixture of Marx Brothers slapstick and pitiful mimed farce, with wretched non-communication as each screamed at the other, arguments unheard and problems unresolved.

At one point, Beethoven wrote to his brother Johann, entertainingly demanding the sibling come to look after him because putting up with his 'old witch' was impossible: two hundred years ago, the composer went on, she would certainly have been burned. He begs his brother to visit, lamenting (with a pun on a vulgar German term for defecation) that otherwise his publisher Schott would have to attend him.



Beethoven was sick and lonely, isolated by illness, deafness, and the not infrequent vehemence of his own rage. But he wasn't entirely alone. Karl Holz, violinist with the Schuppanzigh Quartet, then later Beethoven's copyist, secretary, accountant and confidant, was a keen companion: vigorous, appealing, often coarse, as well as a keen patron of taverns and other assorted drinking establishments: he would take Beethoven along whenever he



could.<sup>71</sup> Letters between the pair of them constantly berate and mock the other for their excessive eating and drinking – along with the bodily consequences of such indulgences. (Holz's name in German means 'wood' or 'timber', and as was his habit, Beethoven relentlessly loosed off an arsenal of ligneous puns and quips, variously addressing his friend as 'My Most Excellent Piece of Mahogany' or 'Dearest chip!')

In Baden, during the early autumn of 1825, after he had finished op.132 but was suffering another, milder complaint as he worked on op.130, Beethoven would find himself sporadically surrounded by a mixture of companions, colleagues, admirers, hangers-on and visiting dignitaries. Happier in smaller places like Baden, with easy access to the countryside, he was usually in a much better mood and keen to show callers a good time. On one memorable day, Beethoven led a string of friends and visitors on a ramble through the Helenental, a fairly challenging hiking route of some twenty-five kilometres, full of woods, gorges and tumbledown castles.<sup>72</sup> Later, an unsuspecting inn was found, and at once bounteous amounts of food, beer and champagne were ordered.

This drink-filled feast, which became semi-legendary far beyond Baden, was attended by Beethoven, Holz, the piano maker Conrad Graf, a local oboe maker, and the German-born Danish composer and pianist Friedrich Kuhlau, among several others. Such were the debauchery and shenanigans of this get-together, which dragged on throughout the afternoon and well into the night, that pages from Beethoven's conversation book of the day had to be torn out and destroyed – taking with them forever the juicy details of what had passed between the carousers. During the merriments, in another such book<sup>73</sup> (several of them were clearly in use at any one time), Beethoven made for the party a musical commemoration of the day. A canon, beginning with a 'B-A-C-H' motif, it was accompanied by a text punning on Kuhlau's name: 'Kühl, nicht lau' ('Cool, not tepid'), a witticism which presumably meant more to the revellers that autumn day in Baden than it does for us.

The following morning, Kuhlau himself had absolutely no idea how he had got back to Vienna. From Baden, Beethoven wrote to him the same day. (Postal services being much better then than now, this resembled a hungover nineteenth-century WhatsApp message.) In the letter, he jokily complained about his wine-induced headache, lamented his amnesia

concerning some of the events from the latter part of the day, and enclosed the canon that in his drunken state he had forgotten to give to his new chum.<sup>74</sup>

Such boozy behaviour can scarcely have been beneficial to his intestinal problems, but we can hardly begrudge Beethoven these pleasures, especially given the immense joy such sociable gatherings seemed to have brought him, a man too often isolated and alone.<sup>75</sup>



Baden was for work as well as for play, of course. Not only did Beethoven write most of op.132 there, and a great deal of op.130 (as well as the Große Fuge, which would initially be attached to it), but rehearsals for and performances of the quartets would also occur in the spa town.

On 9 September 1825, one such run-through took place – after a morning of fairly horrific stomach problems punctuated by furious changes to the musical manuscript when he could gather the strength. The piece was op.132, and the location was an upstairs room of the Zum Wilden Mann inn, a venue hired by the French music publisher Moritz Schlesinger (who evidently wanted to actually hear the quartet he was interested in purchasing for his firm).<sup>76</sup> The room was, as you might expect in central Europe in late summer, oppressive and airless, and filled with people – musicians and musicologists, as well as Beethoven's nephew Karl and Carl Czerny, one of the composer's piano pupils and also now a teacher and prolific composer. The Schuppanzigh Quartet performed, with Ignaz himself as first violin and Karl Holz second.

Beethoven arrived – after a significant amount of scrubbing and cleansing by his 'old witch' – looking fairly presentable. He took off his coat and went to sit and scrutinize the performers as the quartet was played through twice. He normally sat between the two violinists, so that his damaged hearing might just grasp some of their higher notes, but he would also move about, occasionally snatching up Holz's instrument and demonstrating what his eye had detected to be an incorrect intonation or wrong tempo in his friend's playing. A piano in the corner would also be used to exhibit a particularly difficult passage or the shaping needed for a certain phrase. If Schuppanzigh – let us not forget, one of the

leading artists in the most musical city on earth – strained to keep up with the often furiously difficult part Beethoven had written for the first violin, the composer would fall off his chair laughing, repeating Schuppanzigh's mistakes to himself, at times blithely unaware of (or unconcerned with) the somewhat public event that was taking place. The musicians' sympathy for the ailing composer must, on occasion, have been sorely tested.

The rehearsal/recital, despite the antics and interruptions, was largely seen as a success, though clearly it was hardly being staged under anything like ideal conditions.<sup>77</sup> A couple of days later, the publisher Schlesinger hosted another private presentation of the quartet and invited some of the audience, as well as the players, to supper afterward. Beethoven playfully teased his old friend Schuppanzigh with the familiar name 'Falstaff', and then, after they had eaten, the ailing former prodigy of all Vienna improvised a little at the piano. He was apparently in great spirits, full of gags and anecdotes, even telling the guests that if they shouted loud enough in his left ear he could just about make out some noise. However much trauma his deafness had wrought upon him, Beethoven was not above joking about it or trying to eke out even the smallest sound – though the sight of drunken men hallooing into his ear must have been a poignant one for many of those present.

A few days later, one of those in attendance for this impromptu banquet, as well as both the rehearsals of op.132, went for a walk with Beethoven. This was Sir George Thomas Smart, a music promoter and conductor from London, close acquaintance of Carl Maria von Weber and huge advocate of Handel's music – something guaranteed to make a lifelong friend in Beethoven. The principal purpose of his visit to Vienna and Baden had been to obtain the tempos for the Ninth Symphony directly from their composer himself: Smart had given the British premiere of the work earlier in the year, on 21 March in London, and was clearly keen to discuss, and perhaps solve, some of this pioneering piece's many difficulties with the man who had created them.<sup>78</sup>

In addition to the try-outs of op.132 and the aforementioned dinner, Smart was also given an enchanting taste of characteristically Beethovenian hospitality: nature, music, intoxicants. First, a morning hike in the hills around the town, followed by lunch – which seems to have been mainly in liquid form, since Beethoven insisted they take part in a drinking contest. As was his habit when in his cups, after losing this boozy competition to

the Englishman, Beethoven dashed off a quick canon for his guest: 'Ars longa, vita brevis' ('Art is long, life is short').<sup>79</sup>



Whether Sir George, amid the gargantuan amounts of alcohol he was consuming during his stay, ever obtained the tempos he was after for the Ninth Symphony is unclear. However, just after Smart left to return to London, Beethoven wrote to his publisher Schott exclaiming how the Muses wouldn't leave him alone to die in peace: furious new ideas were still coming to him, and he was determined to finish what inspired him before he 'pass[ed] over to the Elysian Fields.' The ordeals of completing the Ninth, and the *Missa solemnis*, had exhausted him but at the same time frantically heightened his creativity and the willpower to see through the things he still felt he had to say.

The Ninth itself, premiered at Vienna's Theater am Kärntnertor on 7 May 1824,<sup>80</sup> was the culmination of Beethoven's extraordinary symphonic career (though, as we saw earlier, there were plans for a tenth). He had taken his inheritance from Haydn and Mozart and developed the symphony into an exceptional medium for large-scale musical drama and philosophical debate. He had not only magnified the dimensions of the symphony – swelling its orchestra and time span – but he had added voices, words, not only varying and deepening the sonic texture but adding an unambiguously human aspect to the proceedings. The addition of the Ode to Joy took what the *Eroica* and *Pastoral* had implied (politics; emotions related to nature) and made things even more explicit.

No one could escape the Ninth's influence. It was either an impediment or an inspiration: an avalanche which blocked progress for some, while carrying others to places unknown and unexpected. Brahms, Schumann, Dvořák and Bruckner all wrote their symphonies painfully aware of the power, scope and challenges of the Ninth; Berlioz, Liszt and Mahler saw in its programme and expansions – into vocal and textual spheres, as well as cosmic and literary-political realms – opportunities for a new kind of musical artwork, and their revolutionary symphonies stand as part of a tradition Beethoven originated. And this is to remain only within the very local reach of the Ninth. Its influence on generations of

composers and musicians is likely still being felt, as they grapple with its challenges – which go far beyond merely its choral finale, and into the cosmic capacity and remit of the entire work.

Beyond the relatively narrow confines of classical music, Beethoven's Ninth is the only symphony to exist on a truly popular, global and institutional level, linking a vast cultural, historical and political nexus, and which seeks to unite left and right, East and West, dissolving the points of the compass. Everyone from fascists to feminists, Olympians to trade unionists, has wanted to hijack, interpret or reinterpret this work in terms of their own identity or world view. It been a symbol of Teutonic pride, Aryan supremacy, African independence and macho oppression. It was the soundtrack to the fall of the Berlin Wall and German reunification. It is the anthem of the European Union – its Ode to Joy taking on a particular poignancy for the 48 percent of UK voters who wanted to remain in the EU in the 2016 referendum, while also serving as a spur for the movement to rejoin the bloc. It serves as a de facto hymn for the Olympic Games, and as a significant marker for the end of the year around the world, especially in Japan, where 'Daiku' ('Big Nine') is an annual New Year event, often sung by vast massed choirs.

When Richard Wagner inaugurated his music festival at Bayreuth, the Ninth was performed in May 1872 to mark the building's ground-breaking ceremony, while Wilhelm Furtwängler conducted it at the reopening of the festival in 1951, as an act of contrition and rebirth after the horrors of war. For Wagner, the work had a lifelong importance. He had arranged it for piano as a youth, and its scale and innovations ushered in numerous new ways of thinking about the possibilities of symphonic music in combination with theatre. It was also intimately connected in his mind with the late string quartets, and together they made up a key element of his musico-dramatic philosophy, showing how sound and stage could interact, as well as suggesting techniques such as his 'unending melody' and leitmotif structures.

In many ways, Wagner's centenary book-length essay *Beethoven* (1870) was a defining moment for the Ninth and the late quartets, a watershed which repositioned Beethoven's later works not as musical mayhem developed from deafness but as a progressive, revolutionary art of supreme profundity, philosophical insight and cosmic dimensions. The

Ninth, for Wagner, was an ur-*Ring*, a study of creation, damage and renewal; the late quartets, a proto-*Parsifal*, examining suspicion, healing and commitment.

D minor – the key of the Ninth – had a long and stormy past.<sup>81</sup> Domenico Scarlatti chose it for 150 of his 555 sonatas, while Mozart famously picked it for three of his darkest works: the piano concerto No.20, the *Requiem* and, of course, *Don Giovanni*. For Beethoven, it might not have held the same emblematic significance as C minor or the furious negative energy of F minor, but D minor could still be a powerful means of expression: there was the evocative largo of the *Ghost* Trio and the so-called *Tempest* Piano Sonata of 1802. It was the ideal key to open the Ninth's long journey, offering a mix of opacity and direction.

As with the four movements of the op.127 string quartet, each movement of the Ninth starts with a brief introductory passage, and Beethoven's final symphony begins with a murmuring from nothingness which exploits the equivocation and strength of D minor to develop into a primeval disorder and subsequently (re)birth the symphony. (Over in A minor, op.132 will share a similar opening amid shadows, tenuously probing, fumbling towards the inscrutable, the inexplicable, the impenetrable: a nocturnal world of nebulas and nightmares.)

The Ninth's second movement is brazen, impertinent, with a breakneck reckless motion and fugal textures, before a vast, singing adagio which alternates themes and is a superlative example of Beethoven's late style of absolute melody. This slow movement is a clear anticipation of that which exists in op.132, in both structural and intentional terms: it forms a still centre, the eye of a storm raging around it, a zone of peace, recovery and reflection amid drive and protest, a hymn of thanks – a symphonic Heiliger Dankgesang.

After their slow movements, both the Ninth and op.132 have singular, unusual preliminary sections which lead to their finales. Loud, unexpected, they jolt us out of our reveries and complacencies. The quartet even contains a quasi-operatic recitative for the first violin to prepare for its 'aria' finale – just like the Ninth has a preparatory orchestral exploration of the finale's material prior to its new world of voices and texts appealing for human unity as a protection against the many challenges of the cosmos.

Beethoven's Ninth has become a worldwide phenomenon – as kitsch as it is pioneering, as much parodied as played. Its message of universal harmony fluctuates between perverse

idealism and profound sanity as the political state of the world oscillates between attainment, evasion or avoidance of those entreaties. Whatever its potential musical defects (and let us not forget Beethoven himself had immediate and severe misgivings about the finale), it is surely incontestable that it has now achieved what its creator envisioned for it: namely, a secure place in an unstable world, quietly (and not so quietly) urging its aspirations upon a fickle, often unresponsive, species.



With its big tune, soloists and choir, the Ninth was always set for global stardom and celebrity status, even if it had to overcome some teething troubles before its acceptance. For string quartets, even those by Ludwig van Beethoven, such fame was always going to be unfeasible and, perhaps, undesirable. Private, studious, subjective – aren't quartets the very opposite of the Ninth's public, joyous, objective statements?

But we need to reconsider such preconceptions. Not only are Beethoven's symphonies, even and perhaps especially the Ninth, intensely moral and thoughtful works – no mere orchestral entertainment – but quartets, as we have seen, are splendid arenas for both frivolity and profundity, games and brains. Moreover, the planetary, even interplanetary, reach of the Ninth, as Wagner knew, is available in the late string quartets, and particularly op.132. Just as he engaged with history via the Ninth, in this quartet, Beethoven steps into his own personal story, transforming it into a universal narrative, a collective chronicle of suffering and healing.

Although less conspicuous – by both the means and meaning of its expression – op.132 offers the same journey from mist and mystery to auspicious assertions forged from doubt into affirmation. Both op.132 and the Ninth make an appeal to liberty, whether in socio-politico-philosophical terms or as an emancipation from the prison of illness / the body. In addition, although we have noted the structural, movement-by-movement, correspondences between the two works, each also has a widely celebrated segment of considerable reputation. The Ninth has the great Ode to Joy – a tune familiar to countless millions around the world, and a substantial dynamic in global Beethoven worship. Op.132 has its

Holy Song of Thanksgiving, which is not known to anything like the same extent but still a fairly famous piece of music that at times seems larger than the work it emanates – and is so frequently detached – from. Mourners weep to it; popular classical music stations endlessly play its unfurling themes, exploiting its liquid charm, its sonic grace.



This exploitation has not been restricted to the realm of music. In literature, several writers have sought to capture or employ op.132's powers in their poetry and prose. Far from limiting or imprisoning the music in the confines of words, the music can thus be unlocked, freed into any number of narrative, conceptual or poetic possibilities, opening up this often highly abstract and elusive art form into a wealth of meanings, which can be both concrete and indeterminate, fixed and fluid.

In Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* (1913–27),<sup>82</sup> a fictional composer's music haunts and inhabits the (innumerable, great) pages of this multivolume novel, and is a vehicle for the author to explore his own sympathetic appreciation of music, its extraordinary power, especially as a sensual and sensory experience. Proust's narrator talks of an imaginary composition – a chamber work by the invented composer Vinteuil – but all the time we seem to really be coming into contact with Proust's experience of Beethoven's late quartets. These were works he dearly loved, with their mixture of struggle and mysticism, splendour and malice, as well as their mythology in relation to Beethoven's own inner and outer lives.

In one celebrated sequence, Proust takes us directly into a concert, brilliantly conjuring the wandering, drifting mind of the narrator as his attention floats in and out of the music he is listening to. We roam from the recital and its music to the events of the narrator's own life, or to his inspecting the other people (and a dog) attending the concert. It is one of the great – and most truthful – descriptions of how we tend to experience music, especially live music. We are not, if we're honest, always 100 percent focused on the sound produced by the players, however beautiful or sublime or clever or profound it is – especially when it comes to slow music, like the Holy Song of Thanksgiving in Beethoven's op.132. We swing between intense scrutiny and passionate involvement with the music to distractions (a face, a



memory) and other diversions before returning to the (probable) reason we're there in the first place, swept up by a sudden forte or delectable chord.

Proust is also alert to the sneaky, elusive, even dishonest nature of music, along with our frequent, sometimes ambiguous assertion of its profundity. Who can agree on which works are the deepest, or why, or what form this profundity takes? Proust recognizes, too, the unbearable, unbeatable power music has to transport us in time and space, to take us from the prison of earth and physical being into other bodies, other souls, other worlds – flying, as he puts it, 'from star to star'. He knows the interstellar capacity of great chamber music.

Aldous Huxley's 1928 novel *Point Counter Point*, with its fugally suggestive title (which also implies the contentions of a debate), features a series of interlinked storylines and recurrent themes, which function like contrapuntal music. It is a literary, or human, fugue. An extended stream of consciousness from one of Huxley's characters largely outlines the method of the book, which engages directly with Beethoven's own compositional techniques, especially those of the late quartets:

The musicalization of fiction ... Meditate on Beethoven. The changes of moods, the abrupt transitions ... More interesting still, the modulations, not merely from one key to another, but from mood to mood. A theme is stated, then developed, pushed out of shape, unperceptively deformed, until, though recognizably the same, it has become quite different. Get this into a novel. How?

The shifts in mood are fairly straightforward, the modulation in tone and character harder to accomplish, but Huxley achieves a good deal of what his character outlines, and *Point Counter Point* is a dark, enticing novel of ideas as well as a thought-provoking rendezvous between the arts. Yet it goes well beyond the orthodox novel of ideas, too, which usually makes voice- or soapboxes of the characters, tending to personalize or individualize them only through an emphasis on their narrow, obsessive thoughts. Here, characters – and a suitable range of characters, too – more convincingly illustrate difference via behaviour, enacting their intense and prolonged vocalizations.

Music and musical discussion suffuse *Point Counter Point*, and it includes a famous employment of op.132 itself, as a direct plot point. One of the characters, Maurice

Spandrell, an intellectual searching for proof of the divine, claims that the Holy Song of Thanksgiving *is* proof of God's existence, but only for as long as the music is playing. Eventually, this troubled soul commits suicide<sup>83</sup> listening to the third movement of this quartet, and Beethoven's private adagio of gratitude for recovery from illness becomes something larger, subsuming the personal in the universal. (But, of course, by focusing on only one movement of the quartet, Spandrell distorts it, undermines and cheapens it – and with fatal consequences for himself.)

Like Spandrell, and the Ninth Symphony, the alternating subdivisions that comprise the Holy Song of Thanksgiving movement go through a number of transformations – take your pick from darkness to light, chaos to creation, death to life – and their dynamic metamorphosis energizes, as we listen, our own creative processes as we locate meanings to attach to the music. Although Beethoven specifies the origin, and therefore to some degree the connotation, of the movement, we are free to generate our own values, references and import.

If prose can achieve such engagement with music, how much more might we expect from poetry? One answer came not long after: T. S. Eliot's *Four Quartets* (1943).<sup>84</sup> The poems themselves are four interlinked meditations on humanity's relationship with time, the universe and the divine, and although the title might seem a dead giveaway, we need to be careful about exactly how we relate Eliot's verse to Beethoven's music, however much the poet himself sanctioned it. Eliot found op.132 an inexhaustible work to listen to and study. He was not only fascinated by its 'heavenly' nature but intimately connected it with the 'fruit of reconciliation and relief after great suffering' – something, of course, Beethoven himself makes explicit. The poet claimed that he should 'like to get something of that into verse' before he died. The *Four Quartets* were the rich harvest of that wish.

Reading the poems, we have a splendid sense of their construction, their ideas, their patterns; but if we hear them delivered orally, we capture more of their inherent music, their ability to go beyond the cerebral and into the emotional, catching the ringing quality of the rhyme and metre, the sonic language of words and syntax, the marvel of phonetics and phonaesthetics. Indeed, these are four very complex poems, often highly philosophical and extremely conceptual, and allowing their verbal music to work on us is often a key way into

understanding them. Although it has long been tempting to relate each of the quartets to specific parts of Beethoven's music, or to identify different textual voices for the different instruments of a string quartet, mapping the one onto the other, a more beneficial, rewarding approach is usually broader in prospect, surveying key parallels and preoccupations, using the poem to illuminate the music and vice versa.<sup>85</sup>

Faith, sin and suffering have an important role to play in both, as poet and composer seek deliverance from mortal distress and towards transcendence, the escape of transient reality and a great leap into freedom, truth and eternity – whether via Christianity or the Eastern religions both artists were fascinated by. Eliot's verse blends elements of Anglo-Catholicism with mysticism and a range of religious, philosophical and poetic works from several traditions (much as *The Waste Land* had in 1922), including quotes from the Bhagavad Gita; at the time of composing op.132, Beethoven copied into his diary lines from an earlier Hindu scripture, the Rig Veda.

Although Beethoven's quartet communicates a delivery from physical suffering, it is clear that he – and Eliot, who was very ill during the Second World War, when he wrote three of the poems – are discussing the hope for a release from the more general bodily prison of earthly existence, freedom not only from pain and sickness but the material bondage of passion and desire (Eliot took a vow of chastity in 1933; Beethoven turned away from using prostitutes by the 1820s). Both *Four Quartets* and op.132 are spiritual autobiographies (and therapeutic exercises) as much as they are complex metaphysical debates, sublimating the erotic into their textures.

Time is one of the key fixations of *Four Quartets*, governing the poems as it governs all else (and connecting to themes of history, individuality and fluctuating religious allegiance). The famous opening lines of 'Burnt Norton' ('Time present and time past...') immediately set up a discussion that will pervade the four texts and have a natural connection to the way music functions as a progression of sounds through time. Beethoven's op.132, in particular, anticipates Eliot's poems by stretching and squeezing our perception of time, as well as asserting – through the sheer act of its performance – the tyranny of time, a chronological despotism which music can escape by looping backward (for instance, via the recapitulation component of sonata form). Through its repetitions and motifs (fire, rose, water, time, faith),

and by exploiting musical techniques, *Four Quartets*, too, destroys linear time, linking past, present and future as well as rendering them inconsequential, opening up both a circularity and timelessness through which to reveal, explore and determine its preoccupations.

This connects – with heavy irony – to the impossibility of language, the powerlessness of words, to express the inexpressible, and accordingly most clearly ties *Four Quartets* with music, specifically the way in which op.132 ultimately communicates what the poems themselves know they cannot. In the end, perhaps, any reading of Eliot's poems needs to be immediately followed by listening to Beethoven's music, which acts as a revelatory postscript to the cumbersome futility of even some of the most exquisite, abstract verses of the twentieth century.

So let us now turn to that music, albeit only in words.

## No.15 in A minor

### 1. *Assai sostenuto – Allegro.*

The beginning of op.132 in A minor is a single embryo for triplet siblings. With it we encounter the musical motto that will dominate not only this quartet but the next two as well. Indeed, these three works – op.132 in A minor, op.130 in B flat and op.131 in C-sharp minor – are sometimes known as the *ABC Quartets*, after their musical keys, and they form an alternative troika to the *Galitzin* group of opp.127, 132 and 130.

In technical terms, the four-note opening phrase consists of two pairs of semitones, and throughout these three quartets the composer looks for different ways to link such couplings. This four-note idea (which we will refer to as the 'ABC' motif) becomes a puzzle, a chamber music Rubik's cube, that Beethoven turns around in his hands, over and over again.<sup>86</sup>

Op.132 begins with two notes from the cello (G sharp and A); then, as the instrument reaches its third note, the viola joins in, followed on the next beat by the second violin, and on the one after that, the first violin – an exquisite progression, which looks stunning on the page and is gorgeous on the ear. It is a startling opening, creepy and cryptic, and for eight bars the four instruments – pianissimo and *assai sostenuto* – solemnly converse on the motto idea. This is a conversation full of unease: a hoodlums' conference, conniving and conspiring.

The opening movement is strange, anxious, caught between courage and regret. A minor was a rare key for Beethoven – and everyone else. Bach had written an impressive violin concerto (BWV 1041) in it, and one of Mozart's finest piano sonatas (K.310) was in the key, but only well into the nineteenth century, and then the twentieth, did composers really feel ready to embrace the abnormal wonder and austere magic of A minor. Schubert found he needed it for several works, including the great *Arpeggione* Sonata, D.821. Mendelssohn, Mahler and Sibelius would all write imposing symphonies in it, Grieg and the two Schumanns three astounding piano concertos; Brahms found it ideal for his *Double Concerto* of 1887 and Shostakovich for his violin concerto No.1 in 1948.

In op.132, A minor is perfect for establishing an air of guilt and veiled malevolence, as

well as the discursive presentation of the 'ABC' idea that will permeate the music to come (though much of the indefinable atmosphere of the movement is generated by its refusal to firmly locate the main key). Here we have Beethoven's late style brilliantly encapsulated: it unites the moody and the mysterious with a profound inner logic that gives it the security and strength to assert its own eccentric arrangements, defying conventional structures.

Out of this sinister opening, with its especially brilliant writing for viola, emerges the allegro. The first violin zips away with a vigorous phrase, flutters up and down, then pauses for a moment, considering what it has said, before repeating itself with renewed energy and disappearing into the void. A gangster boss with his final comments before the big raid? Perhaps... Beneath, the cello introduces a wannabe phrase it will repeat throughout the movement. Everything is mobile but obscure, one moment grim and discreet, then suddenly strident as shapes appear before slinking back into the shadowy textures.

All is expectation and postponement, tense and asymmetrical – Beethovenian suspense writ large. These inflections and fluctuations fill the air with not only mystery and malice but a sense of sadness, the inward pain behind the macho exterior. Themes and pseudo- or subordinate themes trace and flow through the air, the instruments whispering, shouting, talking (and giving quite convincing imitations of human voices).

After a forceful crescendo, the first violin unveils a brief new idea, sending it forth like an impromptu march, before stepping back to another crescendo which allows the second theme to come in: a beaming F major from the second violin, which is then taken up by the first. Sweet and tender, viola and cello join in with a series of fast notes which invigorate the charm.

In theory, we are in sonata form, but Beethoven does not repeat the exposition, though there are some cunning impersonations of the beginning of the movement, as well as – a real deception – a double recapitulation, first in E minor, then turning into the actual one in A minor. Nothing in this 'mobster' movement is to be trusted.

The false recapitulation, in E minor, has the music progress as before, with the same melody, but with the harmony misaligned – another of this work's asymmetrical twists. From here both the brief impromptu march and the 'sweet and tender' second subject are repeated, though now switched from F to C major. Some play on the 'ABC' idea leads us to

the true A minor recapitulation, a recurrence now bearing a thuggish grin, and with the 'sweet and tender' material repeated in A major. Here the musical ideas themselves are so mercilessly misshapen that the very notion of exposition/recapitulation, already destabilized, is further interrogated, beaten around the head, with a flash of knives and fragmented memories.

Intimidation and preparation complete, the movement needs only a curt, resounding coda, which takes on a concerto-like quality for the first violin (which is made to sound like a string trumpet, full of muscle and organic energy).

Directed by Martin Scorsese or Francis Ford Coppola, this movement is one of darkness and polished allure. It is highly intelligent, sophisticated, erudite. It is full of aesthetic wonder, but it is also ruthless and cool, cold-blooded and unfeeling beneath the sharp suit and silk tie. Traditional and formal landmarks (in structure or tonality) are concealed or repositioned: it is storytelling in a new way, highly aware of its heritage (and debts) but confident enough in both itself and its audience to deconstruct and toy with the familiar.

## 2. *Allegro ma non tanto*.

The second movement is pert, madcap, a cinematic intermission. It is a new kind of capricious scherzo, initially overlaying the 'ABC' motif with a twirling pseudo-waltz and then letting the two dance contrapuntally through a range of keys and textures. The idea is simple but very successful. Just as in the first movement, contrast is crucial, as voices shift in conflicting, antagonistic gestures, one moment tender and kind-hearted, then suddenly inflamed (pure Joe Pesci). On the whole, the speeds and dynamics are fairly consistent – it is the harmonics that add the punch and spice – but occasional rhythmical shifts are also highly effective, not least when combined with surprising key changes.

The trio section is a ghostly musette, a hallucination amid the unstable, kaleidoscopic mechanisms of this schizoid scherzo. It begins with a rustic bagpipe drone on A with easy tunes, languid and dreaming. It then creates something truly breathtaking – a sonic illusion – by metamorphosing into a huge but distant wonder, a supernova remnant glittering in psychedelic colours.

Although probing Beethoven's inner musical imagination is usually a dangerous,

thankless, task, here we might consider that the risk he takes with this astonishing transformation – really a transfiguration – is born of his hearing difficulties. With this shift in texture and sonority, we can almost perceive Beethoven himself straining to imagine what it might actually sound like. It is a moment of immense poignancy and consummate musical inspiration, simultaneously visionary and heartbreaking.

Following this lunar apparition, we are firmly reminded we tread the earth: cello and viola execute some emphatic clauses before being joined by the second violin. The first violin, however, is determined to proclaim its difference and independence with a scurry of arpeggios that disrupt the mood even further, upsetting the rhythms before the dance is able to reassert itself and the eerie intermezzo comes to a close.<sup>87</sup>

### 3. *Molto adagio – Andante. 'Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart'* ('Holy song of thanksgiving of a convalescent to the deity, in the Lydian mode')

If the trio of the scherzo gazed at the heavens, the central adagio takes us directly there. It is one of Beethoven's most sublime and extraordinary achievements, its magnetism never dulled through repeated listening, its celestial magic only strengthened, deepened. Yet it also has a crucial functional role in the quartet, providing a stable centre around which the volatile, irregular outer movements can orbit, the adagio's blend of polyphony and harmony a steady rotating sun for its four circling planets.

In a manner which artfully prefigures the movement's own fame, the composer himself seems to reveal this movement to us, appearing from behind the notes and amid us, a sonorous incarnation. With this movement, Beethoven plays with time and space, entering history while at the same time leaving it far behind and passing into a realm of timeless eternity. Beethoven here appropriates the most private of experiences and turns it into something universal and public. He is simultaneously the focus of his art and utterly detached from it – an inhabitant of both the Romantic and the Baroque. It is modern and an anachronism, or rather it uses the past to develop the future – as Stravinsky would do with his neoclassical period in the 1920s.



Beethoven's choice of a mystical, old-fashioned church mode – the Lydian<sup>88</sup> – for the 'hymn' sections of the adagio (leaving behind the usual major/minor keys), and using it to express a subjective experience (of illness), is an ideal combination of this composer's erudition, resources and originality, as well as his time-travelling capacity, at once glancing forward and back. Nonetheless, time itself in this movement also seems to be put on hold, as we pass into a dominion of infinity and stasis (an effect achieved, with splendid irony, via variations).

This is pure Beethoven, utilizing paradox and diversity to create something entirely new. He takes the most physical, personal and painful occurrence – sickness and recuperation – and transforms it into the most otherworldly and ecstatic: an elicitation of heavenly peace. That abdominal illness which laid Beethoven low in the spring of 1825 becomes a means for an extraordinary string quartet movement, a punishing bodily malady turned into the most elusive and abstract of art forms. The evocation of affliction/resurgence would not be enough (though it is astonishing). It is the procedural, technical mastery which Beethoven also displays which makes this one of the greatest movements he ever wrote.

In theory, it is a set of double variations (a Lydian mode hymn and a D major dance), arranged in the palindromic form ABABA, but this is only for ease of illustration, since they are not equal in size, with the adagio Lydian hymns (A) standing like great church pillars for the movement's structure. The hymn (A) is restated twice, with variations, interposed by the bright dance in D major (B) that quickens the tempo to andante – and which is marked in the score with the great triumphant words 'feeling new strength' ('neue Kraft fühlend'). This in fact *interrupts* the hymn in order to present a series of ebullient staccatos, animated upbeats, and a truly delighted violin trill that dances above the other instruments (themselves providing a festive accompaniment). It is a magnificent example of how the forces of the string quartet can work together to produce some mesmerizing effects.

Returning, the hymn's textures are now even more handsomely polyphonic, with rhythmical embellishments while the first violin sings the main hymn theme. Given the richness of the scoring, the tempos can seem a little slow, even making the strings sound a little strained: but this is precisely the effect Beethoven wanted. The sense of striving, of effort, is the aesthetic the composer is trying to convey, something he will take even further in

his next quartet and its Große Fuge.<sup>89</sup> The modifications of the hymn are now more diverse and more gradually efficacious: with their every return, they become more merged, more intricate, full of song and feeling, quietly euphoric. The 'feeling new strength' episode makes its second appearance, now even stronger, more joyous, more substantial, the mind and body further regaining its power.

The hymn comes back, a closing column, again even more luxuriously multidimensional in texture and rhythm. So as not to repeat the hymn verbatim, and where a full tonal shift would be impossible, Beethoven abbreviates – dissolves – the main material, turning it into liquid gold. Unusual cadences work to create some breathless moments, and there is a marvellous range from the four instruments, who often seem to be hardly in the same room, the cello down in its deepest register, the first violin soaring high above (and yet, of course, completely bound together and intimate). The key to the power of this exceptional section, however, probably lies in its subtle melodic and harmonic shifts. Beethoven homes in on the first phrase of the hymn, presenting a range of peppery imitations that are given a wonderful piquancy in the harmony, verging on the dissonant.

It is this delicate spice amid the lush, stable background which generates probably the most touching passages of the entire movement, and in many ways, these pages are the centre of Beethoven's achievement as a composer. Everything is now entirely detached, flexible and free. He transforms the hymn from an ancient, awe-inspiring chorale prelude into molten metal, dense and immensely strong, far greater than the 'feeling new strength' section, which is merely a physical regeneration; this is spiritual. It is a passage of indescribable splendour, radiance and visceral emotional power. Built on resolute, exemplary principles but with an unrivalled creativity, it is Beethoven the master chef, conjuring a dish of astonishing depth and flavour from simple, organic ingredients. And it is food which nourishes, too, for nothing is merely for show or entertainment; everything is working towards its musical goal and emotional function.

From its beaming, luminous pinnacle – where we don't just see heaven, we *experience* it<sup>90</sup> – the movement sinks amid its rapture, gradually falling to end in the utmost tranquillity, either anticipating the Liebestod of *Tristan* or foreseeing the radiant serenity of *Parsifal's* conclusion.

#### 4. *Alla marcia, assai vivace.*

Unlike Wagner, however, Beethoven still has a quartet to finish, and he spent a long time pondering how to follow music of such gravitational depth and celestial reach. Eventually he drew on his experience as a performer to solve this musical-emotional riddle. When he improvised at the piano, Beethoven would often move his audience to tears – before shaking them out of their trance with harsh, abrasive chords, sometimes laughing manically as he did so.

He invokes a similar mechanism for op.132, with two linked movements, the first of which is a violent shock after the transcendent adagio. It is a bit mean, perhaps, but certainly a useful protective measure to prevent the slow movement from becoming either too maudlin or sentimental: its honesty and integrity is part of its strength. Played out of context, just like the adagietto from Mahler's Fifth Symphony (1904) so often is as well, op.132's adagio can lose its emotional authority, its candid confessional power, which the rough violence of the *alla marcia* is (paradoxically) able to reinforce.

Moreover, the fourth movement also acts as a kind of regulatory valve, releasing the pent-up pressure and tensions implied by the immensely poised and dignified adagio, which needs to perform a delicate balancing act of variations, repeats and complex inner textures. The *alla marcia* allows the quartet to be emancipated into relief (and slight recklessness), bursting free after the restrictions of the sickbed – just as the 'horror' fanfare equivalent does in the Ninth Symphony, following its own great slow movement and on the way to its own intrepid finale.

Without a breather, we go directly from the adagio to a short and sprightly march, in A major and in two parts. It is slightly sardonic in tone, but never malicious – just a gentle nudge from Beethoven to remind us who's in charge and accordingly not to become too mawkish. It is only two minutes long (the adagio was nearer twenty) and brings us with a jolt back down to earth. It is a glass of hard water, full of minerals – or a gulp of fresh air, the invalid finally out and about, back in his beloved countryside.

Tousled, urgent declamations from the first violin recall its efforts in the first movement, especially in the rough coda. It is swiftly joined by the other instruments as they put forward the march's ideas – which are then abruptly cut off, incomplete. With a good dose of caustic

sparkle, Beethoven lurches into another section: weird, relaxed and reminiscent of the peculiar fun heard in his *König Stephan* Overture (1811). From here we go to A minor, which gropes towards C major and an operatic recitative from the first violin with a tremolo accompaniment beneath. Its purpose, as we saw earlier, is to prepare, like all recitatives and with exquisite dramatic suspense, for the aria/finale to come. And, indeed, with the recitative's closing cadence, the fifth and final movement begins.

### 5. *Allegro appassionato*.

We are back in A minor (mirroring the first movement; this, along with the 'ABC' motifs that have perforated the work, acts as a wonderful coalescing feature). We surge along in a flowing, fertile rondo – a form which, along with the choice of key, camouflages many of the movement's intricacies of design and emotion.

The main subject has an unexpected origin, one final link to the other great work this chapter has been considering: its melody was first sketched as an *instrumental* finale of the Ninth Symphony. Occasionally a bit mysterious, even hesitant, it nonetheless has a wonderful drive and urgency – it would have been ideal for the symphony, though it works even better here.

This is the joy that comes with age, which appreciates its happiness in a different way to the agile, energetic finales we saw throughout op.18. Being cast in A minor (that austere, anxious key), it lacks a certain freshness – though this is absolutely not a criticism; rather, the music is still able to assert its energy, retaining speed, but does so with a slight and imperceptible limp (whether psychological or physiological). It is a hobble which adds a certain mystique, a measure of charismatic grace, to the spirited goings-on, differentiating it from the young-whippersnapper finales of distant decades.

Opening out from A minor to C major and thence back to A minor, this movement explores the spacious possibilities of its tonal choices brilliantly, disabusing any lingering dissenters of the wisdom of selecting this unusual key for the quartet. Where the first movement was lithe but elusive, here the prompt fluidity is direct and straightforward. In the coda, as things begin to speed up even more, the cello – in its dizziest, highest register – suddenly reengages the principal melody, and as if it is hitting top gear, the music is thrust

magnificently from A minor to A major, zooming forward with power and panache.



In Huxley's *Point Counter Point*, Spandrell says not to bother with the rest of the quartet – it's the Heiliger Dankgesang which is the main thing. But this is the wrong way to think of both that movement and the work as a whole. Beethoven is all about contrast, progressions of emotion, and ultimate unity/resolution. In the novel, Spandrell focuses only on the slow movement – and suffers the consequences as a result: death. Beethoven and the quartet live on, fighting first with 'new strength' and then with commendable vigour in the *al fresco* final movements. The visions and experiences of heaven (glimpsed in the second movement and then sustained in the third) are not the whole story – in life or the music.

Beethoven would write three more string quartets. One (op.130) would explore greater diversity, another (op.131) more unity, and the third (op.135) more liberty. But op.132 achieves a near-perfect mixture of all three elements, binding variety, balance and freedom to an extent never previously attained in the string quartet. It takes immense gambles with its contrasts, and on paper they sometimes seem impossible to reconcile into a resounding unity. But Beethoven does, and this psychological development is a fascinating marvel: we're caught up in the drama of this work perhaps more than any other of Beethoven's quartets. For many it is quite reasonably and convincingly his finest achievement in the genre.

The present book will award that 'gold medal' to op.131, but there is nothing second best about op.132. It stands as a testament to learning, creativity and imagination; to risk and respect. This string quartet shows what is possible when a brain and a heart are allowed to function together at their highest level, emotion and intellect combining in flawless harmony to tell a truly compelling human tale – stuck on earth but gazing at the distant stars and wondering, with Hamlet, what dreams may come.

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<sup>68</sup> Now numbered as No.15 in A minor, op.132.

<sup>69</sup> Not to be confused with its more famous namesake Baden-Baden in southern Germany, Baden bei Wien is about forty kilometres south of Vienna. We can easily see what attracted the nature-loving, spa-seeking Beethoven: nestled in the vast Vienna Woods, the town is located at the mouth of the Schwechat River in the Saint Helena Valley (Helenental) and has fourteen hot springs.

70 Punning on the similarity between the German words for 'musical notes' and 'predicament,' Beethoven's text reads: 'Doctor, close the door to Death, notes ['Noten'] will help him who is in need ['Not']:'

71 Beethoven would very rarely compose when drunk, though he would sometimes have a little wine to aid his thoughts.

72 A location shortly to reappear in our tale under less happy circumstances.

73 Around 140 of them, dating from 1818 to Beethoven's death in 1827, survive, containing the written side of discussions, which Beethoven would then typically answer verbally. Topics include everything from music to politics and art to religion; the books also enclose numerous shopping lists for items as diverse as walking sticks, sugar and shoehorns. A complete English edition, in three volumes, is available from Boydell & Brewer.

74 Kuhlau was a leading figure in the Danish Golden Age. After fleeing his German homeland for Copenhagen to avoid conscription into the Napoleonic Wars, he wrote numerous works for piano and flute, as well as songs and other chamber music, in addition to music to accompany productions of Shakespeare's plays, then very fashionable. His larger-scale works were strongly influenced by Beethoven's music and included an opera, *The Magic Harp*, along with the singspiels *The Robber's Castle* and *Elves' Hill*.

75 They would also have some surprising upshots, even ones that took years to transpire. In September 1824, to another visitor to Baden – Andreas Stumpff, a German living in London – Beethoven professed his love for Handel and Mozart. Learning that the composer, despite his passion, lacked many Handel scores in his musical library, Stumpff secretly swore to acquire them for his idol. A few weeks before his death, lying ill in Vienna, Beethoven received the huge forty-volume complete edition of Handel's work. It had taken Stumpff a long time to track down, but he had done what he had vowed to do, and it brought Beethoven some of the greatest musical happiness he had ever known, not least in the bedridden confinement at the end of his life.

76 A contract was agreed in September 1825, but it took two years before the music was in print, by which time Beethoven had been dead for several months.

77 Two more suitable, public performances took place, on 6 and 20 November.

78 The British premiere, in a concert given by the Philharmonic Society (who had commissioned the work), had its Ode to Joy sung in Italian and was for the most part well received by a knowledgeable, intrepid audience. During his time in Austria, Smart tried several times – unsuccessfully – to get Beethoven to travel to London.

79 Now catalogued as WoO 193, it is thirty seconds of daft – though not a little poignant – fun.

80 Beyond the Ninth, the Kärntnertor had seen some extraordinary premieres: the final version of *Fidelio* in 1814, as well as Haydn's *Der krumme Teufel* (1753), Mozart's piano concerto No.25 (1787), Salieri's *Falstaff* (1799), Schubert's eerie song 'Erlkönig' (1821) and Weber's *Euryanthe* (1823). In the years to come, it would witness the Vienna debut of Frédéric Chopin, Donizetti's *Linda di Chamounix* (1842), *Maria di Rohan* (1843) and *Dom Sébastien* (1845), as well as Offenbach's *Die Rheinnixen* in 1864. Shortly thereafter, it was razed to make way for the Vienna Court Opera and apartments which eventually became the luxury Hotel Sacher.

81 And future, for it would be a vital strategic key for several crucial musical works to come, most notably Schumann's Fourth, Dvořák's Seventh, Bruckner's Ninth, Mahler's Third, Shostakovich's Fifth, Sibelius's Sixth (as well as his violin concerto), plus Liszt's *Dante*, Nielsen's *Inextinguishable* and Havergal Brian's *Gothic Symphonies*. In the twenty-first century, Hans Zimmer would almost obstinately utilize D minor for his film music, including in the scores to *Gladiator* (2000) and *The Dark Knight* (2008).

82 *À la recherche du temps perdu*. Proust's title for his series of novels might serve as a convenient moniker for Beethoven's last quartets as a whole.

- 83 By allowing himself to be shot. Usually when this scene is reported, people tend to give the impression Spandrell is merely lying on his bed taking pills, or some other passive exit accompanied by Beethoven's divine sounds. It's more complex – and violent – than that.
- 84 The first of the *Four Quartets*, 'Burnt Norton', was published in 1936's *Collected Poems, 1909–1935*. The other three – 'East Coker', 'The Dry Salvages' and 'Little Gidding' – were written during World War II and issued separately, before all four were published together in 1943.
- 85 The universal appeal and connectivity of the number four has also encouraged any number of fanciful interpretations of Eliot's *Four Quartets* – from the four elements and the four states of matter to the four horsemen of the Apocalypse. The quartering of the temperate year into spring, summer, autumn and winter is a further abiding concern of the poems, with rich, evocative, poignant imagery associated with the changing seasons.
- 86 To mention every appearance and transformation of the 'ABC' motif would be an arduous task, far beyond the scope and purposes of this book, but the reader is invited to consider Beethoven's intentions and technique as akin to Wagner's leitmotifs in the *Ring*: the basic motif is constantly altering, inverting, reversing and so forth for a variety of musico-dramatic reasons.
- 87 The ethereal qualities of this movement, along with the dance elements, evoke the sinuous, sonorous worlds of Bach's violin sonatas and partitas (BWV 1001–6), as well as the anxious, majestic spheres of his cello suites (BWV 1007–12). Beyond atmosphere, the structure of the cello suites is also suggested by Beethoven's next quartet, op.130, with its unprecedented six movements.
- 88 The Lydian scale is similar to an F major scale, though with a B natural rather than B flat.
- 89 This is where orchestrations of the Beethoven's quartets fail to account for his intentions or to sonically articulate the notion of striving as the four instruments on their own do.
- 90 At this moment in the quartet, we do well to recall poor Maurice Spandrell in Huxley's *Point Counter Point* and his celestial, trans-dimensional claim for this music.

## Chapter Eight

### Contemporary Forever: *Op.130 in B-flat major & Große Fuge*

**I**n September 2015, hedge fund manager Kenneth Griffin purchased Jackson Pollock's *Number 17A* (1948) from fabled record producer David Geffen for \$200,000,000 – a then record-breaking price for any work of art. The painting is an anarchic mosaic of oil paint drips and splashes on fibreboard, a pioneering technique that made Pollock both a household name and target of derision ('My kid could do that!'). Yet each square inch of *Number 17A*, one of the most chaotic and controversial paintings in history, is now worth over \$130,000.

When you first gaze at this extraordinary work, its colourful confusion is the thing that stands out most, its abstract bedlam. But peer closer, linger a little longer, and pictures, images, ideas, even narratives, begin to form in your eye. In many ways, it is an optical equivalent of Beethoven's op.130 string quartet in B-flat major, and especially its grand, unruly finale: the *Große Fuge*.

Deliberately unbalanced, where op.132 had a dramatic equilibrium op.130 develops the string quartet into a warzone of conflict and instability. It progresses from a vast sonata-form opening to an even bigger fugal finale, with, in between, four briefer movements of various distinctive styles, types and tropes. In op.130, oddity and alienation surround the poetic and the popular, their encircling ironies threatening to tear the whole work apart into



magnificent mayhem. Each movement is highly individual, even aggressively personalized, glittering in idiosyncratic, kaleidoscopic colour and shimmering illumination. Yet, for all the various reflections and refractions, the quartet is less pearls on a string than bombs on a tightrope and, played well, this chamber work still retains its power to shock and surprise.

Was Beethoven a prophet or a lunatic? A psychic or psychotic? His new piece for string quartet did indeed scandalize everyone from the moment of its first performance, a confusion (and even repulsion) which eventually forced its creator to substitute a new finale, in a bid to rein in the whole. But whether with the serrated, austere Große Fuge – as its original finale is known – or the splendidly tongue-in-cheek replacement (or even both together), this remains a disproportionate string quartet of unparalleled audacity and authority. Whimsical, sardonic, dangerous and alert, it may never have the theatrical popularity of op.132, or the miraculous integrity of op.131, but op.130 is Beethoven at his most vigilant and extreme, showing just how far he is prepared to stretch form (and patience) to develop his art, taking string quartet form to new levels of ambition and unclassical design, to a unique and unholy place which as a conception probably remains unmatched even now.

In op.130, the lifelong Beethovenian tenet of contrast reached its logical endpoint of nearly fragmenting the music entirely. But it is Beethoven's ability to push things as far as he can without falling into total disorder that is the mark of his brilliance as much as his insurrection. Extremity is now no longer a vice or a recalcitrant streak, it is a governing principle, a philosophical ideology – with significant consequences. More than a century after op.130's premiere, the composer of *The Rite of Spring* would famously claim this to be 'an absolutely contemporary piece of music that will be contemporary forever'. Stravinsky knew all about Beethoven the mystic, Beethoven the futurist, Beethoven the time traveller – and, decades on from his own statement, both composers have been proved right.

In this string quartet, the musician who can no longer hear asks us to ponder human fragility, to contemplate the ease with which we can lose hope and descend into disarray, as well as to reflect on the endless enigmas which will always elude us. Neither comedy nor tragedy nor chaos, op.130 surprises us in new ways as we attempt to understand it – before we realize that not understanding it might just be the point.



Work on op.130 – the third and final of the quartets for Prince Galitzin – had commenced in August 1825 and would be completed by November. In the middle of these labours, in October, Beethoven returned to Vienna, after a long cure down in Baden. Once again he was on the move, moving house for the umpteenth time around the city he had first made his home more than quarter of a century before. In fact, this would be the last time he would change residence, for this was to be Beethoven's final dwelling and the house in which he died less than eighteen months later. The eternal wanderer had, at last, reached his ultimate destination.

He took four spacious and – as the estate agents say – *well-appointed* rooms in an apartment named the Schwarzschanierhaus ('Black Spaniard house'; it had been built by black-robed Benedictine monks). It was comfortable, one of the best flats Beethoven had ever occupied, and all set for him to trash with his hopeless personal habits and lax attitude to household management. In the bedroom went both his beloved Broadwood and Graf pianos. Another room he piled high with manuscripts and books: part library, part storeroom, it was seldom subjected to the indignity of cleaning. It became a strange space, but nonetheless a vital tool and resource for the composer (even if finding things amid the heaps and masses was neither easy nor swift nor pleasant).

One room – doubtless smaller than that bestowed to the music – was given to the pair of domestic staff: an anonymous maid, plus an ancient cook named Sali. This cook was to become that rarest of creatures, a semi-permanent member of Beethoven's staff. She seemed utterly devoted to him: affectionate, fiercely defensive of his well-being, and with him to the end. Before then she would have much to endure for her master's health and tantrums would take on an even blacker turn in the months to come, exacerbated by continuing familial troubles with Beethoven's nephew Karl. But Sali knew the other sides to Beethoven, too: not only the granite genius, but the gentler, playful spirit who would be endearing and kind (when he wanted to be).

An additional advantage of the new apartment was that it was situated opposite a boyhood friend, Stephan von Breuning. In fact, Breuning and Beethoven had shared this

very flat, years earlier, before various arguments and disagreements (particularly over Beethoven's treatment of his nephew, always a very sore topic) upset their friendship and with it their domestic arrangement. A Vienna bureaucrat – he had something to do with the War Department, so he had presumably been kept fairly busy during his time in the city – Breuning was by now not a well man, and Beethoven, similarly ailing, took pity on him, and they became reconciled. The familiar Beethovenian wrath and indignation, that hot temper and stubbornness which had destroyed so many relationships, softened to an equally recognizable Beethovenian warmth and generosity. Beethoven had not seen his beloved Rhineland for years and revelled in hours spent reminiscing about his homeland with his old childhood chum, their rekindled camaraderie inspiring fondness and wistfulness for the Bonn he had left behind to make his name in Vienna, aeons ago at the end of the eighteenth century.

Breuning came with two bonuses. One was his wife, whom Beethoven commandeered to supervise some of his own domestic servants – including instructing poor prehistoric Sali in the art of cooking (despite her job description, she turned out not to be the world's finest culinary wizard) and making sure that at least some of the Beethovenian squalor was kept under control. Frau von Breuning had limits, however. While she was happy to try to organize a little of Beethoven's chaos, she absolutely refused to stay there to dine, which seems entirely reasonable. Instead, Beethoven would frequently be invited over the way to join the family for meals. During one of these gatherings, the Breunings' daughter let out a shriek – why we don't know – and Beethoven laughed with joy because he had heard it: extreme sounds could still just about penetrate. Like so many of his social events at this time, these dinners must have meant a great deal to him, preventing total isolation, even while they also served to remind him of what he didn't have: a family.

The other advantage of the renewed Breuning companionship came in the form of his friend's son, Gerhard, a boy of twelve when Beethoven moved back into the district. Gerhard allowed Beethoven to have a consort who didn't come with the complications of family or sex or love: he could indulge the boy with that avuncular charm the composer so desperately loved to give off. They would go for many walks around Vienna together – Beethoven often mistaken for a tramp, much to Frau von B's dismay – the composer

delighting in coming up with new nicknames for the boy, as well as telling him about various projects. Struggling to keep up with Gerhard's impish cavorting, Beethoven would wheeze along, his legs and sides aching, but delighted to be with a being of such a disposition. Indeed, one of his nicknames for the boy was Ariel, after the spirit in *The Tempest* – who was, lest we forget, kept in service by Prospero for most of the play, though Beethoven seems to have been far kinder to his friend's boy than the magus ever was to his sprite.

Another name he had for Gerhard was 'Hosenknopf' ('trouser button'), because the boy stuck to him just like a clothing fastener. During a walk in the elaborate Schönbrunn Palace, Beethoven would sarcastically comment on the ridiculous organization of the trees, the paths. It was all dressed up, a trick, full of unnecessary ornament and display. Beethoven, of course, as he would frequently tell his new friend, preferred the wildness of unspoilt nature: it was, after all, like him. Though such comments could be cynical, we should see them as products of illness and sadness: he probably couldn't always manage longer trips to his beloved unblemished nature, away from extravagant palaces and the insecurities of princes or emperors. (He was also probably forbidden from taking Gerhard too far from town, for fear that all manner of calamities might ensue.)

Gerhard would buzz and hum like an insect around Beethoven's slow tread, enthusing on the sights that meant nothing – or worse – to the rapidly ageing composer. But the boy's energetic spirit lifted Beethoven's own moods, as he delighted in the freedom and frivolity of childhood. He would sometimes share with the boy details about the enterprises he was undertaking or planned for the future, for whatever his pessimism or poor health, Beethoven's mind never lost its dynamism, its constant creativity. Scribbling questions into a conversation book and then thrusting it into Beethoven's hand, Gerhard would inquire about this or that and we get back tantalizing titbits: a new instrumental symphony was in his mind, and with it a 'new gravitational force.' Quite what he meant by that we can only guess, but a tenth Beethoven symphony would doubtless have been as fascinating as the nine that preceded it – and it would have been refracted through the intense, groundbreaking work on the late quartets.<sup>21</sup>



Towards the end of 1825, a letter arrived unexpectedly from Beethoven's old friend Franz Wegeler – who we saw helping with rehearsals for the First Piano Concerto in 1795, and who was the first friend Beethoven felt able to trust enough to confess his deafness to, in 1801. Their friendship had not been subjected to the frictions of proximity – any proximal friendship with Beethoven would eventually go off the rails or hit the buffers – and the physical distance between them helped conserve and sustain their closeness. Writing to his old friend, Wegeler apologized for not being in contact and updated Beethoven with news of the people from his past, including former loves and their general circle from those years in Bonn. He touched upon various gossip and scandals – including the long-standing rumour that Beethoven was the illegitimate son of the king of Prussia.<sup>92</sup>

Beethoven enjoyed the letter, but he wouldn't write back for a year. He was busy. By January 1826, the op.130 string quartet in B-flat major – the third and final *Galitzin* Quartet – had been posted to Artaria publishing house, and a couple of months later the work had its premiere. It was to be an event and a date – 21 March 1826 – to live in musical history, one of those crucial milestones, like 10 June 1865 (*Tristan und Isolde*) or 29 May 1913 (*Le Sacre du printemps*), where everything seems to both halt and explode.

Wrapped against the rancorous chill of the early evening on that first day of spring, Beethoven left his apartment building and trudged bleakly, belligerently, against the virulent final winds of winter, kitted out in his usual eclectic assortment of rags and riches. As he walked the silent streets children would taunt and tease, adults scowl and stare, for Vienna – then as now – likes its oddities only with limits, permitting drab bourgeois horseplay but no arty slovenliness. As many have observed, this was, and can still be, a city made not of stone or bronze or brass but loneliness and lies.

But Beethoven hardly cares, and certainly not today, for another new quartet is to be unveiled. He has been urged to keep away from the performing venue for the premiere of op.130: his friends say not only will his presence make everyone nervous, but he will likely cause a scene (again). The manic ferocity, the sonic collisions, of the work, are liable to cause trouble. Go to the pub, enjoy some beer, and we'll come and find you afterward, they had said.

Night fell as Beethoven entered a favourite tavern, ordered a beer and went to sit down,

waiting in a quiet corner for the performance to go ahead and then for the reports to filter back. People tended to stay away from him when he was by himself in public: interaction would typically have meant at best confusion, or worse, arguments. Under the pub's low roof and beside its roaring fire, he sat amid his manuscripts with a few time-padding beers, likely pondering the dangerous work now finally being given that most taxing of things: a public airing.

Beethoven himself was cautiously excited by the uncompromising ending he had given the quartet: that beast of a finale, the Große Fuge. The whole quartet, he felt, was one of his best. The Schuppanzigh players hadn't quite got the hang of it when they'd played it through with the composer; he knew its challenges but he also expected people's minds and abilities to raise themselves to his art's games, however difficult, however inscrutable.

Eventually, there was a noise at the door and in rushed a few gentlemen, craning their necks, searching for the composer. Finding him, they hurried over, shouting and scribbling for him, delightedly telling him about the sensation – as they saw it – of the evening. We can imagine some of the exchanges...

- A success, Master! Much of your new work has pleased!
- The fugue...?
- Your new quartet is a triumph!
- The fugue...?
- The presto and tedesca were encored! A coup, Master!
- The fugue...?
- It is ... with a work ... a new work of this kind, Master ...
- The presto and tedesca were encored!
- *Repeated*, Master!

After a fair bit of this, the friends of the composer were forced to concede that the Große Fuge had not been a success. Although much of these exchanges is unclear or lost to time, one of Beethoven's replies has gone down in musical folklore, its angry bovine summation doubtless corresponding with many artists' reaction towards an unfavourable assessment of a new and challenging work:

And why didn't they encore the fugue?! That *alone* should have been repeated!  
CATTLE! ASSES!!



It is amusing to ponder what that first audience, or the first players – or its commissioner, Prince Galitzin – truly thought of this work. (We are fortunate: we have had the interval of a couple of centuries, and the dangerous, outlandish worlds of Wagner and Webern, Boulez and Stockhausen, to help us cope with Beethoven's peculiarity.) The two quartets which preceded op.130, opp.127 and 132, were, for all their phenomenal innovation, at least fairly conventional in design, save the mini-march movement which was needed to connect the astral Heiliger Dankgesang with op.132's finale.<sup>93</sup>

Op.130 starts big, though of a scale one might anticipate for a first movement, especially in Beethoven. But then it veers off into a mixture of moods and styles – almost taking the string quartet back in time to a world of eighteenth-century suites or divertimenti. This magnificent medley of movements leads to a finale of outrageous proportions and equally shocking impenetrability. The sheer audacity and eccentricity, the blind cheek, must have bemused, even angered, many. Was this man mocking them? Or was he simply mad? There were rules, *conventions*, that even the rebel pioneer Beethoven had hitherto mostly adhered to – at least in the ears of those submitting his work to only a casual, laid-back listening.

The audience that cold night in Vienna were not alone in their bemusement, however, and it wasn't long before Beethoven's publisher – Matthias Artaria – tried to convince him to write an alternative finale to the Große Fuge – something lighter, kinder, easier. (He had paid a fortune for this quartet and was understandably concerned about getting his money back via future sales.) We can envisage Beethoven's reaction to such a preposterous request. His art, after all, was not there to be gentle or mellow, something to soothe the pains of a civil servant's day away. It was electricity, storm and fire, an exhibition of humanity's power and passion amid an indifferent cosmos. He wasn't interested in what people found sympathetic or accessible.

A bit of cautious, psychologically astute, persuasion from his friend Karl Holz, however,

changed things. There were the potential financial benefits not only of a new finale (which could be invoiced separately) but of a quartet more manageable to the delicate ears of the Viennese public, as well as the blundering fingers of incompetent string players. So, after a day of Beethovenian fulminations about his art, the composer caved. For one thing there were bills to pay – and an unsaleable quartet wouldn't contribute there. Beethoven was no lofty fool either, for all his stubbornness, and knew that a quartet which was never played was of no use to him, or his reputation. If a minor modification could be made to reap a bigger reward, then so be it.

Moreover, all was not lost for the *Große Fuge*: Artaria was keen to simply spin off the gigantic finale as a distinct piece, a stand-alone quartet whose exuberance and vision could surely be better regarded in this way (thoughts similar to the ones Beethoven himself had had regarding the choral finale to the Ninth Symphony). It would not be forgotten, thrown on the trash heap, but raised up and commended via its independence. Such was part of the argument, anyway, though clearly many had doubts about the potential of the *Große Fuge* in whatever form it existed.

As it was, Artaria commissioned a four-hand piano arrangement of the fugue (op.134) to be published together with the autonomous string quartet version, now op.133.<sup>94</sup> The new finale, however, did not immediately come forth from the Beethovenian pen. He would write two more string quartets – opp.131 and 135 – before settling down in the autumn of 1826 to compose the alternate ending to op.130 (and, brilliant though it is, it is often hard not to see the new conclusion as a sardonic riposte to the shortcomings of the Viennese public and publishers).

In performance, players are today presented with three choices:

1. The original six-movement version with the *Große Fuge* as the finale.
2. The reworked six-movement version, with the *Große Fuge* taken out and replaced by the allegro finale.
3. A seven-movement version, with both the *Große Fuge* (following the *Cavatina*) and then the substitute allegro finale.

Although rarely performed, this third option – which can feel like a false, overloaded



compromise – in many ways solves many of the problems the Große Fuge creates, allowing its audacity to be retained, as well as its counter-balancing effect on the huge first movement, while still permitting the quartet to close in something like coherence. The British composer Robert Simpson – creator himself of fifteen of the finest quartets of the twentieth century – was long an advocate for this seven-movement version, and although the quartet is not often presented onstage like this, many people probably experience it this way via recordings which tend to include both finales (unless, of course, they programme their machines to only play one).<sup>95</sup>

The Große Fuge is eccentric, unique even, yet still incorporates elements from earlier in the op.130 quartet as well as Beethoven's own previous music. Moreover, whatever its wrath and ferocity, it concludes in peace and an exquisite, fragile beauty. So what was it about the Große Fuge that people found so hard to take? What does it do that is so demanding, so unfathomable, even now? What was it that Beethoven was trying to achieve in this definitive puzzle, this ultimate conundrum of his art?



To answer – or, at least, examine – these perhaps unanswerable questions, we have to reconnoitre the wider hinterlands where Beethoven's music had been heading in those final years, delving again into the works which preceded his arrival at the final quartets. Beethoven's art had long been uncompromising and forward-looking, anticipating developments that wouldn't occur for decades and more – indeed, almost all his art is in some way defined by its desire to quiz, push and disband boundaries. In the later works, however, this was taken even further, with many being of an enormous scope and inordinate technical complexity which presented immense new challenges – for both listeners and performers.

With the proviso that opp.1 through 105 were, in some measure, *all* pioneering works, with op.106, in 1818, begins Beethoven's desire to stretch the limits of both musical form and musical endurance to their absolute breaking point. For this was his twenty-ninth piano sonata, now nicknamed the *Hammerklavier*, a work which ushered in Beethoven's final

artistic chapter, a phase where size, transcendence and convolution combine to generate some frightening works of art, pieces for which we need a deep breath to merely contemplate, never mind perform or create.

The term 'Hammerklavier' (literally, 'hammer-keyboard') is really only the German term for the Italian 'pianoforte', and was actually on the autograph of op.106's predecessor, the twenty-eighth piano sonata, op.101. However, in the English-speaking world, this fearless, foreboding and obstinate word has now more or less attached itself exclusively to Beethoven's great B-flat major sonata – and it feels wholly appropriate for a work of this length, grandeur, inflexible menace and absolute technical demands, as well as sheer emotional range, from anger through desolation, confusion and transcendence. Writing to the publisher Tobias Haslinger about op.101, Beethoven claimed that 'what is difficult is also beautiful, good, great and so forth' – a statement which impeccably encapsulates so much of Beethoven's methodology, art and arduous life.

If the *Hammerklavier* anticipates the late quartets, it is also the successor to, or transition from, the *Eroica*, the *Emperor* and the *Razumovskys*. Beethoven needed the space all these works provided in order to work out and work through the musical, emotional and intellectual ideas he wanted to explore. The ideas were grand, and they needed a grand architecture to display them. Like Richard Wagner – or Pieter Bruegel or Herman Melville – Beethoven demanded the largest canvases for some of his greatest art. Granted, smaller works could – and would – play an important, luminous role in his artistic and philosophical expression. It is also true that both detail and compression have a key function in his larger works: he constructed them from a myriad of the smallest details, each of which is as important, and as fascinating, as the wider totality. But Beethoven's spacious musical imagination tended to require capacious battlegrounds upon which to operate, and the *Hammerklavier* sonata is just such an arena.

Writing twenty-eight piano sonatas had given Beethoven good experience, but even so, across the *Hammerklavier's* four movements, he manages a breathless management of proportion and balance, arranging the work on a scale which, though large, is magnificently well-organized and breathes as a single, vast conception. Beyond constitution and magnitude, it is the gravity of the work, its absolute majesty and precipitous philosophical

weight, which also stands out. This, of course, is partly connected to its size, though as we have seen with many of the earlier sonatas, intense metaphysical debate can also occur in smaller packages. The *Pathétique*, *Moonlight*, *Waldstein* and *Appassionata* Sonatas had shown what was possible in terms of emotional expression and dramatic scope, as had, in their more diminutive way, ostensibly slighter works like opp.78 and 79. It is from all these that the oak of the *Hammerklavier* was born, and, in this colossal sonata, many of the pianistic, structural and expressive resources from across Beethoven's career converge in one mighty opus.

This magnificently obsessive sonata opens with a fanfare, a physical gesture where the rhythm alone is impressive and unforgettable – comparable to the openings of many of the symphonies. It is marked 'impetuoso', and rarely has the term been more apt than in the impulsive, hurried beginning to the *Hammerklavier*. Stops, pauses and repeats govern the commencement as a situation of extraordinary tension is established, which then enters into a barrage of dialogue and disagreement, peppered by tiny musical ideas that will come to be repeated, varied and shattered across the work. Atoms and particles, after all, concoct people, trees and galaxies.

As with the *Große Fuge* to come, counterpoint lies at the heart of the *Hammerklavier*, and already in the first movement we have intricate interchanges between the firm/heroic/dramatic and the spare/curving/contrapuntal, sonata form and ancient fugue flawlessly blended together.<sup>96</sup> This complex, compulsive, fanatical world needed both forms to fully convey the range of emotions and musico-intellectual contests Beethoven desired. All of these are, of course, only implicit, inferred – the narrative itself is one we have to generate for ourselves each time we open its pages or listen to its notes.

And some of those notes are incendiary bombs – like the forte stresses on feeble beats towards the end of the movement. It is a weird warzone, a triumph of anger and organization, extremity and paradox in satanic command. The old contrast between melody and harmony here, too, forge an unusual, even unlikely, alliance, merging notes and chords to create a new sonic environment and innovative musical soundscape.

The second movement is a terse scherzo, placed second, as in both the Ninth and the rushing presto mini-scherzo of op.130. It swallows the main idea of the opening movement and regurgitates it as a nimble farce, disconcertingly orthodox in appearance but with some

peculiar chuckles in its trio. Again, as we will see in op.130, this is a character piece, a mood, an episode – designed to delight but also to disorientate.

For the third movement of the *Hammerklavier*, we turn to one of Beethoven's largest and longest structures, a twenty-minute adagio in F-sharp minor, that remorselessly grief-stricken key which Mozart chose for the anguish of his twenty-third piano concerto's adagio. Beethoven here conjures a world of pain, an infinite universe of sorrow, in music that is relentlessly developing, endlessly weaving and wandering through the souls of its listeners. It roams, itinerant, its dark course interspersed by G major moments of immense beauty, flashes of light and warmth amid a cold cosmos. As with the *Heiliger Dankgesang* of op.132, and the *Cavatina* of op.130, this is Beethoven at his most human, his most affectionate, his most tender and aching.

Yet, of course, as with all his finest works, everything is generated by the most extraordinary technique and musical imagination, which is welded to its expressive content: method, means and emotion fused. A magnificent monologue, the *Hammerklavier's* adagio anticipates most of the Romantic piano literature to come: the great works of Liszt, Chopin, Schumann and Brahms are unthinkable without it.

In order to bridge the gap between the ethereal sphere of the adagio and the energetic violence of the last movement, the finale is given a short prelude. This preamble is an exquisite piece of improvisatory charm, written sans most bar lines, so that the performer is unburdened to explore and express at will. As with Monteverdi's *L'Orfeo* (1607), Bach's *Art of Fugue* (1750), Wagner's *Die Meistersinger* (1868) and Mahler's Ninth Symphony (1909), this now becomes music which is discussing music. What is sound? What is composition? How do they fit together and why? The prelude quizzes and probes, looking for music, playing with music, picking up ideas for inspection like a punter examining peaches at a market, before discarding them and moving on.

Eventually, after a pugnaciously ephemeral impersonation of Bach,<sup>27</sup> the true finale of the *Hammerklavier* is discovered: a phenomenal fugue, the evident progenitor of the *Große Fuge*. The main subject of the finale is mercilessly altered and metamorphosed, and in the customary fugal fashion: there are episodes which enlarge and intensify the subject, others which reverse or invert it – and all with the old-fashioned skeletons of exposition/episode,

subject/countersubject.

But this is no mere showing off or conformity designed to exhibit learning. Beethoven cared for neither. The fugal writing here is focused on the aesthetic, the lyrical, communicative quality Beethoven was striving for, expanding and exulting technique, even logic, for the sake of wider expressive purposes. This fugue learns from the past, even respects it, but knows imagination has its rights too, and that the future belongs to a more poetic employment of contrapuntal technique – counterpoint as a means of expression not erudition.

Amid the traditional treatment of the fugal subject, Beethoven mixes in an adherence (or semi-adherence) to sonata form, with variation and development of the theme alongside and within the counterpoint textures. This fugue/sonata fusion is like adding chillies to a curry or petrol to a fire, heating the music to extraordinary levels of excitement and explosive fascination. The music surges along, modulating all over the place, adjusting and transforming itself with a perfect combination of technical commitment and ecstatic autonomy. Everything is excessive and euphoric, a frenzied world of experimentation and marvellous elucidation.

Titanic, manic, sublime. This is truly symphonic writing for the piano, a musico-dramatic survey of form, genre and feeling which leaves us awestruck, spellbound – and probably slightly confused. It is a mighty celebration of music – and performance – itself. The hero of the *Hammerklavier* is not a Napoleonic or even Promethean figure, but Orpheus himself: music. Yet this was no dead end or musicological cul-de-sac. The *Hammerklavier* opened up another new realm for Beethoven, and drove him on to create his final masterpieces, showing him the way forward, exhibiting the means to extend and combine his reach. Often, this was in surprising ways, steering him towards a concision and calm a long way from the thunderous complexity of op.106. But there would also be clearer offspring, more visibly related consequences, and op.130's *Große Fuge* stands as the most obvious spawn of the *Hammerklavier*'s propagative noise.



If the Heiliger Dankgesang at the centre of op.132 is a sun, a source of light, warmth and energy, the Große Fuge from the next quartet, op.130, is a black hole, a movement of gravitational collapse and boundless power, sucking everything into it, warping space-time and producing some violent effects. It is ferocious, unreachable, weird, filled with contradictions, absurdities – a musical Armageddon.

Yet, just as star-forming regions are often connected to black holes, driving the expansion of the universe,<sup>98</sup> the Große Fuge is also a creative, generative force, not merely a cosmically destructive one. Both within and beyond its own boundaries, this monumental work for string quartet has been able to produce new ways of conceiving sound, arguably opening up a conduit to many of the developments later in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth. As we have seen, Stravinsky endlessly enthused about the Große Fuge, knowing its prophetic creative and destructive power. Even more vitally, to a significant extent the Große Fuge represents an early incursion in the assault on the diatonic tonal system, its main subject a belligerent grandparent of the twelve-tone technique Schoenberg would unleash upon an unsuspecting planet many decades after Beethoven was first bemusing audiences.

Moreover, by ending the quartet in this fashion, the Große Fuge alters what has gone before, creating a hindsight that shifts our perception of the preceding movements' moods – though the enormous opening movement is largely able to stand firm, a mirroring and monumental pillar on the other side of the op.130 temple to the Große Fuge. By contrast, when the substitute finale is performed, the divine and sublime Cavatina (the fifth movement) becomes the centre – emotional or otherwise – of the quartet, while previously, when the Große Fuge came last the slow movement was more of a contemplative prelude to this gigantic and compelling finale. To a degree, the Große Fuge might seem to undermine the power of the Cavatina. But the Cavatina's inherent musical strengths and heavenly charms are surely sufficient, and powerful, enough not only to withstand the onslaught of the fugue, but in fact to shine even brighter in retrospect when we have then experienced such a confrontational ending. We appreciate peace far more during war.

There has always – from the first rehearsals on – been a danger of the Große Fuge undermining the whole quartet in the eyes of audiences, as if its eccentric, devastating qualities were evidence of the insanity of the entire work. The alternative finale did some

honest labour to prevent such perceptions, of course – and op.130 is an exceptional quartet, the equal of any of the late works, with or without the fugue. Yet Beethoven wrote this work with a grand fugue to close it, and we should be wary of any attempts to separate the fugue from its parent quartet, even those semi-sanctioned by the composer himself. This is not least because, as we have said, of the strange and fascinating ways the Große Fuge adjusts the rest of the quartet, consciously and unconsciously, before, during and after we hear it. The thrill (or dread) of the fugue to come must modify our experience – especially of the Cavatina, its sense of serenity and segregation the more moving given the loudmouthed neighbour next door, about to return home...

The other four movements, too, are subtly altered through their exposure, or antecedence, to the fugue. A range of comedy, irony, dance and pensive thoughts, they are atmospheric pieces, sonics auras which variously prepare the ground for the elegiac tragedy of the Cavatina and the boisterous energy of the fugue. In many ways, they function like the succession of musical paintings in Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (1874), or the first five movements of Gustav Mahler's *Das Lied von der Erde* (1908), prior to the huge finale of the 'Abschied' ('Farewell'), a piece as long as the others combined.

In the Mahler, these songs (which are also symphonic movements) generate a significant assortment of textures and moods, contrasting with each other and varying the musical material, prior to a cohesive finale. Similarly, in op.130 Beethoven is able to present a series of narrative, pictographic or psychological constituents which operate as a diverse group, a sequence that offers a compelling mix of colours, genres and styles, before the ultimate mood pieces of the Cavatina and the Große Fuge – the former a form of Abschied, the latter surely the definitive Willkommen.

The Grand (or Great) Fugue of op.130 is not a fugue in the sense Bach would have recognized – that is, an inexorable calculation, addition, subtraction, multiplication (and realization) of opportunities to combine and recombine ideas inherent within a given subject or subjects.<sup>99</sup> The malignant moon of the Große Fuge certainly steals some of these solar and quasi-mathematical practices, but it is far more interested in the poetico-dramatic potential of such systems. While the fugal dogma performs a principal part, it is supplemented, and eventually overrun, by other voices, other devices, other textures. Both a

discourse and a drama are being played out here, which is never the empty anarchy many would have it to be – though, of course, not only does the interchange get rather animated, but it is also in some sense a deliberate representation of incomprehensible madness, an archenemy of the academic fugue.

This massive and miscellaneous, even heterogeneous, string quartet – and especially its ‘great fugue’ – are the quintessence of Beethovenian irony and dislocation, paradox and pandemonium. Op.130 is a prophecy of conflict, a revelation of disarray, a work of art which glowers forward, backward and sideways at time: contemporary forever. For all that, for all op.130’s recklessness and elusiveness, it retains a beauty – not only the fundamental beauty of chaos, but an awe-inspiring grasp at otherworldliness too. The Große Fuge, if it is permitted its original placement, ends a great quartet in a space known to us all: the unknown. In this sense it is a portal, a door of discovery, an inquiry occupying a liminal space between here and a possible hereafter.

In his next quartets, opp.131 and 135, Beethoven would offer tantalizing responses to this superbly tendered question.



## No.13 in B-flat major

### 1. *Adagio ma non troppo* – *Allegro*.

Op.130 opens with a copious and prodigious sonata-form movement which acts as a counterweight to the equally elephantine Große Fuge at the other end of the quartet (at least in the original version). Three dissimilar ideas, clips and snatches of what is to come, are offered: first, there is a disturbing sigh, which grinds and grows; then comes a brooding fugato; finally, the movement proper gets underway with an abrupt allegro surge. This will be the overall disposition of the movement, and the quartet generally: a mix of moods and feelings – one moment grave and intense, then meditative and preoccupied, or suddenly erupting in alacrity. More than a dozen fluctuations in tempo and temperament disrupt the passage of the first movement alone.

But back to the beginning. It starts slowly, adagio, with a by now recognizable arrangement that will eventually lead, with wonderful subtlety and assurance, to a swifter pace. Everything is still, but inexplicably unnerving. Part of this might be our own (now) unavoidable knowledge about the chaos and antagonism to come, but the music also has an inherently discomfiting quality to it. Initially, everything is snugly intertwined, condensed, the four instruments playing together as a tight group. It proceeds slowly, by stops and glances, moans and groans.

Then, in the eighth bar, the cello provides a slightly more animated fugato figure that hints at the faster music to come, but which has a curiously old-fashioned aspect (though with contemporary dynamics). One by one the other instruments begin to answer their cello by recalling the opening sighs, the music gradually moving into a more fascinating contrapuntal texture, with darker, threatening harmonies.

Suddenly, the first violin explodes into a commotion of quick notes. This eruption begins the allegro and is marked by an intriguing little Mahlerian fanfare from the second violin, weirdly mixing and mangling its rhythms and accents. Everyone joins in, though hardly has the allegro begun than it stops, discontinued by a return of the adagio, where the opening material is briefly but richly worked. Before long the allegro returns with its jumble of fanfares and flurried notes, the latter now permitted to become the proper presentation

main theme of the movement, and both are accompanied by an accelerated version of the early fugato.

It is an admirably perverted sonata-form opening, as striking, disorientating, playful and peculiar as any Beethoven had yet written. The vagaries of mood, of which there are many, are less schizophrenic than ironic, full of jollity and vivacity. At long last, a second theme is introduced, *sotto voce*, by the cello, offering an interlude of lyrical tranquillity in G flat. This is joined first by some sharp staccato, then by smooth legato variants of the main theme's prattling flurries, which expand before climaxing in a dignified new rendering of the fanfare, fortissimo, which can bring the exposition to a satisfying close, before it is repeated (the only *Galitzin* Quartet that asks for such an echo).

Once the exposition has been reiterated, the movement quietly moves into its development section – one of the queerest Beethoven ever wrote. Fragments of the adagio and allegro come and go. All is terse, ambiguous, unemotional, appearing like a ghost from the future, neurotic and fixated harmonies throbbing beneath the fanfare subject and a long legato line which repeatedly ascends, circles, then disappears. We are locked in a dream, a musical abstraction which seems to last far longer than it actually does, Beethoven superbly warping our sense of time and space. Eventually an ecstatic phrase is imparted three times by the cello and twice on the first violin, breaking the stasis, the other instruments interjecting.

Taking the hint, the first violin rapidly jumps to the fanfare and begins the recapitulation, where a range of variation and elaboration on the original material takes place – though without too much eccentricity. Nonetheless, it is clearly a Beethovenian recapitulation, indifferent to verbatim replications and keen to add a little flux and spice: judicious impertinence and spirited surprises are the order of the day.

The coda takes us back to the opening adagio's sighs, followed by the flurries and then the fanfare. Beethoven is strong-arming the principal ideas of the movement together, not as an attempt at resolution but to once and for all show their divergence, their incompatibility. It is a coda coercion which then forces them to split apart and fragment, the fanfare attempting one final call before it is brusquely shushed and the movement ends.

Dense and intense, despite its length, and drenched by a few simple ideas, this is Beethoven at his most relentlessly paradoxical and magnificently mysterious. We have a vast,

expansive movement, but one which also seems tense and overwhelmed, with a probing mutability of polyphony and transparency, thrust and indecision. It is still recognizably in a classical arrangement, but it is an elaborate, ironic and unbalanced thesis on the sonata-form scheme, simultaneously enriching and obliterating it.

## 2. *Presto.*

Next we are given a series of diverse atmospheric pieces, almost Dickensian in character, and beginning with a charging mini-scherzo that recalls the sets of quirky little bagatelles (opp.119 and 126) which form an intriguing post-sonata coda to Beethoven's piano-writing career. This brief but utterly unforgettable movement swiftly advances in B-flat minor, arising in a murmur and barely pausing for breath. It has the vim and flight of a fairy, darting about with an inimitable snide charm and in an eerie light – hurried, persistent, but with an elegant lucidity. There is a slapstick, clowning trio in B-flat major, with high jinks from the first violin; then we re-enact the mini-scherzo material with some beguiling adaptations of the initial textures and motifs, before a minuscule and capricious coda which riffs on the movement's main ideas prior to being hastily shown the door. In less than two crazy, whirlwind minutes, Beethoven packs in a huge amount of energy and detail, casting his movement as almost deliberately farcical and strange, a flea circus of fun.

## 3. *Andante con moto, ma non troppo – Poco scherzoso.*

A slow movement is expected to come next and though it is indeed marked 'andante', it is appended 'poco scherzoso' ('a little flippantly') and forms a continuation of the mini-scherzo, though with the mood altered more to one of whimsy than the circus. This is a pleasant D-flat major intermezzo, still a place of strangeness but the incongruity shifted to curiosity not travesty. Neither fast nor slow, it a miracle of placid humour and gentle wit. If it is nostalgic, it is only in a nourishing, almost Russian, way: dreamy and delicately indulgent.

It opens in subdued rumination, with an exhaling melancholy from the first violin in B flat, shaking its head at the reckless riot of the mini-scherzo. Joined by the other instruments, the ambiance is akin to the regretful air which opens act three of Verdi's *Falstaff* (1893), as

the cold and sodden fat knight drinks his mulled wine in the pub, following his earlier unceremonious dumping in the Thames. In fact, this sombre reflection is based on the first movement's sighing *adagio* – though this *intermezzo* does not linger in sadness for long. Indeed, it has really all been just playful pathos, and swiftly the movement unfolds into a humming conviviality in D flat, with some wonderful sparkle and warmth – a nonchalant viola and cheerful cello among the highlights.

All is in orthodox sonata form, often sweet and singing, with exquisite, luxuriant textures as well as some tenderness light years from the opening two movements. There is an enchanting *cantabile* development that gives each of the four instruments a personalized subject, before the quartet pieces their colourful individual parts together to form a captivating stained-glass window.

#### 4. *Alla danza tedesca (Allegro assai)*.

For the fourth movement we switch to G major – the furthest distance possible from D flat, and the adjustment is immediately apparent. So too is the change in tempo, as we begin a neo-Mozartian German dance, speedy and agreeable, but from time to time with just a hint of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna in its blood. We are a classical string quartet, the music seems to say, but we know how to have fun too, how to party in sullen glad rags, all decadent and deliriously despairing.

At times, when Beethoven speeds things up, there is a spectral fright to the dance, a feeling that things are getting out of control, that the energy and debauchery merely offsets the fear. Colours, too, shift in this movement, from limpid pastels to more lurid hues, the composer magnificently exploring and exploiting the limited palette at his disposal.

This is op.130's second scherzo, but where the first was a fairground, this is an otherworldly ball, a proto-Mahlerian scherzo, spooky and unsettling, crowded by ghosts and the dead. The *presto*'s ideas were protean, yet here things are less complex, with a sinister simplicity to their presentation. The trio further augments the Mahlerian atmosphere by heading outdoors, from the ballroom to the meadows, with a hallucinatory rustic allure, echoing the slow movements of Mahler's Fourth and Sixth Symphonies, before returning to the earlier material then closing with a delightful pastoral echo.

## 5. *Cavatina* (*Adagio molto espressivo*).

There follows one of Beethoven's supreme movements: a deeply moving, almost impossibly poignant, *adagio*. Straightforward in design but intricate in texture, it is the very definition of 'elegiac', and a song of limitless sorrow (though it is, in fact, only around half the length of the slow movements of opp.127 and 132). Yet although this is a grief-stricken lament for happiness, it also encompasses a reconciled even defiant air, and with this additional element it prolongs the Mahlerian element to this quartet. This is since, in some ways, the *Cavatina* is Beethoven's anticipation of the great Austro-Bohemian composer's fragile but resilient song 'Ich bin der Welt abhanden gekommen' (1901), with its agonizing, resigned acceptance of human loneliness and isolation. Like Mahler's song, Beethoven's own seems to stretch time, the far-spun melodies so characteristic of the late music breeding their own communion with the clock.

The irony, comedy, nostalgia and dance of the first four movements now turn to a more profound kind of reflection. Beethoven himself was clear that this piece was composed amid deep melancholy, in the late summer of 1825 – and that merely thinking about the movement would bring the composer back to the tears which streamed down his face as he wrote it. Nonetheless, defining the exact mood of the *Cavatina* is less dependent on its internal character, or the circumstances of its composition, than on how we ourselves encounter it, whether young or old, happy or sad, rash or sympathetic. In this way, it becomes a lifelong fluctuating *tabula rasa* onto which we can project our own particular feelings. Performance can play its part, too, of course, and quartets must also reflect on how the movement is to function in the context of the entire work – especially as potentially either the throbbing heart of op.130 or perhaps as a prelude to the *Große Fuge* (though it can, of course, also be both).

Although the first violin is the leading singer of this extraordinary unbroken song, the lower voices are never mere accompaniment, instead providing a multifaceted, organic and self-motivated texture that both sustains and complicates the violin's material. Indeed, the movement begins *sotto voce* with strong, independent lines for these three instruments, which all materialize from the German dance, before the first violin begins its plaintive song. From here, whenever it needs to pause for breath, that song is maintained by the other

instruments – it is what gives this movement its remarkable, abiding span.

From this soft dynamic, things become even softer but with slightly agitated rhythms from the three lower voices and a shift – via the cello – to a remote D-flat major. Above this, Beethoven gives us one of his most inspired (and frightening) ideas: the first violin stumbles and wavers for several distressing bars, staring out across the void or into the abyss. The passage is marked 'beklemmt', which could straightforwardly be rendered 'anxious', 'anguished' or 'oppressed', but even these freighted words do not seem capture the full existential terror of the original German, which has shadowy associations with nightmares and thunderstorms, prisons and hospitals. It is all about dread and waiting, lingering and delays. This is the absolute dark centre of op.130 – and, perhaps, all Beethoven's music. Here we are not listening to a representation of pain but pain itself, raw and troubled, amid the utmost melancholic beauty.

But, as a core, it can move onward and outward, and the Cavatina song is able to swiftly return, Beethoven exploiting a harmonic device to make the return seem even quicker, like the mind darting back from its black thoughts. The Cavatina is now now more compressed than before, but able to bring consolation and relief after the 'beklemmt' episode, with the final sounds dying away – as they do in the last, evaporating pages of Mahler's Ninth Symphony (1909).

With this movement, again and again we feel the absolute cosmic injustice that this remarkable man was not permitted to hear his own extraordinary music – this flawless, exquisite blend of anguish, sadness, defiance and despair.

## 6. *Große Fuge* (op.133).

To follow the Cavatina, Beethoven concocted, as only this composer could, his most eccentric, ferocious, enigmatic and confrontational movement of all. In all music, there can be no greater or more sudden shift in emotional disposition or sonic content. It is outrageous, astonishing – and deeply moving in its own way as Beethoven refuses to lie down and instead gets up fighting, an attitude which augments the air of stubborn resilience already quietly present in the slow movement. For this, of course, is the 'Great Fugue', the 'Grand Fugue', the *Große Fuge*, a work which will still be avant-garde when the sun dies.

In order to try and unravel it a little, we can break it down into its ten sections, though, as with his Ninth Symphony's own revolutionary finale, doing so should not detract from the remarkable unity and cohesion Beethoven wishes this astonishingly diverse movement to retain. Although it can give the appearance of a multi-movement, almost Hegelian, work – not least on those very rare occasions when it is presented independently – it is crucial to preserve its status as a single conception, albeit one with frenzied variety.

1. Overtura<sup>100</sup>
2. Double Fugue
3. Double Fugato
4. Episode: March
5. Double Fugue
6. Fantasy
7. Double Fugato
8. March
9. Coda I
10. Coda II

Here some of the structure begins to reveal itself, showcasing not only the organization but the truculent qualities of the *Große Fuge*, which is ultimately an obsessive and furious battle for musical supremacy, much like the *Hammerklavier* Piano Sonata.

It opens with an 'Overtura', a term probably employed to differentiate it from any run-of-the-mill prelude which usually preceded fugues. Volatile sforzandos are detonated all over the place before the main theme of the *Große Fuge* is starkly though systematically presented to us, note by note, brick by brick. We travel through a section of violently shifting tempo and temperament, encountering music of punishing incoherence and dislocation, with fragments of sonic substance flung about, in a manner not unlike that of the beginning and end of the first movement. (It is also similar to both the exploratory rummaging which began the fugal finale of the *Hammerklavier* and the first part of the last movement of the Ninth Symphony: music about music; music concerning chaos and discovery.)

From here the fugue bursts into life – it is music that truly earns its moniker in the score, fortissimo – and refuses to give up for several relentless minutes, its main theme a peculiar,

violently jumping dotted rhythm which is counterbalanced by the opening subject. The players here have to contend with some furiously difficult writing – but this is part of Beethoven's plan. Just as the string players have to produce unfeasible figures in the Magic Fire Music section that closes *Die Walküre* (1856), which intentionally creates the flickering effect Wagner wanted, so in the *Große Fuge* impossibility is built into the writing. It is awkward and intense – precisely as Beethoven wished it to be. At times, we think the players are not up to it, or that our sound system is on the blink, or that the score has been printed wrong (upside down and back-to-front at times). But no: it is all part of the plan.

As the fugue surges along, we encounter some of the sections listed above, elements of the conventional interchange between exposition/theme/episode. But that is only a loose interpretation, the merest guide, to what is happening. So much uninhibited reworking of the material is going on that the landscape frequently takes on the appearance of a dangerous desert: extreme, hostile, defined by shifting forms and hallucinatory shapes, all mirages and ever-changing contours. That said, the music can also sometimes sound like a sergeant major with a hangover.

Material gets smashed together in a way which made the similar actions of the first movement seem positively tame, even friendly. It is as if we are stuck inside a particle collider, with notes as quarks and bosons, everything crashed and crushed, and with precious little, if any, space for meaningful evolutions. At one point our particle accelerator is abruptly shut down, to allow for a fugato in G flat to emerge which combines with fundamentals from the *Overtura*, the two weaving in and out of each with remarkable chaotic eloquence, but with a diminishing intensity.

After this, a march-like passage in B flat begins to modify the main theme into a lilting dance, almost a Bach-like gigue, before it is again transformed into a new A-flat fugue that proceeds to take on a furious resentment fighting against ostentatious augmentations of the main theme, the cello seething away in the bass. This leads to a magnificently grotesque mixture of fantasy and bedlam, ideas morphing and disintegrating, mutating and decomposing – the *Große Fuge* as both creator and destructor of music. Everything is left in an enticing, provocative, even tormenting, state of flux.

For the double coda, the severe, unyielding *Overtura* returns, a vast and majestic



affirmation scanning back across the dark expanse of space towards its own remote stellar explosion, aeons ago. From here resplendent, galactic vehemence subsides leaving only glittering remnants via elusive trills and a suggestive memory of the main theme which then rises gloriously to an imposing fortissimo termination.

It is a surprising, and deeply moving, resolution to the cosmic conflicts promulgated by this extraordinary piece of music, a technical marvel, which was written for just four string instruments, and seems to exist an inestimable distance from the formal, classical quartets with which Beethoven began his quartet career – though they, of course, contained the perilous kernels of what was to come.

### *7. Finale: Allegro.*

Six months after the ‘cattle and asses’ public premiere of op.130, Beethoven sketched a substitute/replacement finale for the quartet (though the work is sometimes presented with the fugue as the penultimate movement, and this one as the last). The ‘stand-in’ or ‘understudy’ finale can seem like an anti-climax – if we approach it in just this wrong way. Either we lament the absence of the great fugue, or we wish that it was the end of the quartet. Although it will always perhaps feel a pity not to close with the grandeur of the Große Fuge, the allegro (which is still some ten minutes long) has much to offer, not least as a smart, sardonic alternative to the imposing antagonism of its belligerent older brother.

If the enmity and irony of the first movement is counterbalanced by the similar disposition of the Große Fuge finale, the new ending to op.130 corresponds more closely to the lyrical, fanciful and highly individual internal episodes of the quartet, echoing their sense of play and caprice. At the same time, Beethoven could not resist some minute echoes of the original ending, as if the reverberating laughter of the the great fugue can still be heard as it melts into the distance or lingers locked in its cell nearby.

The finale opens brimming with confidence and jaunty joie de vivre, a spirit of fluency and exuberance that will last until its close. If this appears to be a Haydnesque, or even occasionally Schubertian, joy, it should not detract from the novelty, the freshness, of the sphere of sound Beethoven generates. The viola gets us underway by imitating a guitar before the main theme enters pianissimo on the first violin, a wrinkle of muted mirth which

sprouts and flourishes, another of those Beethovenian acorns. The leader shifts to a staccato accompaniment, backed up by the viola, while the second violin is tasked with whispering the theme, a little lower this time, as the cello does the opposite, teasing high in its register with some spritely impersonations of the subject. We modulate a little across to E flat before returning to B flat, the theme passed around the instruments like the port at a college dinner or a spliff at a teenagers' party.

There is some wonderful thematic back-and-forth going on here, giving the lie to the notion that this is merely a simplistic, 'accessible' finale for dull wits or to furnish its maker's pockets. It is shrewd, intricate and beautifully proportioned. The exposition – for we are in agreeable sonata form – brings three contrasting sections before the development commences with an expressive new subject that could be a rondo. A four-note figure is entwined with the material and developed at considerable length. (It reminds us of the 'ABC' motif inaugurated by the op.132 quartet and which has reappeared from time to time in various guises, such as in the main subject of the Great Fugue and the ominous fugato opening of op.131, which Beethoven, of course, wrote before the second finale to op.130.)

This protracted development, combined with both a bogus recapitulation – in G minor – that sneaks quietly into the real recap *and* a substantial coda, is the agency through which Beethoven can balance this most unbalanced of quartets. A triple-stretched sequence of sections – development, recapitulation and coda – to go with the already extended exposition, makes for a healthy conclusion that, while it does not have the pre-eminence of the Große Fuge, is nonetheless a considerable and daring achievement. In these quartets, Beethoven was incapable of anything less.

The coda itself sees Beethoven unwilling to stop, now he has finally got down to the business of writing this 'substitute' conclusion. As the end nears (in more ways than one), the composer's creative imagination seems to locate renewed verve and vigour. The coda trundles along, blithe and carefree, as free of stress as the fugue was full of emotional turmoil and cosmic tension. A progression of imitation and play – especially with the viola's guitar gesture from the opening – allows all the instruments their moment in the sun, as well as a brilliant opportunity for unity and strength. All is colour, exhilaration and delight, as the quartet builds to a fortissimo declamation, then a touching and tranquil pause, before a curt

and unforeseen inflection ends matters on a spacious chord.



This would be the last music Beethoven wrote, following on from his final quartet, op.135. He had only a few, very painful, months left to live, but musical energy and comedic hope remained. The surrogate ending to op.130 was a magnificent coda not only to his string quartet career, but his entire composing life. In the end, it was right that this extraordinary work obtained a second finale, so we can revel further in Beethovenian gusto and glee, appreciating his agitated imagination and furious creativity a little longer. When he finished the movement, in November 1826, he was – as we shall see in the final chapter – utterly broken in body, nearly squashed in spirit, but his mind, and his funny bone, were exuberant to the end.

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<sup>91</sup> Gerhard's recollections, dating from decades after the events, are likely full of elaborations and fabrications, but they do give us a flavour of Beethoven's life and states of mind in his final years.

<sup>92</sup> He wasn't.

<sup>93</sup> The sixth of the op.18 quartets, we remember, had an introductory section to its finale which also hinted at a future expansion from the traditional four-movement classical design.

<sup>94</sup> Initially Anton Halm completed this four-hand piano version in April 1826, but Beethoven was displeased by Halm's work and wrote his own version soon after.

<sup>95</sup> We might also remind ourselves that the replacement finale for op.130 is no pushover but is a fully engaged nine- or ten-minute wonder and one of Beethoven's longest last movements.

<sup>96</sup> Anticipating an even more sinuous whole in the opp.109–111 sonatas.

<sup>97</sup> The sketches for the finale are littered with Beethoven's copying out of fugues, or parts of fugues, from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, that stringent but magnificent patterned exploration of tonal centres.

<sup>98</sup> As NASA/Hubble indicated in January 2022, the black hole at the centre of dwarf galaxy Henize 2-10 is seemingly contributing to the galaxy's stellar development, helping create stars rather than merely consuming them – a parent as well as a monster.

<sup>99</sup> Bach, too, of course, was always as concerned with the emotional aspects of music as he was the technical. He was no abstract, arithmetical dullard, as some have wished to portray him, but as composed of blood and beer as he was logic and Lutheranism.

<sup>100</sup> This was the only occasion Beethoven used this Baroque term.

## Chapter Nine

### **Kings of Kings: Op.131 in C-sharp minor**

**H**amlet. Parsifal. Guernica. Emma. Raging Bull. Murder on the Orient Express.

When we are confronted with artists who have created a wealth of outstanding work, an embarrassment of aesthetic riches, we – nevertheless – often still want to assert which of that art is the ‘greatest’, their supreme achievement. We don’t really need to; it’s a little shallow and perhaps undermines the wonder and reason of an astounding body of work – the Nobel Committee, after all, award their literature prize for a career’s worth of writing, not any individual opus.

That said, our desire to assert pinnacles is strong. And we all love to argue about it. Glancing at the above list, any nod of agreement is almost certainly immediately met by cries of quarrel and dispute. What about *King Lear*, *Tristan und Isolde* or *Les Demoiselles d’Avignon*? we holler. *Persuasion*, *Taxi Driver* or *The Murder of Roger Ackroyd*? Not to mention *Twelfth Night*, *Der Ring des Nibelungen*, *Garçon à la pipe*, *Pride and Prejudice*, *Goodfellas*, *The ABC Murders*. Each act of assertion automatically prompts us to ponder the works not mentioned, and the deliberations, fights, agonies, and occasionally well-made contentions are endless (though, by encouraging discussion and debate, hopefully worth all the bother).

So why propose Beethoven’s op.131 as his greatest string quartet among so many marvels, as his ‘king of kings’? Well, for a start, its author himself believed that his C-sharp

minor quartet of 1826 was the absolute zenith of his attainments as a composer – and who are we to question his own particular, and very considerable, insights?

Greatness is frequently linked to perfection, yet perfection is surely a false and unrealizable achievement in art, perhaps even an undesirable one, as Beethoven himself knew. And how could we possibly arrive at an agreed-upon definition of or criteria for perfection? Everyone experiences and considers art – be it a novel, opera, poem, painting, film or string quartet – in their own way, within a complex, shifting mixture of their own knowledge, requirements, ability, awareness, circumstances and instinct. Even if a work had a ‘textbook’ quality, meeting or delineating certain codes or principles, would this truly make it ‘perfect,’ still less ‘great,’ given the manner by which we suffer, feel and engage with art, especially challenging and innovative art?

If we allow our definition of perfection to go beyond notions of arithmetical symmetry or paradigmatic models and towards more directly human aspirations of precision and excellence, towards comprising all the appropriate or prerequisite elements, qualities or characteristics, towards something that is as good as it can conceivably be, then op.131 begins to attain some measure of viable perfection. That it also includes an extensive study of anguish, hope, pain and fulfilment, within a work of seamlessly crafted unity and outstanding originality, is no bonus but a very apposite mark of human artistic perfection.

To experience op.131 is to experience an incomparable coherence of form and expression, at all levels. Its themes and tonal purpose continually support one another – aiding, abetting, conniving, encouraging; the rhythmic designs and manifestations share a general sympathy and attraction; melodic subjects reach out across and through the work to evoke and bind. Even the seven ostensible movements are to be played ‘attacca,’ ‘without a break,’ which inevitably connects them more closely than with the usual pauses, conferring further unity and integrity, as well as considerable ambiguity about the overall formal plan.

Op.131 is a monumental feat of imaginative integration, and yet it is never monotonous. It is ever-changing, elusive, surprising, but always coalescing and amalgamating itself – function, form and expression combining and recombining with ever-closer degrees of logic and lucidity. Beethoven is showing, with supreme skill, the arts of variation and union impeccably combined, a cyclic innovation which proved – as if we didn’t already know – that

this composer was the vanguard of the future.

But might this mountain, with its vistas of what was to come, also be an impediment? A work as unprecedented – and, arguably, still unsurpassed – as the op.131 quartet seemed to temporarily set limits on what was achievable in the form. Just five days before his own death in November 1828, the gravely ill Schubert is alleged to have asked his (and Beethoven's) friend Karl Holz and his string quartet to play op.131 so that the last musical work he heard on earth was this one. ('The King of Harmony has sent the King of Song a friendly bidding to the crossing,' Holz commented.) 'After this,' Schubert himself reflected on op.131, 'what is left for us to write?'<sup>101</sup>

Schubert understood, as many have come to know later, that the expressions of op.131, and our awareness of them, seem more instinctive, more intimate, more profound, more unfathomable than even the other great works of Beethoven's life. Op.131's originality, range and coordinated perfection undermine, even refute, verbal analysis or description, the quartet snubbing our attempts at linguistic scrutiny with a serene austerity. Yet its organic opacity also means there can be no definitive elucidations, as this inexhaustible work invites us all to constantly share in the creative and re-creative process, its supreme internal and external integrity prompting never-ending attempts to break it down, to comprehend its bits and pieces, its inner workings, its potential or concealed meanings.

Op.131 has the raw pain of *Guernica* and the provocative abstractions of *Les Demoiselles*, the diverse unity of the *Ring* and the redemptive power of *Parsifal*, the complex modernity of *Twelfth Night* and the timeless scope of *King Lear*. But, in truth, Beethoven's penultimate string quartet stands alone and apart, unique and on its own terms – a self-effacing, subtle, exquisite and extraordinarily refined enigma.



Yaron Zilberman's 2012 film drama *A Late Quartet* was inspired by and to some extent structured around op.131 and follows the personal and professional turbulence of the internationally acclaimed (though fictional) Fugue String Quartet, who are thrown into turmoil after their recently widowed cellist is diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Set during

a romantic Manhattan winter, it has much of a serious Woody Allen picture about it: sumptuously and intelligently shot, with a sharp script and outstanding performances. The characters – aside from Christopher Walken’s pensive, paternal cellist facing up to his double grief with immense dignity – are perhaps a little self-regarding, a touch fussy, intense and egotistical – but which serious artists aren’t a bit like this?

Before long we are able to gaze beneath the fastidious facades and into the inner lives of the four players, with the chalk-and-cheese violinists battling for supremacy over the quartet, as well as the affections of the graceful violist, while the cellist tries to maintain order amid the heated rows, flung vases and broken (heart) strings. For all this surface melodrama, *A Late Quartet*, like Beethoven’s op.131, is an essentially unsentimental piece, and its occasional apparent lapses into soap opera terrain – which is to say, love, sex and squabbling families<sup>102</sup> – are in fact only an honest, truthful attempt to exhibit the tawdriness and passions which enter into most of our lives – even the lives of outwardly sophisticated chamber instrumentalists.

Apart, perhaps, from the notion of the uninterrupted, interconnected movements of life with some inevitable (and random) goings out of tune, *A Late Quartet* never tries to map op.131 onto the film. Instead, it shows magnificently how music and musicians overlap, especially when it comes to the complexities, intimacies and inscrutabilities of a string quartet (as both composition and ensemble). Musical groups – from the Beatles to the Berlin Philharmonic – inevitably have to go through breakups and changes of line-up, sometimes for professional reasons, often for personal ones. Life carries on outside music, and Zilberman’s film reminds us that the players (and composers) of such abstract phenomena as the C-sharp minor string quartet have private lives, too – often messy, ardently tempestuous ones. Indeed, it’s hard – though hardly impossible – to imagine someone having the ability to create emotionally complex music without the necessary life experience to either draw on or refer to.

As this book has had occasion to mention from time to time in its pages, Beethoven’s personal existence was one of repeated failures in love and lust, as well as complicated relations with employers, friends and family. Of the latter, one significant example is the figure of his young nephew Karl, and in the last years of his life this boy would come to play

an increasingly important (and dangerous) role in Beethoven's life, culminating in a dramatic act at the climax of the composition of op.131 itself.



Beethoven's brother Kaspar's son had been born in September 1806, three months after his parents' marriage, and following his father's death in November 1815 had been subjected to a bitter custody battle between his uncle Ludwig and mother Johanna. Beethoven – who had probably been in love with her, at least at some point – was unspeakably rude and misogynistic about Johanna, deeming her an unfit and immoral mother, while further declaring that Kaspar's naming of her in his will as a co-guardian was unlawful and iniquitous. While it is true that Johanna had been convicted of embezzlement and faking a burglary – 1811's infamous 'case of the three pearls' – she committed such crimes largely to provide for her family amid her and her husband's debts, rather than seeking genuine personal profit, and her case demonstrates the brutal double standards women were subjected to, both at home and in the legal system.

Beethoven wasn't interested in such mitigations, however, and the ensuing struggle for custody of the poor boy – with inestimable appeals, reversals and legal quarrels – would last some five years, until 1820, when Beethoven was finally awarded sole protection of the by then thirteen-year-old boy by a Viennese court (which, given Beethoven's eminence in the city, can hardly come as a surprise). The interim – and subsequent – confusions, the tales of the school expulsions and of the police forcibly returning the lad to Beethoven when he (repeatedly) ran away back to his mother, are a harrowing indictment of Beethoven's occasional selfishness, bitterness and haughty idealism. Despite his own fondness for and indulgences towards the lad, his lofty and sometimes prudish (which is to say, hypocritical) morals, as well as his own unhappy lack of a son to call his own, it seems clear his conduct was in part an act of revenge. Whether Beethoven's behaviour was retribution for spurned love or not is hard to fathom precisely, but it was without doubt criminally mean-spirited and immensely damaging to the mental health of the very boy he claimed to love. Uncles, as Hamlet knew, can be tricky customers.



Life for Karl with his celebrated relative was largely one of arguments and misery – like many teenagers, of course, with constant rows over drinking and sex (and Johanna, whom Beethoven continued to regard acrimoniously, almost as an ex-wife), at least until he enrolled at the University of Vienna in 1825, in order to study languages. During this time, as we saw in some earlier chapters, Beethoven was often away in the countryside, especially at Baden, which afforded the boy some respite from his uncle's invidious intensity and boisterously protective conduct. Even then, like many a jealous lover, Beethoven employed his acquaintances to spy on his nephew, usually to check he was not visiting his poor mother – hardly the actions of a loving, trusting relation.

When they were apart, Beethoven's letters to his nephew often have the wistful ardour and excitement of a separated lover, and we are here shown some small insight into the difficulties any form of relationship with Beethoven must have presented. Beethoven was hard to know, hard to be near, but he was full of fondness and affection – emotions that were often better expressed at a distance, in prose on the page (or, of course, in notes on a stave).

By the spring of 1826, and when Beethoven was at work on his latest string quartet, op.131, Karl's linguistic studies were not going well, and he had decided instead upon a career in the military. For a mixture of snobbish and conceited as well as perfectly natural and understandable reasons, this did not go down well with his uncle. Beethoven had been keen, like many a parent/guardian down the ages, for his son/ward to be an artist or a scholar, but although he could perform perfectly well on the piano, Karl was no star, and his interest in languages was not enough to make him a philologist.

The soldiering issue was not a new dispute between them. We can see from a conversation book of 1824 that Karl said he had an announcement to make: he was a little bored at being his uncle's quasi-secretary-cum-assistant-cum-dogsbody (he had often helped out with his uncle's accounts, Beethoven being hopeless at arithmetic, as well as countless other daily tasks and errands) and craved something more exciting – as well he might. He conceded his choice of profession was a little strange; tried to argue that it, too, needed study, but of a different kind (we can imagine Beethoven's mounting consternation as the boy's cryptic announcement dragged on on the page...). 'And what is it?' the uncle demanded. 'Soldiering,' the nephew replied. 'No' came the firm response, and that was that.

In many of the letters between them, and more keenly in correspondences between Beethoven and others, we see the typical clichéd grievance of the nitpicking, controlling and narcissistic father over his teenage son's bolshiness and his obstinacy and, that great complaint of parents everywhere, his *attitude*. 'He's ruining my health!' Beethoven would wail (to friends, editors, publishers...), always finding a way to make things about himself and his own fixations. We see Beethoven's constant revulsion and abuse of his family: Johanna is 'that monster', his brother Johann 'brainless', his brother's wife Therese an 'overfed whore'. Everyone else who wasn't a countess or a king was essentially one of Beethoven's inferiors, and he wasn't afraid to say so.<sup>103</sup>

Perhaps Karl's language studies were an attempt at long-term preparation for a military career he intended to pursue anyway. Certainly, by 1826 he was firm that this was where his destiny lay, and again Beethoven rejected it as unsuitable. By the summer, relations between them had reached breaking point: Karl had moved out and was lodging in a cheap boarding house. Beethoven was furious, even remaining in the city during the hot months, which he hated to do, essentially to snoop on his nephew. That said, Karl was sly and a little unscrupulous too: he would secretly see his mother and drink with verboten friends, proudly claiming to people that he knew how to manipulate and make up with his uncle – a bit of 'flattery and friendly gestures' was all it took. But, for all the youthful bluster and bravado, Karl was falling apart and had been counting on the usual summer absence of his uncle to get a bit of relief from the constant arguments, accusations and abuse.

Beethoven himself, when he wasn't spying on or screaming at his nephew, was, somehow, hard at work on a new quartet, one he had written not to fulfil a nobleman's commission or secure a financial return, but for himself. This, of course, was the C-sharp minor, op.131, and quite how he was able to concentrate on what he would consider his supreme quartet, with its astonishing level of fluid integration, boggles the mind. But it was doubtless a welcome distraction from the constant commotion Beethoven generated with his relations, as well as a realm where he could control or impose order and harmony, something he could never seem to do in his life.

But Beethoven's capacity to redirect mental, emotional and physical pain from his art, to cover and envelop suffering through creativity, was astounding. The pain is there, of course,

somewhere in the art, but it is organically consumed by the music, forever dissolved into its textures, prohibiting lazy or facile attempts to connect biography and art. Sometimes, Beethoven allows us clear biographical/historical associations – of which op.132's Heiliger Dankgesang is the most obvious example – but even then, caution is required. Just as the *Eroica* is not exclusively (or perhaps even partially) a musical biography of Napoleon, the Heiliger Dankgesang is not simply a sonic diary of illness but something far broader, far deeper (as well as simply an abstract movement of a classical string quartet). Similarly, tensions or conditions – such as within the famously melancholic opening movement – of op.131 can hardly be related with ease to events in Beethoven's life at the time. He had higher aspirations for his art than for it to act as mere musical memoir.

Around the time he finished the op.131 quartet, in late July 1826, he received a note from Karl's landlord saying that loaded guns had been discovered in his room and that the boy intended to kill himself. Karl eluded attempts to find and detain him, pawning his watch to purchase another pair of pistols and disappearing from the city.

He was looking for somewhere special to terminate his life. And, in a place he knew from happy walks with his uncle, he found it. He went to Baden, to Beethoven's beloved spa town, with its famous, uber-Romantic surroundings of forests and streams, cliffs and castles. There, in the ancient chocolate-box ruins of Castle Rauhenstein amid a scenic wooded valley, he sought the ideal location for a suicide straight out of Goethe. We can, perhaps, imagine some of the thoughts and half thoughts – the rage, the sadness, the despondency – running, tumbling, through his mind as he raised one of his pistols to his head.

But it missed, or misfired, and he had to try again with the second firearm. This time he had aimed sufficiently well to graze his temple, and the bullet knocked him half-unconscious to the floor, embedding itself in the left side of his forehead, though not breaching his skull (we might at this point propose that a martial profession was not necessarily one for which Karl seemed suited). He was somehow found by a passing wagon driver and asked to be taken to his mother's. Here, after a panicky, desperate search from house to house, Beethoven discovered his nephew, and it must have been a scene of unspeakable, unbearable tension breaking out into angry recriminations.

The upshot was no less awful: whether a gesture or genuine attempt, suicide was suicide

in the harsh eyes of early nineteenth-century ethics. Taken to hospital and put under police guard, Karl was interrogated for his 'crime'. He told a policeman that his uncle's constant harassment had made him do it. Beethoven turned up, furious – doubtless as the only way he could find to cope with his own guilt, though he was also desperately afraid Karl would be sent to prison. The conversation books from the hospital visits at this time – when Beethoven again, unbelievably, was hard at work on another quartet, his last, op.135 – are traumatic, dreadful documents. We witness Beethoven's futile, persistent, idiotic abuse of Karl's mother and Karl's pleas for his uncle to stop the language and behaviour which had caused him to undertake his dramatic action at Rauhenstein in the first place.

Beethoven does not come out of the incident well – indeed, in any of the sorry tale of his relationship with Karl and his wider family – even if we allow that many of us behave foolishly, and cruelly, when such intense emotions are involved. Part of Beethoven's problem, understandable to a degree, given his many ailments and sorrows, was his inability to see beyond his own pain, his own sufferings, and into the eyes of a young man separated from his mother and keen to make his own way in life.

The composer's isolation, his longing for love and a family, trapped him into appalling behaviour to gain and then keep his nephew. This cannot be excused, but it can be comprehended. He had always, like so many artists, had a solipsistic/narcissistic tendency, a single-mindedness that helped him create but also caused him to alienate. Many had tolerated it, justifying or forgiving it as part of Beethoven's 'genius' – but Karl couldn't, and he finally cracked.

Beethoven's friend Stephan von Breuning took over the guardianship of Karl, presumably as a moderating, amicable solution to the Beethoven-Johanna rift. Breuning and Holz were able to persuade Beethoven to let the boy undertake the military career he wanted. Beethoven moaned about it, lamenting that his dreams of re-creating in Karl 'at least my better qualities' had been dashed. He wasn't the first, or last, parent to want their child to follow in their footsteps, or even to succeed in areas they hadn't, but Karl was also simply a teenager, a young man, who wanted to be a young man, discovering himself, discovering the world and the people in it. Beethoven's hopes, which had congealed in regard to his nephew into a nasty mixture of aspirations, principles, convictions and lunacies, were

roundly crushed, and in some measure it destroyed him. He aged twenty years in appearance overnight, it was said, and had only seven more months to live.

Eventually, Beethoven (with others) was able to persuade the authorities that a spell of religious re-education ('counselling') would be a suitable punishment for Karl's Rauhenstein misadventures. Fortuitously, this would now be coupled with a stretch of good old-fashioned military discipline – which suited Karl perfectly well. He was – in due course – accepted into a regiment by one Lieutenant-Marshal Baron von Stutterheim, who agreed to take the boy into his company despite the scandal of Rauhenstein. In gratitude, and in a final ironic twist, given what had caused all the uncle-nephew tension during the work's composition, Beethoven dedicated his op.131 quartet to Stutterheim, spurning the affluent music lover who had been the original dedicatee.<sup>104</sup>

A week after the Rauhenstein incident, as Karl lay in hospital, Beethoven had sent off the manuscript of op.131 to his publisher Schott, including a joke that he had stitched together a new work from patches of others purloined here and there. Schott didn't get the joke and wrote back worried the composer was simply reworking old material. Don't worry, Beethoven replied, it is just my unhealthy humour: the work is entirely new.

Entirely new it certainly was. And it certainly wasn't a patchwork. It was his most seamless composition, fresh and completely original – compared to not just his own work but any other music that had been written. The composer considered op.131 now to be his greatest achievement, a designation he had only recently given to a work considerably larger in size and musical forces. This was his solemn mass, the *Missa solemnis*, op.123 – a gargantuan piece of stupefying beauty, hazardous audacity and relentless sonic imagination, which, despite obvious differences, shares many of the ideas of musical unity and integration Beethoven would explore and even more fully realize in op.131.



What poor Karl made of the religious psychotherapy he was subjected to as his punishment for Rauhenstein is not clear, but for Beethoven it was important as part of the boy's honourable redirection (in truth, of course, Karl's transgressions were no more than either

youthful high jinks or pitiful actions caused by his uncle's mistreatment).

Beethoven had a lofty and idealistic view of religion, both as a moral agency and overarching force. Bach had placed Jesus at the centre of his (Lutheran) faith, with the two mighty Passions – the *Saint John* and the *Saint Matthew* – as his extraordinarily powerful and compassionate commemoration of Christ's achievement as a sympathetic communicator and arbitrator between humanity and God. Beethoven, being Beethoven, wanted to speak to the boss directly.

In 1820, he copied down a quote from Kant that has become almost a cliché of the composer, but which remains a neat summary:

The moral law within us and the starry skies above us.

He had little need of a more empathetic, caring kind of Christianity, preferring the grandeur he found in faith, the sweep of feeling he found in considering the cosmos, the solitary artist in direct communion with the divine. We see it in many of Beethoven's works, but perhaps most directly in the Ninth Symphony (with Schiller's great 'Ode') and its contemporaneous liturgical twin, the *Missa solennis*.

Beethoven had been born a Catholic but was never a regular churchgoer, preferring to consider things on his own terms and in his own way (the more conservatively devout Haydn had frequently considered the younger Beethoven an outright atheist). Beethoven might not have read contemporary theology and philosophy like a scholar, systematically and meticulously, but he was deeply interested in it – the swathes of books devoted to the subjects in his personal library are indisputable testimony to that. He was a child of the Enlightenment, and he wanted to be enlightened – and he wanted his audiences to be enlightened, too, so his beliefs were expressed via his music.

Beethoven was a progressive thinker, generally rational (at least by the standards of the day), and intellectually ravenous. It has become easy, fashionable even, in our century of showbiz New Atheism, to consider any religious belief backward. Yet this often fails to consider the complex strains and varieties of spirituality that have always existed and which were always proliferating, all competing in Beethoven's society and within the souls of the populace. Elements of Beethoven's faith had become more conventional as he aged; he

eventually claimed Socrates and Jesus as ethical ideals (though he hardly followed them). But there always remained something highly individualized about his particular spiritual attitudes and engagement, far beyond the familiar rites, rituals and beliefs of most ordinary churchgoers. For Beethoven faith was a personal cosmic quest, a dialogue between him and God alone, a struggle and an endeavour informed by his existence, with its heartaches and woe. It was part of his identity, his personality – his methodology.

The *Missa solemnis* was not only about faith, of course: it was about music. Rarely caught inside a church, Beethoven had mastered – and as we have seen, often radically developed – every genre of music available to him: opera, symphony, concerto, string quartet and piano sonata, along with numerous others. Now he wanted to be a master of another immense musical tradition: the grand mass, a genre which came pre-packaged with an imposing majesty, an inherent, preordained transcendence.

Before the *Missa solemnis*, his principal sacred works had been the rather hurried oratorio *Christus am Ölberge* (1803) and the modest mass in C (1807), as well as the quasi-pantheistic *Pastoral Symphony* (1808). Then, in March 1819, came the impetus to write something for his patron Archduke Rudolf, who had been elected archbishop of Olmutz and would be enthroned a year later. Had this been earlier in his life, he might have composed something relatively concise and diminutive – like a Haydn mass, or his own mass in C.<sup>105</sup> But this was his period of Big Projects – the *Choral Symphony*, the *Hammerklavier Piano Sonata*, the *Diabelli Variations*, the *Große Fuge*. The new mass was only ever going to be colossal. It was written, too, against the background of his burgeoning passion for Bach, Handel and Mozart. Thus the B minor mass, *Messiah* and *Requiem* are all important contexts for any contemplation of the *Missa solemnis*, and Beethoven copied down passages from the Mozart and Handel as he worked on his gigantic new creation.<sup>106</sup>

It took Beethoven a long time, nearly five years, until well after Rudolf had received his archbishop's staff and mitre.<sup>107</sup> After several hundred pages of sketches, what he achieved with the finished product is almost unfathomable, for the *Missa solemnis* is a tremendous, furious reaction to the Catholic missal, displaying the composer's absolute awe in the presence of the almighty and his absolute belief in his unique powers as a composer. In it, Beethoven seems to redefine, with supreme musico-dramatic flair, the relationship between

God and humanity: on the one hand, he shows the distance between us, our smallness within a divine and infinite cosmos; on the other, he shows our connection, our capacity to comprehend this limitlessness through the very fact of our awe.

The *Missa solemnis*, which is certainly one of the most difficult pieces in the classical canon to either play or sing, is full of splendid puzzles and infuriating paradoxes – between God and man, between time and space, between musical notation and musical performance – but at its heart is a simple unity, an integrity and cohesion, impulsion and concentration, characteristics which will also come to define op.131. The ironies, absurdities and contradictions of human existence are written into the very fabric of the *Missa solemnis*, working as part of its musical, as well as its theological, meanings.

Developments he himself had undertaken in choral and symphonic writing helped establish the *Missa solemnis* as an aspect of a new sacred style Beethoven wished to inaugurate. He utilized techniques – in structure, form and musical language – that he had learned from those media, as well as the piano sonata and string quartet, to bring about his highly original conception. In some respects, the *Missa solemnis* is a giant choral symphony in five movements, though obviously with a different design than usual, and employing the Viennese solemn mass as a prism to refract its symphonic vision. The vast forces – orchestra, choir, four soloists – are bound tightly together, without solo arias or anything remotely operatic. There are oratorio elements to it as well, so that it stands as a vast and indivisible hybrid work – part mass, part symphony, part oratorio, but all Beethoven – existing on (and confusing) its own terms of musical fusion.

Its five movements – Kyrie, Gloria, Credo, Sanctus, Agnus Dei – can be regarded almost as a ‘love pentagon’ of emotional, spiritual and intellectual angst and fervour. For, whatever divisions and subdivisions exist, it is as an inseparable unity that the *Missa solemnis* functions. It is as bound and enigmatically complex as the Trinity, as solid as a cathedral’s walls but as elusive as candle smoke too.

The Kyrie opens ‘mit Andacht’, ‘with devotion’, in a scream of power with a prodigious D major upbeat, something that will recur again and again in the work. At first it doesn’t sound like an upbeat, and it takes a while for the timpani and trumpets to signal the downbeat, but this is all part of the world Beethoven is trying to both create and reflect. Awe and



endurance, mystery and coherent commotion – these were his watchwords, with patience a very familiar Beethovenian necessity. Countless times across his work, not least in his quartets, he foxes us with false or early subsections (dishonest recapitulations, and so on). Yet this was not just musical enjoyment or progression but a moral lesson in expectation and reward.

With the *Missa solemnis*, those anticipations and remunerations are spread across the whole work, and the opening ‘Ky---ri-e!’ immediately spawns an immense web of binding ideas and motifs. The way Beethoven introduces material, the way he repeats it, the way he develops motifs – so much of the *Missa solemnis* has a unified autonomy which has now, as it had in works like his late quartets and piano sonatas, taken on a radical new abandon and brilliance, endlessly uninhibited but always essentially cohesive.

The Kyrie movement itself actually employs a quasi-sonata form (exposition-development-recapitulation), since the text there sanctions it, but elsewhere the words more radically determine what the ever-resourceful Beethoven needs to do musically. Classical form and key relations are thus for the most part thrown out of the window, as are conventional attitudes to rhythm and mood, since all are strictly governed by the text. This freed the music to exist in a fascinating new manner, and, by linking music so closely to the word, this technique offered subtle supplementary opportunities for variety tethered to an overall unity of musical and theological-dramatic content. The *Missa solemnis* is one of Beethoven’s most ruthlessly logical creations.

An additional binding tool, one which further fastens words and music, sound and sense, is the sheer *physicality* of the *Missa solemnis* – a burden for performers (and some listeners) but surely one of its great pleasures. This is music raw and real, brutal and bodily. Beethoven himself composed while making a considerable noise, shouting and thumping, bellowing and gesticulating: he wanted us to *feel* his music and, in the *Missa solemnis*, to *feel* the text, too – its sorrows, pains and joys – since sound, word and feeling were to be inextricably interconnected.

Beethoven’s great mass was not to be a liturgical lip service, a tame hypocrisy meekly carried out in a bourgeois Sunday church, but a supreme divine encounter, a vast sonic engagement with God. Beethoven wanted us to see the resurrected Christ in a blaze of solar

glory, to shudder in fear and astonishment at the thought of the heavenly king of kings. Listening to the immense, gorgeously complex noises of the *Missa solemnis* in a casual, background way is hardly an easy task, but for Beethoven it would have been unthinkable, impossible. Its first sound seizes you by the throat, and the music barely lets go for eighty minutes of spine-tingling space and mind-blowing sonority, binding you to your ears as much as it is bound both to itself and to the universe, a rocket on the way to God.

Yet, for all this sound and fury, for all this determined power, it is the moments of profound peace and gentle intimacy, even a sinuous sensuality, in the *Missa solemnis* which can often strike us as the most memorable, the most touching and the most sincerely Beethovenian. Here his music is searching for serenity – for himself, and for humanity – free from the cruelties of existence and our relentless fear of death.<sup>108</sup> Additionally, and perhaps even more crucially, the work ends in mystery and hesitation, with a meagre handful of climactic orchestral bars, then a strange staccato D major chord. It is not the grand resolution we might have expected but a disintegration, an abrupt vacillation, a realm of liminal contingency. Beethoven is once again making us wait, forcing us to be patient, surprising us by offering a leap of faith and an elusive unanswered question.

One of the answers to that question would only be found in death; another was the C-sharp minor string quartet, op.131.



Physicality in sound was something Beethoven had always been interested in. Had he lived a century or so later, he would doubtless have been fascinated by *Finnegans Wake* (1939), James Joyce's great book of the night, which relies so much on the supple aural flexibility of language, as well as the racket, clatter and clamour it can make. This can be seen especially in the *Wake's* ten magnificent hundred-letter 'thunder words' – each an onomatopoeic cryptogram, explaining the booming reverberating consequences of major technological changes across human history. They are wonderful to say aloud, and one even occurs on the first page:

The fall

(Bababadalgharaghtakamminarronkonnbronntonneronntuonnthunntrovarrho  
unawnskawntooohooordenenthurnuk!)

Look at some of Beethoven's manuscripts, especially for the late quartets, or listen to the final results, and at times he seems to be playing with the same mixture of bewildering incomprehension, sonic freedom and enigmatic meaning. Beethoven was also, like Joyce, experimenting with the connection (and disparity) between what things look like on the page and how they end up sounding to the ear.<sup>109</sup>

The hundreds of leaves of sketches for op.131 are no exception – indeed, they are among the most frenzied and unruly of any of Beethoven's famously untidy handwritten scores. Notes and notation swarm the pages, outwardly at random, at strange angles and apparently in arbitrary, indiscriminate places. At times they overlap or are spaced far apart. They can be faintly sketched or heavily marked on the page. Midway through a passage, the score is occasionally scratched to pieces, only for a new phrase to emerge from the murky chaos. But Beethoven knew what he was doing, and from this apparent anarchy there emerged his most cohesive and flawlessly formed creation – it just needed some bedlam and exertion to get there.

More than this, however, was Beethoven's need to work music out physically on the page. His deafness meant that he now relied more than ever on the visual and tactile aspects of music in order to process his creative thoughts. It wasn't an entirely new thing to him, of course – he had done it since his very earliest works – but by the time of the *Missa solennis* and late quartets, it was becoming even more important and extreme. And this had mesmerizing consequences – especially for string quartets, where Beethoven frequently plays with the different registers and instrumentation, visualizing their sonic-spatial distancing or intimacy, compelling players (and listeners) to constantly reconsider the relationships between the violins, viola and cello.

It is fascinating to be able to see Beethoven at work, building his masterpieces, via his sketches: the ideas, themes and structures taking shape, as well as many of the particular sounds and textures. In some ways, being able to see was more important to Beethoven than

being able to hear. He needed to see what he was doing, to develop ideas visually as well as aurally. Paper was Beethoven's workshop, his musical laboratory. Here he could hypothesize and theorize music – especially the extremely demanding music of his later years. Visually stimulating textures, visually attention-grabbing sequences: these were more often than not the way Beethoven experimented. In part, this explains many of the challenges listening to his later music presents, where we are taken beyond the limits of what we might have thought possible in sound, because it has been conceived graphically.

An early review of Beethoven's late quartets – especially, of course, the *Große Fuge* – made this very point as a criticism: that the deaf composer was depending too much on what things looked like because he couldn't precisely adjudicate the results with his ears. This reviewer, however, also had the perspicacity (and humility) to note that future audiences might be able to decipher what Beethoven had – literally – envisioned. Certainly, the upward and downward leaps, the fragmentation and jagged lines, which open the *Große Fuge* do look appealing on the page in a way it takes longer to appreciate with the ear – and such sounds would barely appear again until the sonic uproars of the twentieth century.

And yet, for all the importance of the visual to Beethoven, the deafness remains. Whenever we mention this composer, we have a tendency to marvel at his ability to write music without being able to hear. This book has done it several times. His deafness is the one thing everybody – from schoolchildren to the most inaccessible hermit – knows about him. Our first (naive and slightly facile) exclamation when faced with the idea of a deaf composer is usually to wonder that anyone so impeded is able to do this in any capacity at all, let alone with a facility as enhanced as Beethoven's.

But, as we have seen, a deaf composer is not quite the same as a blind painter or an anosmic perfumer, and on reflection, or with experience, we begin to recognize that a great deal of musical composition is done in the head or with the eyes, not ears. It is undertaken on walks, in the bath, at the desk or in the library, not sitting at a piano (though this is the popular image; it is also where, of course, much composition still takes place). Eventually we might even begin to consider whether we haven't been overplaying the agonies and vexations of the deaf composer.

And then you hear late Beethoven. Here, you are confronted with two immense

challenges. First, there are the immeasurable, enigmatic and astonishing miracles of what he created in his soundless world: the incredible richness of this new music, the novel demands it makes on us, the endless beauties of his increased imagination for the physicality of sound. Second, the amplified suffering and distress we hear in those creations. For, however much we argue Beethoven didn't need to hear in order to compose, we need to remember that, beyond the immense personal/professional/social consequences of his disability, he could also never luxuriate in the simple *pleasure* of music.

Analysing music, locating its intellectual properties or socio-political consequences, is one thing, as is reading it on the page; listening to it, however, is quite another. From the most ecstasy-fuelled clubber to Morris dancers, from ancient tribes in distant jungles to the fussiest online opera critic – all of us revel and delight in the boundless joy of listening to music. And Beethoven could no longer do that.



At the end of the *Missa solennis*, Beethoven posed a question, leaving it lingering in the concert hall and hanging between our headphones. In part it seemed to be asking for a leap of religious faith, a bound beyond death and into a possible hereafter. But the closing fragmentation of the *Missa solennis* was also asking about musical integration, and about personal endurance amid the agonies of existence.

Op.131 is a response to those questions. In this extraordinary work, Beethoven produces a statement of sophisticated poise, stoic fortitude and superhuman strength which is also a deeply moving testament of his humanity as well as his supreme gifts for musical cohesion, which he had been developing to astonishing lengths in the late piano sonatas and *Missa solennis*. Op.131 would not be his final quartet – op.135 would respond to the same question with exquisite comedy – but op.131 would be the most authoritative and definitive answer.



The overall scheme for op.131 shifted in Beethoven's mind as he worked on it, and at least five different movement plans have been unearthed in Beethoven's sketches, including a 'traditional' four-movement design: the C-sharp minor fugue, followed by a recitative and the A major andante, then a D major scherzo and C-sharp minor finale. Beethoven also considered a three-movement cycle of C-sharp minor/major movements, and another with a more violent utilization of F-sharp minor, while the rest incorporate extravagant elements for the central movements – but all keep unharmed the opening fugue.

With the finished product, there are legitimate grounds for considering the quartet in several broad ways: as a one-movement work; as a seven-movement work; as one divided into four 'units,' with some movements paired up. In this last option, the short sixth movement is usually seen as an introduction to the finale, much as Beethoven had done with the fourth movement of op.132 – though here we will come to see op.131's sixth movement as occupying a more frightening role than as any mere primer or preamble.

All these provisional, varied possibilities – in both the work in progress and finished version – might make the work seem unstable, unbalanced, incoherent, all of which renders Beethoven's final achievement in making this quartet so cohesive so extraordinary. So what is it that makes op.131 so convincing a piece, so credibly logical and intelligible?

One of the factors was tonality, and what Beethoven achieves with his keys in this quartet is astonishing, the structure and themes wonderfully assisted by Beethoven's inventive tonal arrangements (and vice versa). Op.131 is a work in an odd key – as it probably had to be, for a work so strange, so mysterious, and yet so revelatory. Beethoven had used C-sharp minor only for his *Moonlight* Piano Sonata of 1801 (which, like op.131, also begins with a slow movement); Haydn used the key just once and Mozart never at all. Strange symphonies of the future – Mahler's fierce Fifth (1904) and Prokofiev's sulky Seventh (1952) – would need its peculiarity, as would some of Chopin's and Scriabin's more dangerous, eccentric piano works. Brahms tried writing his piano quartet No.3 (1875) in the key but wasn't satisfied and rewrote it in C minor. Excellent, though now rare, piano concertos of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries – such as those by Amy Beach, Erich Korngold, Issay Dobrowen and Miriam Hyde – knew how to utilize the key's curiously intangible sound and form, just as Beethoven had.

C-sharp minor makes a very distinctive noise, producing a special impression on the ear (and the page). Moreover, in a string quartet using this key, Beethoven could also exploit its gloriously uncanny sound quality on the viola and cello to exceptional effect, and especially in the two specifically C-sharp minor movements which open and close op.131.

The slowly unfurling opening fugue, which might well be Beethoven's greatest single achievement and which Richard Wagner would memorably call 'the most melancholy sentiment ever expressed in music', is surely the most daring beginning to any string quartet. It makes the resourceful slow introductions (and quasi-introductions) to Haydn's and Mozart's (as well as Beethoven's) quartets seem a little compliant by comparison. We are in a numinous, preternatural, almost occult zone that is to a great extent generated by the strange key and its sombre tonal investigations, as well as the way in which musical phrases intersect, overlies and collapse, dragging our concentration into op.131's dark orbit while also offering a massive exposition for the huge span of this quartet.

With its ominous probing of tonality, the fugue actually foreshadows the fundamental keys of all the subsequent movements – a brilliant, but fluently subtle, means through which to bind all the quartet together, as well as offer a mixture of prediction, expectation and surprise. It is like Alfred Hitchcock's theory about the importance of seeing the bomb under the dinner party table: we know what is coming, but we don't know when. 'There is no terror in the bang,' Hitchcock claimed, 'only in the anticipation of it.' Moreover, the bomb should never go off – that would only give you fifteen seconds of shock at the moment of the explosion. And then you can't reclaim the tension.

Like Hitchcock, Beethoven is a master of suspense, knowing that it is the expectation that is interesting. No bombs are detonated in op.131, but plenty are hidden ticking in the score. Thus he half shows us his full tonal palette at the beginning, secreted in gloriously gloomy colours. In the fugue, we hear – in technical terms – the flat supertonic (D major) of the allegro molto vivace (II); the submediant (A major) of the andante variations (IV); and the mediant (E major) of the presto (V).

And Beethoven goes even further in portending his entire tonal design from the outset. The first two statements of the theme in the fugue accentuate the notes A and D with some unmistakable sforzando stresses. The fugue also showcases the relationships between D, C-

sharp and F-sharp minor, since these will come to play a crucial, gripping role in the concluding movement. Then, at the very close of the quartet, as we will see, there is a brilliant final coup in Beethoven's lifelong adventure with tonal and harmonic connections, with musical surprises – and with cathartic drama.

Beyond doubt, as Holz had said in relation to Schubert's death, Beethoven was the 'King of Harmony', and in op.131 he is the absolute king of harmonic kings. Like a painter blending and differentiating oils on the canvas, Beethoven is able to exploit, mix and contrast musical colours at will, showing the infinite networks and departures, as well as the emotional-intellectual ramifications of such features. And he does so with brilliant imaginative resource between his four string instruments, intimately aiding and abetting his tonal intentions by developing the particular qualities of either a specific instrument or groups of instruments sounding together.

Although each of the seven movements has a particular tempo marking, one of the ways Beethoven achieves astounding liquid unity in op.131 is his employment of rhythmic continuity throughout the quartet, with only occasional shifts in his metrical language. This was one of the most original features of op.131 – no one had really done it before, and no one has really attempted it since – but Beethoven, needless to say, makes it sound like the most natural thing in the world.

The employment of *attacca* – playing the movements without a break – for the seven movements obviously helped, too; but so did the tonal elements discussed above, along with the elevated, graceful way in which Beethoven varied his motifs, with infinite subtlety and imagination. Accordingly, we might reinterpret Beethoven's wry comment to his publisher – that the new quartet was stitched together from patches of others filched here and there – as actually being the truth. This quartet *is* a patchwork quilt of colours (whether tonal or motivic), but they are colours of immensely refined and elusive shades, gently shifting in the light, their textures woven so elegantly, so effortlessly, that they are both uniform and as varied as the lustrous iridescence of a butterfly's wing.





In op.131, Beethoven's originality and liberty of form reach their true zenith, while this quartet also endures as his most ruthlessly logical creation. There is no contradiction, or even paradox, in this, for it is the logic which encourages – even sanctions – the liberty. Op.131 is an extraordinary quartet of technique and design as well as a record of Beethoven's spiritual and psychological state, with all these elements now interlinked in one piece. This work is a continuous unfolding of the composer's mind and soul utilizing his most sublime abilities for absolute integration, the contrasting features mutually interdependent.

From the great rising gloom of the fugue, with its heavy burden of human suffering, fluid energy flows unceasingly towards affirmation against and indifference to the forces of darkness. This conclusion is not to be a simple victory like that of the Fifth Symphony's well known journey, with its powerful but relatively straightforward and conventionally conquering major-mode close. Instead, op.131's ending is an assertion of the quiet, unobtrusive, subjective victory and a proclamation of personal endurance: Socratic courage and calm in the face of imminent execution and annihilation.

Op.131 is Beethoven's final – and greatest – tragedy in music. It expresses the inexpressible. It recapitulates everything Beethoven had achieved. It makes vital room for comedy but ends in grandeur and confirmation, resonating powerfully with its sense of gracious dignity, purgation and release (into history and eternity). It has the deep, immensely satisfying quality of Greek and Shakespearean tragedy. Yet op.131 contains no Hamlet or Lear, no Electra or Clytemnestra. It does not chart the folly of families nor investigate the irrationality of revenge. It communicates its drama with us not in poetry or prose, but in something even more elusive: the music of a string quartet.

## No.14 in C-sharp minor

### 1. *Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo.*

The opening of op.131 is chilling, eerie, aggrieved. It unfurls itself slowly, like a black flower revealing horrendous secrets and suffering. It is at once distressed and resigned, active and passive, struggling under shackles but always moving forward: Christ on the lonely road to Calvary. The tempo is slow, though players must be careful not to make it too slow, since this will ruin the effect. Beethoven is clear in his incessant demands for crescendos, diminuendos, accents, stresses and so forth: the dynamics are relentless, working in a highly detailed, highly expressive manner to conjure up the exceptional atmosphere, which recalls *Parsifal* or the third act of *Tristan* – no wonder Wagner found this quartet so fascinating.

One by one, the four instruments enter, gradually pervading the space with a fugue. They do so in a downward sequence, a descending series from the highest voice to the lowest. The first violin begins, subdued and unaccompanied for five bars. Its music is in two parts and will recur throughout the quartet: first, three notes (G sharp, B sharp, C sharp) that indicate burden or mourning; then a tenderly flowing scale which stands for resignation as well as forbearance and even a little optimism. But between them stands an accented and agonizing A. It will be of enormous significance to the quartet. Then the second violin arrives, itself at one point stressing a pitiful D as if in answer to the first violin's lonely A. Both A major and D major will resonate throughout op.131 with colossal impact. Then the viola and cello, at intervals, take their place. The texture is grim, ascetic, everything moving in parts.

Most works in this time period, including most by Beethoven, might include two or three keys per movement. Op.131's opening fugue has six. The key shifts into E-flat minor, then B major, as well as the visits to A and D just mentioned; F-sharp minor also has a crucial role, undertaking battles especially with the home key of C-sharp minor. As well as harmonically complicating itself, the movement does so rhythmically, syncopations and gentle emphases obfuscating and confusing the sombre, if not entirely despairing, environment.

Although, as we have seen, there are many fugues in late Beethoven, they are not 'pure'

fugues in a technical sense. Beethoven was not in the business of providing lessons in music history, preferring to utilize elements of both Baroque and Classical paradigms for his own purposes. Op.131's opening fugue is no different, and this is especially noticeable in its agitated quality: after the initial presentation, Beethoven takes us off on a series of contrapuntal and derivative developments – slyly hinting at sonata form (the B major section is a little like a second theme).

After the chapters in E-flat minor and B, the quartet relocates part of an idea from the 'resignation/forbearance' part of the fugue subject, and the violins are able to transition into a calmer episode in A, with the viola and cello then providing the momentum. Here the music takes on a tragic tenderness, with heartbreaking duets echoing across the textures. Eventually the viola breaks out on its own to bring back – for the first time – the principal fugue subject in its original form.

After being shown the way, the violins follow the viola. So, too, does the cello, but with a series of massive amplifications of the material, doubling the length of the notes, impelling the fugue forward. It reaches a mighty apex before bit by bit softening into near silence via several C-sharp major chords that are unbroken yet still occur in distinctive phases. It is a remarkable effect, highly idiosyncratic yet reminiscent of some of Bach's finest finales.<sup>110</sup> This is our first glimpse at the main key's major form, and our last chance to hear this key for a long time. Beethoven is going to make us wait.

## 2. *Allegro molto vivace.*

The C-sharp major chords fragment to leave only the C sharps themselves, which the cello takes up from one octave to the next. The viola and first violin echo this action before all three voices repeat the leap a little higher, from D to D: at this point, we are suddenly in the second movement, like a cinematic jump cut from a gloomy graveyard to a sun-drenched plain, or when yawning awake after an appalling nightmare.

It is one of Beethoven's greatest transitions: musically logical and psychologically believable, full of feeling as we launch into a jaunty gigue (in a quasi-sonata form) with which to begin the day after a restless night. Looked at on the page, it is incredibly simple, but the

impression on our ears is unforgettable – warm, open, liquid, quietly celebratory, consumed by an easy-going spirit. The furtive, serpentine windings of the first movement are met by broad and symmetrical phrases in the second, and although the D major allegro becomes more intricate, more insistent, it always retains its spacious outlines, which remain as clear as its melodic voice. For Wagner, in his *Beethoven* of 1870 (written for the composer's centenary), this movement banished the pain of the opening adagio to a 'wistful memory,' and its mixture of gentle mood with swift tempo has the effect of a glass of water or dip in a refreshing pool.

And yet. Beethoven is keen that, however different the music sounds, we are also subtly tethered to the first part of the quartet. There is variety but an umbilical unity too. In particular, the blithe charm of the second movement echoes the lyrical A major episode of the adagio, as do some brief flashes of F-sharp minor and occasionally brusque accents, as well as a disconcerting occurrence of un-harmonized octaves, splendidly severe.

A peevish, dangerously droll, eruption of colours and dynamics, with the instruments all over their registers, leads to a fortissimo, criss-crossed by quieter phrases and modulating down to the minor – ready for another metamorphosis.

### 3. *Allegro moderato*.

The second movement dies with the sound of an incomplete D major chord topped by an F sharp. The absence of an A allows the transmutation to occur – with a B minor chord, also crowned with an F sharp, that begins the minuscule third movement, and which is really a preface to the great central andante. It is largely a series of skips with an abrupt and ardent outpouring which is, in truth, an Italian operatic recitative: passionate but elegant, and something Beethoven has often used to introduce his longer quartet movements. Only a couple of handfuls of bars long, this movement is reminiscent of one of Handel's outstanding rhetorical passages, and it is a masterclass in the art of transition (it is clear why Wagner loved this quartet above all of Beethoven's works, even the Ninth Symphony). The first violin's proud Italianate statement ends with a series of departing gestures that traverse the bridge to the next movement.

#### *4. Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile.*

This is the stupendous central andante, a magnificent sapphire in the crown of the king of kings.

A theme with six interlinked variations and a hectic coda, it is the centrepiece of op.131, and although less famous than the slow, lyrical movements of opp.127, 130 and 132, it is a master stroke of Beethoven's imagination. The theme is memorable, uncomplicated, naive and trusting: Flaubert's *Felicité* in musical form.<sup>111</sup> And yet it is just this unassuming, innocent nature which allows the theme to be so wonderfully spun through its variations, as easily affectionate as *Felicité*, and full of the capacity to love, with the variations showing the depth and range possible from the most trouble-free of musical ideas. In many ways, this movement is a lesson in simple faith and a quietly majestic quasi-religious sensibility, though Beethoven reminds us that it is one often threatened by maturity and the outside world, with shadowy figures and ominous proceedings which may permanently remove that innocence.<sup>112</sup>

The A major theme itself is presented with a serene harmony, a transparent texture, a straightforward tune, a softly swaying rhythm. At its simplest, the theme is a statement and reply between the two violins, but Beethoven is magnificent in the way he scores the piece, making it seem as effortless as a dream but actually using all his cunning as a composer of music for four very similar voices. Particularly inspired is the way he invites the second violin to back and then authenticate the opening phrases of the first, the latter mute while the former speaks. There is also the lovely contrast between the two supportive lower instruments: the placid long notes of the viola and the tender pizzicato from the cello.

Variation 1 flows organically from the theme, with the second violin obviously giving the first phrase of the theme, while the viola brings the rest. Above them, the first violin creates some exquisite contrapuntal flowers that then merge back into the other voices. This is no time for the voices to speak apart; they must be unified, or at least on equal terms. The viola then carries a thematic fragment while the cello is allowed space to perform its own musical embellishments, its rich sound intensifying the progression of the variation, which becomes more and more extravagant and impulsive, everything appearing to speed up (although

actually the tempo remains the same as the theme).

Variation 2 naturally takes up this heightened situation, presenting a quasi-march that is a little coquettish, teasing us as both the tempo and the texture increase towards something positively unruly by the end. It starts with a straightforward, almost casual, but nonetheless grown-up conversation between the parental first violin and cello, supported by the slightly bored, childlike voices of the second violin and viola. Before long, the middle instruments want to take part in the intriguing tête-à-tête of the outer parts, and at one point the second violin impetuously interrupts the cello's appearances, while the viola sings along with the cello, like a child imitating their father. Eventually the second violin succeeds in commandeering the conversation from the first violin, before all four voices fall out with unharmonized sounds (similar to those in the second movement). From here, our 'family' is unsure how to proceed, and they mutter and moan, irritably outlining an A major chord one petulant note at a time.

Variation 3 emerges from this crabby texture. It could not – initially – be more different: flattering, sensual – even alluring, but with 'dolce' ('sweet') written over the first phrases for the viola and cello. And it is these two instruments which begin things, genially, referring back to the passage in A major that was the glimmer of light in the stygian first movement. The violins soon begin their own exchange, the viola and cello briefly relegated to a background role, before finally all four voices begin to sound together. This starts to shift the mood of the variation into a more vibrant tone, with sharp offbeat stresses adding piquancy to amiability, before spice becomes vice and a much more menacing atmosphere pervades the air.

Variation 4 begins with the final chord of variation 3, and this is the first truly slow variation, an adagio. Its connection to the theme itself is not apparent via the melody, but – as so often throughout these variations – it is the harmonies which are providing the unmistakable association. Another familiar feature is the way this variation, like the ones which have preceded it, builds its momentum, the instruments chattering across one another before, at the close, the two violins soar up above a couple of resounding thumps from their lower partners.

Variation 5 is kick-started into action from this final cadence, and we now enter one of

the most alien and upsetting parts of op.131 – indeed, one of the strangest realms in all Beethoven. It is troubling, evocative, unforgettable. It begins seemingly devoid of a melody, everything offbeat, languid, almost as if the string quartet have decided to start retuning their instruments, with just the harmonies again giving a ghostly connection to the main theme. From this no man's land, the quartet begins to speed up (that other distinguishing feature of all the variations), though with no diminishing of the ominous atmosphere, as it snatches at some melody before evaporating into thin air.

Variation 6 remains within these intimidating mists, quietly varying some of the harmonic shapes, while allowing brighter, firmer threads of melody to float through this curiously motionless and hypnotic atmosphere which is certainly peculiar but much less threatening than the previous variation (the cello has an important role in adding some more solid mediations).

'Variation 7' is what we think occurs next – but it is another Beethovenian trick, a misleading cadence that starts with florid conviction but then disperses into a series of cackles and trills. We are not in a variation but an ostentatious, capricious coda. We dart from A to C major, desperately trying to remember the theme, before the first violin seems to rediscover the innocent original theme. Finding it seems to send the quartet into a slight daze – like Felicité confusing a parrot for the Holy Spirit in Flaubert's story? The tempo oscillates before A major is indeed found again and the theme is re-presented, not in its original, naive form but in gloriously rich scoring with the first violin providing its favourite ornamental trills.

This elaboration soon consumes itself, and everything liquefies back into a confusion as the quartet try to trace the original theme in its simple, trusting form. One attempt, in F major, is asserted, then rejected, before the first violin takes us back to A with a lyrical flourish which leads to a series of witty confusions and a play on the theme from the rest of the quartet. With this, the movement – one of Beethoven's supreme achievements – comes to an end, the innocent theme now perhaps lost forever.

## 5. *Presto.*

Here we – almost – pause for breath, before the fifth movement (a true scherzo, unlike the

more ambiguous second movement) lifts off. It is a scherzo in E major which whirls around, revisiting its material, with a trio in the middle and a choleric coda at the end.

At the beginning, the cello mumbles and grumbles for a moment, and there is the briefest hesitation before the first violin picks up the cello's muttering theme and all four players inaugurate an enchanting screwball comedy. But it is one for children, and there is a delightful folksy innocence to its charms which allows us to believe that everything was not lost forever in the coda of the fourth movement; at times it recalls the scherzo country dance of the *Pastoral* Symphony. With this movement, Beethoven was as keen as ever to experiment with sonorities, producing some wonderfully strange effects – it is tempting to relate them to a clown or a children's entertainer effecting funny noises, raspberries or other juvenilia, all as part of the fun.

In the midst of this comedy, however, comes a more amiable trio, its ambiance fresh but related in shape to the opening of the movement. It is played by the two violins with a rapid back and forth accompaniment below from the viola and cello, who then persuade the violins to join in with their own game, which – nonetheless – needs to be played carefully and without any sense of panic or perturbation, so that it can persuasively lead back to the more raucous material of the scherzo, which is indeed then reiterated.

As in a children's story or game, repetition has a crucial role, and both scherzo and trio are next recapped, with Beethoven furnishing the second trio with more detailed pizzicato and varying the now third appearance of the scherzo with a sizeable pianissimo section. From here, just when it seems we are going to be caught in a dizzy cycle of material, the quartet breaks off its further repeat and comes to a dangerous halt. The first violin and cello try to resume the repeat, but they get it wrong, and everything disintegrates into some alarming dissonance, followed by turmoil and another silence.

Finally the quartet has achieved a meaningful pause only by destroying itself – but the very moment we realize this, it has already begun to put itself back together, hunting around for the main theme but finding only some pizzicatos and more frowning silences. We can imagine that clown and their comically exaggerated expressions as they rummage about for the theme. Where can it be?

Then, suddenly, there it is! But we hear it parodied in a very strange fashion, with the



players' bows virtually at the bridges of their instruments<sup>113</sup> producing a nasal or even metallic sound, as if the artiste is pulling the theme from within one of the youngster's noses or ears, in true children's-party fashion. Then, almost by way of a bow plus applause, the sound world returns to normality and some dignity with a brief passage of standard playing before a terrific crescendo and fortissimo close. This is followed by a transition similar to that between the first and second movements (where its notes jumped from C sharp to D).

#### 6. *Adagio quasi un poco andante.*

From notes in E, three solemn G-sharp blows transfer us straightaway to the very short G-sharp minor adagio sixth movement, which functions for the finale a little like the hyper-brief allegro third movement that prefaced the great central variations. For all its important introductory qualities, however, as with the adagietto of Mahler's Fifth Symphony, which has a similar role in that work, op.131's adagio has an extraordinary and tenacious independence.

It is an immensely poignant song – relatively brief, but it sounds far, far longer (many people would be staggered to be told this movement takes around only two minutes of airtime). The harmonics are extremely rich, previewing Wagner and Bruckner, and it is this which seems to halt time. It is a self-aware final lament, with an alertness to the tragic comeuppance to come. It is one of Beethoven's most outstanding soliloquies: luxuriant, agonizing, eternal.

This G-sharp minor bridge movement contains its own mini-bridge – a deceptive cadence and final phrase that turns this gorgeous music to its, and the entire quartet's, true intent: C-sharp minor.

#### 7. *Allegro.*

A ferocious march in sonata form takes this immensely complex tragedy – which, like *Hamlet*, *Macbeth* and *King Lear*, has found space for clowns and fools as well as princes and kings – towards its awe-inspiring conclusion. Like all truly great tragedies, it is a world that is remote and antique but constantly repeated and continually renewed, cathartic but

stubborn: utterly ancient but entirely contemporary.

We are plunged into things by a wide-ranging violin phrase, and C sharp itself is curtly, unambiguously, restored: staccato and fortissimo. After many events, moods and modulations, we are finally back where we started, in C-sharp minor, for the first time since that melancholy opening fugue. To use an analogy (if not a key) from another great tragedy, we are back in the Rhine at the beginning of act three of *Götterdämmerung*, returning to the place where *Der Ring* began all those hours and days ago in *Das Rheingold*.

This stormy finale is voracious, magnetic, gravitational, dragging in ideas from across the quartet in an ultimate summative statement. It begins by rearranging the quartet's four foundational notes, giving us another combination of the opening: C sharp, G sharp, A, and B sharp. This instantly swells into a theme employing the same idea, before other, more rhythmical, memories of the first-movement fugue seem to surface along with further reshuffles of its associated notes. The Wagnerian analogy just mentioned is surely appropriate, for Beethoven is here taking us back to the beginning of this gloriously cyclical quartet, sealing its own circle as well as its creator's life's work.

We also witness, via the second subject, a bright cosmic comet, heralding the dazzling doom to come: a luminous E major theme, heartfelt and lyrical, with its component parts calling to mind various features of the quartet (the trio of the scherzo; the resonant chords at the end of the first movement; variation 5 of the central movement). This 'comet' theme is simultaneously ecstatic, tragic and serene, like Lear:

You do me wrong to take me out o'th' grave.  
Thou are a soul in bliss, but I am bound  
Upon a wheel of fire, that mine own tears  
Do scold like molten lead.

(IV.vii.45–48)

There are modulations to our old acquaintance F sharp, never one to be left out, before Beethoven introduces a very simple rhythmical idea, steady and poised, which rebalances the quartet perfectly.

D major, the key of the second movement, returns via a dashing second violin, another

chance to make its voice heard, though now we hear it as a close relation to the E major 'comet' theme. Such an association is investigated further as a means, via G sharp and some curious bustling play, to prepare for the recapitulation, which swiftly heads off to explore some fascinating novel reorganizations of the material.

The E major 'comet' theme then returns, but this time in D major, richly resplendent, before an absolute master stroke: this exceptionally brilliant theme shifts to C-sharp major, that key for which we have been waiting since the very end of the opening fugue. It is a deeply moving return and sanctions the music to move towards its conclusion, our hero now free to expire.

But Beethoven is still not finished and conjures a conclusion of supreme tragic grandeur. First, he does something he has never done before in a string quartet: whole notes sound in sustained octaves. Next the dashing D major theme returns, undergoing several energetic changes before everything wanes: the frequency of harmonic alteration decelerates; the tempo slackens to 'poco adagio'. Then we are back in C-sharp major for one last heroic push. But the final scamper to the gate is a strange one.

Beethoven avoids anything too facile or obvious: it is not a leap into joy like the Ninth Symphony, or a fizz of excitement like the Third, or anything like the darkness-to-light trajectory of the Fifth (for all those works' astounding conclusive power). It is not a triumph, but nor is it a pyrrhic victory; instead, op.131 locates something more personal, more profound, more honest. It is an authentic response to suffering. It is an affirmation of existence, an acceptance of the grave, an acknowledgement of mortality. It is also admirably ambiguous, because all human existence is – however it is lived and however it ends.



Beethoven's op.131 string quartet was not to be his final word. That lay within the other side of his personality, with the bewitching comedy of op.135. Yet the C-sharp minor quartet stands as his supreme achievement in music, a tragic drama of monumental strength and fascination, of absolute technical facility and an uncompromising creativity. It contains all the tricks and devices he loved, all the styles, methods and skills he had been honing since Bonn.

It takes us, whether player, listener or reader, on a continuous journey of extraordinary variety and richness but always in a voice of dignified poise. It is a flawless marriage of technique and imagination, storytelling and philosophy.

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101 As it turned out, he didn't need to answer that question. Nonetheless, not only did his own final quartet – No.15 in G, completed around the same time as Beethoven's op.131 in the summer of 1826 – attain supreme heights, but in his final months he had probably found his own way round the Beethovenian peak by writing several major, groundbreaking works in other genres, including his final triptych of piano sonatas, the string quintet in C major – and *Winterreise*.

102 Though these are, after all, the subject matter of *Hamlet* and *King Lear* too...

103 Beethoven's brother Johann had done well out of the Napoleonic Wars, opening a pharmacy in Linz at the height of the conflicts. He had also married his housekeeper, which Beethoven rejected as obscene – privately, he was likely simply envious of another sibling's love. In 1819 Johann purchased a large estate in Gneixendorf – a setting to which we will return in the next chapter.

104 Johann Nepomuk Wolfmayer, a textile merchant and close friend of the composer. Wolfmayer would be compensated with the dedication of Beethoven's next, and final, string quartet, op.135.

105 Though, to be fair, Haydn could locate some considerable power and ferocity even with his relatively constrained forces – his great *Missa in tempore belli* ('Mass in time of war') from 1796 has some terrific energy and anticipates some of the 'war drum' elements towards the close of the *Missa solemnis* (it is, after all, also known as the *Paukenmesse* or *Timpani Mass*).

106 Evidence he used the Bach B minor in this direct way is less dependable. We know Beethoven knew the work well from theoretical treatises he owned, and that he had requested part of the mass (the Crucifixus) as early as 1810, but it is not clear whether he had an entire score at his disposal when he was working on the *Missa solemnis* in the early 1820s. In our age of vast libraries, huge publishing projects, and unlimited internet resources, it can be hard for us to remember just how difficult obtaining certain scores was, especially for relatively new or rare works, even if you were Ludwig van Beethoven.

107 It was premiered in Saint Petersburg on 7 April 1824, under the auspices of Beethoven's patron Prince Galitzin, commissioner of the opp.127, 130 and 132 string quartets. In the copy he presented to Archbishop Rudolf, Beethoven inscribed the words 'Von Herzen – Möge es wieder – Zu Herzen gehn!' – 'From the heart – may it return to the heart!'

108 Principally, of course, in the extended Benedictus, with its exquisite solo violin, which enters in its highest register, representing the Holy Spirit descending to earth and humanity.

109 What Joyce could himself see was limited, and in the *Wake* it was the *sound* words made that especially fascinated him, though he also appreciated the extraordinary effect such long words, along with the relentless polyglottal punning of the shorter ones, had on the way readers perceived the text. Persistent – and often horrific – eye troubles became significantly worse during the time, between 1922 and 1939, that Joyce devised *Finnegans Wake*, and he was often able to see little more than a sliver of light from one eye. The book, his last, would sometimes be composed via crayons, with massive lettering. Elsewhere, the sheer complexity and oddity of many of his manuscripts make them look as byzantine and bizarre as Beethoven's. But the bravura results speak for themselves.

110 That Beethoven had played Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* since the age of twelve is evident on every page of op.131, and naturally the C-sharp minor fugue from book I seems to have been of particular importance to him.

111 From 'Un cœur simple' ('A Simple Heart'), the third of Flaubert's superb *Trois contes* (1877).

112 Wagner called it the 'incarnation of innocence', and the sound of the prelude to his *Lohengrin* (1850) is perhaps prophesied from time to time in this extraordinary movement.

113 A technique known as ponticello.

## Chapter Ten

### The Clown's Trapeze: *Op.135 in F major*

**F**or Beethoven's string quartet in F major, op.135, his sixteenth and final essay in the genre, many writers have not unwisely suggested a parallel with Shakespeare's great valedictory tragicomedy *The Tempest* (1611), routinely cited as the Bard's last play. But just as we now know Shakespeare worked on other projects after *The Tempest* – *Cardenio*, *Henry VIII*, *The Two Noble Kinsmen* – Beethoven had plans for still further music: a tenth symphony, a string quintet, a requiem mass, possible oratorios, even an opera about a fairy who was half snake on Saturdays. He also wrote a magnificent appendix to his string quartet career: the exuberant alternative finale for op.130. Had death not caught up with him, these, and many other, musical endeavours would surely have occupied him.

That said, op.135 is a fitting way for Beethoven to leave the stage. Despite – and indeed, because of – his habitual misery, Beethoven loved to joke, to play games, to muck about, with a humour at times not only near the knuckle but beyond most people's funny bones. And F major is a good key for a warmer kind of comedy and rueful glee. It is full of cordiality, amity and delight but comes with a twinge of regret too. This is not grief but a hint of passing pining, as much for the transitory happiness the key has already granted us as anything else. Vivaldi picked it for the *Autumn* Concerto of his *Four Seasons* (1725), mixing laughter with tears at the dwindling of the year. Haydn chose it for half a dozen of his symphonies, and

Beethoven knew he needed it for the rustic gaiety and songful gratitude of his *Pastoral* Symphony (1808), as well as the complex high jinks of his Eighth (1812). Brahms would pick it for his Third (1883), a work full of buoyant disappointment and forlorn jauntiness; he knew well how to exploit F major's ability to give bliss shaded by sadness.<sup>114</sup>

So Beethoven harvested F major for his final string quartet – and, indeed, his final completed work. After the imposing tragedy of op.131 – a *Coriolanus* for string quartet – a melancholic, bucolic comedy to finish. Op.135 is *As You Like It* for four string instruments, a splendid fusion of the pastoral and the comical, the rural and the raucous, taking us on a short lyrical journey to prove one last time that, truly, 'all the world's a stage' when it comes to the domain of the string quartet, the genre to which Beethoven had turned for his closing masterpieces and most insightful musical statements.

A brilliant piece of chamber music, op.135 – much more mischievously concise and classically succinct than the earlier late quartets – knows pain, it knows suffering, but it refuses to be cowed. Written at a time when he was experiencing unbearable physical discomfort, it shows Beethoven's dazzling ability to change registers, to shift styles, to restlessly reimagine form. Sweet, after all, are the uses of adversity.



'We all look at Nature too much,' thought Oscar Wilde, 'and live with her too little. [The Greeks] saw that the sea was for the swimmer, and the sand for the feet of the runner. They loved the trees for the shadow that they cast, and the forest for its silence at noon.'<sup>115</sup>

Beethoven would have concurred with Wilde – and the Greeks. Although he didn't undertake a great deal of running on the sand, or much swimming in the sea, Beethoven certainly loved the trees, along with the meadows and hills, flowers and birds. If the silence of the forest was imposed on him, later on, he certainly knew the wonder of its stillness, the majesty of its terrors and mysteries. Nature, for Beethoven, was a realm of matchless wonder and delight, a place of truly medicinal possibilities and healing promise. In nature, there was no one to break his heart; no vexing patrons or publishers; no family members or clinging sycophants (useful as the latter could sometimes be).

As anyone who has heard even the first few bars of the *Pastoral* knows, nature mattered to Beethoven, just as it would to Wagner and Mahler later in the century, and Beethoven's symphony of 1808 captures the ecstasy we all feel especially – as the first movement says – when we arrive in the countryside after a time away in towns or cities. The forests, the fields, the lakes, the endless flora and fauna: this was a special place for Beethoven, and we are indeed lucky to have a musical testimony that, while also reinventing the possibilities of the symphony, evokes so many of our own *feelings* for nature. The *Pastoral* has a glorious sense of communion with the natural world, with the world beyond art, which can, too, be so splendidly recaptured via the artificial sphere of music.

Beethoven, famously, would spend hours – days, even – on tramps in the countryside, getting hopelessly lost and bedraggled in the process. He was at his happiest on an excursion to nowhere, contentedly working out ideas for a new piece or simply relishing the air, the skies, the muddy ground and the wind in the trees. He knew the plants and animals as well as he did many an acquaintance in Vienna – and tended to prefer the former's company. It is of some comfort, then, that Beethoven, in a life which did not necessarily overflow with commonplace happiness, was granted one last spell in the countryside before he died.

In the summer of 1826, almost immediately after he had finished op.131 (and probably slightly before), Beethoven began work on yet another string quartet – he really couldn't get them out of his system (though he did concede in a letter to his publisher Moritz Schlesinger that this would be his last, at least for a while). As we saw in the previous chapter, his nephew Karl's suicide attempt had caused a commotion in July and August; but, by September, Beethoven found the idea of evacuating Vienna immensely tempting. He had not had his usual summer respite down in Baden, and the space and air away from the city would give Karl some time to further recuperate from his injuries as well as to prepare for his entry into the military.

Beethoven's brother Johann, six years Ludwig's junior, had thrived – as an apothecary in the Napoleonic Wars – and in 1819 had purchased an estate in a sleepy, scruffy village some fifty lazy and meandering miles up the Danube from Vienna: Gneixendorf. (Beethoven once quipped that the name of his brother's hamlet crunched and snapped like the sound of a cart's axle breaking.) Johann had long been keen to see his brother again and had been



offering for a while to put him up; he certainly had plenty of room.

Tempting as the invitation had been, Beethoven was wary, alas not for the first time, of a sibling's bride. Some years before, Johann had married his housekeeper, Therese, and Beethoven couldn't stand her. The feeling was mutual: Therese once threatened to hit the composer with a poker if he ever darkened their doorway. Beethoven yearned to be in the countryside again, however, and he decided to make the trip to Gneixendorf, dangers to his cranium notwithstanding.

He set off with Karl from Vienna at the end of September 1826. In his luggage were sketches and manuscripts of two works for string quartet, both of which had been nearly completed and which he hoped the rustic air would assist: a new work in F major, along with a substitute finale for op.130 (to replace the perilous *Große Fuge*). As he had planned to stay for just a week or so, Beethoven packed only summer clothes – something that would come back to haunt him when he prolonged his stay for some two months and into the beginning of an Austrian winter.

It was a lengthy journey from Vienna to Gneixendorf and the longest expedition Beethoven had undertaken for some years. (You can do it today in no time at all, on the S5 autobahn, which follows the track and course of the Danube directly.) But the length of the journey was matched by the beauty of the landscape, Beethoven in particular delighting in seeing the fabulously picturesque Wachau Valley again – it is today a UNESCO World Heritage site – which he hadn't glimpsed in over three decades, now just coming into its autumn colours.

Scenery could only go so far, however, in helping his body's ruinous state. His abdominal problems persisted, exacerbated by his drinking, and now caused a host of other maladies. His legs were puffy and at times very badly inflamed; large amounts of fluid were amassing in his abdomen (so much, in fact, that he had to resort to the pitiful indignity of wearing some sort of ridiculous tummy harness to support his protuberant belly).

Upon arrival in Gneixendorf, Beethoven was granted a suite of three rooms and one servant. It had no piano, but Beethoven had no real need of one at the moment, though he did occasionally play the instrument in his brother's salon. His brother's estate – Wasserhof – was large, some four hundred acres, with much of the land leased to local farmers. In their

first days together, Beethoven and Johann roamed his land, catching up a little, both brothers moaning about their financial affairs, mainly to keep Ludwig and Therese apart – though, initially at least, they were on quite good terms, Therese in particular noting to Beethoven how much Karl venerated him, which must have pleased the composer greatly.

Johann was often away on business, either in the nearest town, Krems, or in Vienna. When he was at home, he seemed determined to turn his fraternal hospitality into a modest revenue stream: pestering his brother for money for his bed and board, as well as to live with him more regularly in the summer months (for a fee). Business folk, one supposes, do not become affluent without chasing even minor accumulations of capital.

For Beethoven, a daily routine set in. He would rise at five thirty, sit at his table and work on his quartets, beating time and banging various objects and items of furniture, to the consternation of those with whom he was sharing the house. After breakfast, he would scurry with wild abandon into the countryside, relishing the fresh air, woods and wide open spaces, shouting and waving his arms, scribbling in his pocketbook and pounding rhythms on the trees. He would ramble and hike, sometimes at a slow pace, in either thought or pain, but often, when his legs allowed, at a furious speed, astonishing some of the local cow farmers (and, no doubt, their bovine charges).

On one celebrated occasion, Beethoven scared some oxen – probably his gesticulations had frightened them – who bolted down a hill. Their farm boy handler was able to calm them, before Beethoven appeared again, flapping his arms, barking and hollering, which naturally only alarmed the creatures again, who darted all the way back to their farmhouse. The exasperated farmer's lad, angry at this lunatic for scaring his cattle and causing him so much extra labour, was dumbfounded and bemused when told who he really was: a famous composer from Vienna.

But what was detrimental to the agricultural communities of Lower Austria was just the tonic for the creator of string quartets, and by the end of November both the F major work, op.135, and the new finale for op.130 had been sent to their publishers. If work was going well, familial relations, on the other hand, had reached an impasse. Beethoven tended to stick to his rooms, eating and drinking alone and enjoying the local wines, which were not doing his insides any favours at all. One day, a letter arrived for him – from his brother on the

other side of the house. It concerned Karl and his future, not an issue on which Beethoven was likely to take any advice, not least from his (as Beethoven saw it) dim-witted younger brother. Johann, not unreasonably, saw Karl as malingering fruitlessly in Gneixendorf: a week or two of convalescence had morphed into eight, while Beethoven composed and tramped the fields. Additional rows over inheritances – Ludwig was determined that Karl, rather than the ‘housekeeper’ Therese, be the beneficiary of Johann’s will – and boozing (Beethoven really was imbibing a great deal of local wine and barely eating at all) meant that it was clearly time for Beethoven and Karl to pack up and return to Vienna.

The composer was very ill. His gruesome diarrhoea was back; his legs, tummy and temper were all swollen and often out of control as he sought solace in wine to fill his stomach and temporarily alleviate his many pains. Therese herself was heading to Vienna in the snug family coach, but Beethoven seems to have gruffly, stubbornly, refused this modern and convenient conveyance. He instructed Karl to check timetables and, finding nothing suitable, he decided they would hitch a lift on the back of a milk cart.

And so it was, on 1 December 1826, that Beethoven – still wearing his somewhat reckless summer clothes – climbed aboard an open wagon with his nephew for the two-day trek back to Vienna. The weather, as we might expect for central Europe at this time of year, was absolutely dreadful: damp and freezing. Part of the way home, they stopped at a tavern and spent an uncomfortable night in a miserable, unheated room, Beethoven coughing violently and with excruciating pains in his stomach and side. Drinking iced water to ease the agony only brought on pneumonia, and he had to be lifted by several men back onto the cart the following morning.

They arrived in Vienna that evening, and Beethoven immediately took to his bed. He would never leave the room again.



When Beethoven was writhing in agony at the inn situated somewhere between Gneixendorf and Vienna, on the floor below him local musicians were probably playing some of their latest hits, or old favourites, to the rowdy punters in attendance. Taverns along

routes like this were popular stopping-off points for itinerant travellers and regional merchants keen to make the most of their evenings after gruelling days on the road (or on what passed for roads in those days), and music was a big part of the pleasure (along, of course, with alcohol). One of those performers' folksy tunes in these roadside hostleries might have been the innocuous little ditty Anton Diabelli had written as a strange stratagem-cum-competition back in 1819.

More an editor and commissioner of music than a composer, Diabelli had written both his diminutive waltz and an invitation to fifty great composers of the empire to pen a (single) variation on it, so that he himself could market and sell the results. It was an excellent advertising scheme for his new publishing house: What better than a chain of famous musical names all attached to his own? Although Diabelli was a friend and colleague, Beethoven initially wanted nothing to do with the enterprise, and his apparent retort that Diabelli's waltz was a mere 'Schusterfleck' ('cobbler's patch') undeserving of his time has since become a fabled part of the Beethovenian mythos.

As it turned out, of course, this inoffensive little piece would eventually birth Beethoven's most extravagant piano work: the *Diabelli Variations*, op.120 (1823). A paradigm of his art, it is a vast comic masterpiece of musical adventure, invention and parody, as well as a fascinating part of the journey towards his final string quartet and concluding comedy, op.135. And like all great comedies, from *Falstaff* to *Frasier*, *Blackadder* to *The Bartered Bride*, both op.120 and op.135 contain their share of sadness (plus, in the latter, one last set of Beethovenian variations for good measure).

Whatever the truth of Beethoven's 'Schusterfleck' remark, Diabelli's waltz is admirably described by such a comment, for musical sequences simply repeat themselves with a little modulation – rather like a cobbler at work. Charitably, we might see the waltz as salubrious, with a dry energy and some excellent robust musicianship; less kindly, we might see it as pedestrian, rather banal, and worthy of the back room to a bar. But there again, some fine music goes on in the back rooms of bars, and whatever we think of Diabelli's waltz, it eventually proved sufficiently interesting for Beethoven to mine it for every gem and jewel in the piano's expressive range. In truth, it has a certain quirkiness, a playful plasticity, that makes it ripe for twisting and pulling apart in every conceivable way.

Beethoven does not seek variety through key changes: most of the work remains in C major, until some devastating shifts to C minor and E-flat major towards the end, which have an extraordinary clout because of the general adherence until then to the home key. Instead, Beethoven pursues diversity through seizing the most minute element of the Diabelli – a dynamic; a short sequence of notes – and from each tiny seed sprouts a magnificent row of prodigious trees, for each variation (there are thirty-three in all) can be regarded as a solid construction in its own right.

It is not long into the *Diabelli* Variations before it is clear that the original waltz is no longer in control and has been usurped as monarch by the Beethovenian pretenders to its throne. Like an invading army, the thirty-three variations annex power and decide on their own terms how to rule their new kingdom. And their respect for their former leader is minimal: far from being cherished or revered, König Diabelli is taunted, teased, disowned, torn to pieces, enhanced, parodied, perfected, updated, lamented and finally eradicated, before – perhaps – being resurrected in a mock ceremony at the work's close.

At times, Beethoven's exploitation of his friend's waltz borders on the abusive-satanic, but if truth be told, it is almost always playful: a good-humoured and mischievous journey that also explores some wonderfully complex musical ideas (that could never be reconnoitred in a simple waltz). We can imagine Beethoven frowning at the tune, then his astounding musical mind suddenly leaping upon the golden possibilities that lay in the garbled garbage. But then this was what his – Beethoven's – music had always done: taking the smallest element and from this unleashing all manner of imaginative potential. In a way, of course, he was paying Diabelli the highest compliment, substituting his colleague's waltz for one of his own embryonic creations.



Regarded as a – very long, very complex – joke, the *Diabelli* is a bravura, gargantuan work of dark humour, and this comedic element connects it to Beethoven's final string quartet. After several dramas of extraordinary size and profundity (opp.127, 132, 130 and 131, plus the *Große Fuge*), Beethoven turned to something briefer for a final, but no less philosophically

substantial, piece of chamber theatre. Yet it was no regressive step, no degeneration to the 'smaller' quartets of Haydn, Mozart or his own op.18 (all of which are, of course, only reduced in size, not depth or ingenuity). Beethoven didn't know how to go backward; he had no reverse gear.

Op.135 is not nostalgic; it is radically progressive. Just as his Eighth Symphony is not a retrograde work but a transitional phase preparing the ground for the Ninth and *Missa solemnis*, op.135 was a metamorphosis, but in this case led nowhere, since it was to be his final work. Beethoven's skills as a writer of string quartets had taken him to some extraordinary places – musically, intellectually and emotionally. Op.135 represented another port of inquiry: towards a new concision, an innovative concentration, and a rich seam of comedy wrought amid horrendous fleshly discomfort. We will never know if it was to be a merely liminal work or the first of a number of highly focused, condensed new pieces, even a new phase, but as it stands, it is one of his greatest quartets, and the cycle would be incomplete without it.

Technically it is the equal of anything that preceded it, utilizing that skill to assert its irresponsible jocularly and sublime facetiousness – to the consternation, it seems, of many Beethoven admirers to this day. Though such critics tend to concede the profundity of the slow movement, they fail to see that this adagio is not divorced from the work but a fundamental part of it and its vision of the world as a rustic enchantment. It is surely not a 'foreboding' of his end, as has been suggested, but a celebration of his spirit, a commitment to this planet and the delight he still found in it.

The finale has a strange epigraph. 'Der schwer gefaßte Entschluss' – 'The difficult decision' – is the title, followed by two short musical ideas labelled 'Must it be?' and 'It must be! It must be!'<sup>116</sup> Beethoven claimed to his publisher Schlesinger (to whom he had promised the work) that this was related to his difficulty in finding ideas for the finale and to an incident that had taken place in Vienna. At a quartet party he attended, it transpired that the rich host had never purchased a ticket for the premiere of op.130 (in March 1826) but that he wanted to play the work at his little gathering. Beethoven said no, he couldn't, not until the wealthy host had paid the (exaggerated) fifty-florin ticket price for the original concert. 'Must it be?' the host laughed. 'It must be! Get your wallet out!' replied Beethoven,

guffawing and scribbling a canon based on these words.<sup>117</sup>

It was this canon that solved the problem of op.135's finale. An odd story – likely embellished a little – but one which does explain the weird messages on the pages of the score, none of which are to be played, of course, but which are a form of (very apt) hyper-compressed programme note and anticipate the last movement to this peculiarly wonderful quartet. It all – the inscription, the story – mixes joviality with bogus gravity, amusement with a simulated seriousness, in a very Beethovenian way that helps us comprehend the nature and direction of the piece itself. It is as if Shakespeare has inserted 'To be, or not to be' or 'Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow' at the end of *Twelfth Night* or *Much Ado About Nothing*. It all feels splendidly wrong and self-mocking. Op.135 thus goads neoclassicism and pinches the nose of periodization. It emanates tranquillity, mischief and idyllic arcadias: dukes, shepherds and witty, clever heroines. But more than this, it oozes deceit and charm, tempting us to be taken in by its insights and trinkets – the clown at play on his trapeze one final time.

Op.135 was written in the summer and autumn of 1826, and we can forgive, even applaud, Beethoven for his outlandish, ironic humour as his nephew Karl lurched from crisis to recovery and as his own body began its final descent into deterioration and collapse. Those weeks in Gneixendorf were no blissful idyll, but they had been a return to the countryside he loved so much, with a chance to work and relax a little outside of the pressures of Vienna. Humour had saved him on many occasions in the past, so it is more than appropriate that this final complete work from Beethoven's extraordinary pen – a pastoral comedy; snickering, rueful and enraptured – was one that was not only a little bit strange but filled with jokes. He would need those jokes in the devastating weeks and months to come.



When he arrived home to his flat in early December 1826, after his brotherly sojourn to Gneixendorf, Beethoven was in a physically atrocious state, made worse by recent drinking and then the appalling cart journey back to Vienna in the freezing rain. But he had been ill,

even very ill, before, and he supposed this to be yet another tiresome business to be endured but ultimately overcome. This time, he wasn't so lucky. His body was nearly fifty-six years old, and it had had enough.

At first, sleep was hard, just four or so hours each night, sometimes aided by iced spirits, which became a Beethovenian favourite in his last months. He coughed up blood constantly, choked in a frightening manner, and his persistent, lifelong gastrointestinal miseries became even worse, meaning he wanted little food (though the frozen drinks sometimes roused his appetite). After a week or so he was feeling a little better, able to sit up, even potter about his room (which was fairly large), reading and writing, though given to a vicious cycle of anger at his body which only made that body angrier with him.

We know a lot about Beethoven's medical condition in his final months (he would take until the end of March 1827 to die). Or, rather, his health was well-documented; much of what his doctors saw and comprehended was understandably limited, given the science of the age. Certainly there is no need for another book to intimately catalogue Beethoven's ailments as he groaned towards the grave. 'He was very sick and in constant pain' about sums it up.

His two pianos were with him in his bedroom, a source of comfort and a reminder of better days. He couldn't always go near them and was usually stuck in bed, which did at least face the window – though this only served to remind him how his room was now a functional prison and antechamber to the tomb. His servants stayed on, and many contacts and associates dropped by, appalled at his physical state but pleased when his spirits became as animated as of old.

In mid-December, just as he was able to shuffle about his room, never too far from a chamber pot, a magnificent present arrived. This was the *Complete Handel*, in forty glorious volumes, a gift from a London admirer, Johann Stumpff, whom Beethoven had met in Baden a few years before and who had noted both Beethoven's love of Handel and his complaint that he could never find scores of the great man's music anywhere in Vienna. Beethoven wrote at once to Stumpff, thanking him for his wonderful gift, and pointed out to anyone who visited his apartment the vast pile of books in the corner of his bedroom ('Handel is the greatest,' he told one). Stuck at home, stuck in bed: we can imagine the



delight receiving such a present at that time must have meant to a man not only as passionate about Baroque music as Beethoven was but as sorely ill. A box set just in time for his fifty-sixth birthday and his final Christmas.

On 2 January 1827, Karl finally left to join his regiment. He never saw his uncle again, though they did exchange a few letters and parted on good terms. In many ways, it had been an impossible relationship for them both; but they were also very fond of each other and were a vital part of the other's existence at the respective beginning and end of their lives.

Nostalgia became Beethoven's friend in his final weeks, along with the Handel and the iced spirits. He devoured novels by Walter Scott and returned to the classical world: to Homer and the Greeks. He tried to learn multiplication tables (maths had always been a bit of a problem for him). He wrote to publishers, acquaintances and family, including a letter asking for some Rhenish wine (which he could never get hold of in Vienna). People visited. He talked of old friends and lost loves, favourite places and forgotten dreams. But he was rarely delirious. He knew what he had achieved. There was just more he wanted to do.

Beethoven's deteriorating carcass swelled to upsetting, bloated proportions, and he was drained of bodily fluids in a horrific procedure which involved cutting into his abdomen and inserting a tube. For all the unimaginable pain, it did relieve a good deal of his suffering, and the operation was deemed a success, though it had to be repeated several times. On one occasion, undergoing a sweat bath, his body filled with liquid; on another, lying in bed, his body burst, soaking the sheets and half flooding the room. It must have been terrifying, but Beethoven never really gave up, making jokes about the situation.

One day, Diabelli (of variation fame) arrived with a framed picture of Haydn's birthplace, which Beethoven immediately demanded be positioned on the wall near his bed, a final tribute to the great man who had helped him in those early years. It hung next to that other paternal figure, his musician grandfather Ludwig, whose massive portrait Beethoven still lugged about with him wherever he moved.

By early March 1827, the swelling had gone down, revealing a man who was very thin indeed, a skeleton surviving on what amounted to little more than scraps of food and iced spirits, both of which tended to make him vomit anyway. News of an endowment from the Philharmonic Society in London cheered him, and he promised them more work (likely to

be an overture or perhaps a symphony). But this was a promise into thin air, however sincerely it was meant.

Around the twenty-second, he consented to a priest visiting to administer the last rites, thanking the minister in a jokey fashion: 'Danke, ghostly sir!' On the twenty-fourth, he announced his own end, in the manner reserved for antique Roman comedies: 'Plaudite, amici, comoedia finita est' – 'Friends, applaud, the comedy is over.' That very evening, the case of wines from his adolescence and early manhood arrived: some drinks from the beloved Rhineland that he missed so much. 'Pity, pity – too late,' he lamented, though he was permitted a few spoonfuls. Rarely can wine have tasted so luxurious, so sweet, so sad.

Two days later, he died.



Beethoven's funeral took place amid huge public expressions of grief, witnessed by some ten thousand citizens, and with Schubert as one of the pallbearers (their graves are now side by side in Vienna's *Zentralfriedhof*).

But let us end not in mourning but with music, with Beethoven's last work, his op.135 string quartet, his great final comedy which scrutinizes the strangeness of life while simultaneously celebrating it. For Beethoven, it was surely the best possible farewell.

## No.16 in F major

### 1. *Allegretto*.

We start with a final conversation, taking us right back to the splendid opening of the G major quartet (No.2) from the op.18 set. It is gentle, relaxed, informal – a bewitching concoction of the utterly everyday and the intriguingly peculiar. It's normal, or sounds normal, and it is this which draws us in: What are they saying? What – who? – are they talking about? The three-note upswing will be an intimate gambit throughout the quartet, and the movement will be in sonata form – but sonata form after a few too many glasses, or puffs, of something special, teasing and manipulating our expectations in one final Beethovenian refusal to play it straight.

The enigmatic, to-the-point viola, *piano*, with some tender endorsement from the cello, begins in mid-thought, mid-sentence, before the first violin, *pianissimo*, offers a sarcastic comment: Is it a snigger, a chuckle, a derisive observation? The phrase is repeated, before both violins make a comment, more effusively this time. The viola reasserts itself, trying a new line, which the cello continues to support, and a happy exchange takes place between the three higher voices of the quartet. (The initial notes of the viola's phrase outline the 'Es muss sein' figure from the canon and finale of the quartet. The second phrase, from the viola and cello, mixes F major and F minor and is a compressed form of a similar idea which opened both opp.132 and 131 – as well as the Große Fuge.)

The way the ideas of this opening hurriedly modify let us know we are in late Beethoven, but the whole tone is ironic, unpredictable, open and eloquent, connected – albeit sardonically and with a wink – to Haydn, Mozart and op.18. Everything is magnificently simple – and over in a flash, the quartet abridging an attractive theme before a solemn, severe passage begins: a mock incantation in un-harmonized octaves. But this, too, continues for only a few bars before the solo first violin launches into a grander statement that before long is back as part of a general conversation.

A second section materializes in perky quick notes, extending for much longer than the first section and as a parade of tiny mini-themes, before the exposition moves to its cheerful termination. It is a sustained, delightful dance – perhaps spiring us away from the opening

conversation and into the exiled court of the Forest of Arden (to briefly utilize our earlier *As You Like It* analogy).

As such, the exposition never officially finishes: the expected shift to C major is undermined as the quartet instead veers towards the very brink of D minor. From here the development section can commence, and it is a marvel of compressed review: within moments, the opening comments/dialogues, the mock incantation and the perky quick notes are all discussed. The familiarity of this material has allowed Beethoven to try one of his favourite old tricks, blurring the distinction between traditional sonata-form sections: it sounds like we are already in the recapitulation, which has been ingeniously, irreverently, interwoven into the development section. It is a wry comment, perhaps, on the need for such subdivisions, as well as an observation on the inability of some composers to imaginatively distinguish between them.

The red flag that something odd is going on should be the fact that we are recapping in not F major but B-flat major. For a while, the quartet hadn't noticed, but suddenly all four players issue a protest, and the music travels back to F major. Another alarm bell should have been the length of the development – it was tiny, even if we concede the brevity of the exposition. Eventually, after some games in B flat, A minor and G major, the recapitulation is reconfigured. We are uneasy – is this the real one this time? It is, though its waggishness and surprises do their level best to undermine any such conclusion. (It is a great pity Haydn never lived to see what his unruly apprentice had been able to do with string quartet sonata form: surely he would have delighted in the games Beethoven played.)

Taking its cue from the end of the exposition, the recapitulation concludes speciously, lurking inappropriately near G minor, before we launch into a massive coda, Beethoven, as ever, granting this appendix section a status near equal to those of the sonata form proper, and consequently allowing it to manipulate everything that has gone before. In this mesmerizing, exploitative postscript, Beethoven takes the parts of the opening and exposition (the viola's inaugural phrase, the first violin's offhand comment, the mock incantation) and shows them all together – something we'd surely never expected to be possible given the way in which they were presented to us.

Flexibility is the watchword of comedy, and for those that don't share Beethoven's sense

of humour, this movement, and especially its coda, doubtless infuriates. It is quirky, impulsive and full of zing, as the composer tries out one last time in a first movement his subversive art of reorganization with its cheeky defiance of expectation.

## 2. *Vivace*.

From here, a lightning-fast three-minute scherzo to further display Beethoven's wild wit: here events are less Forest of Arden and more Samuel Beckett or Eugène Ionesco – or even Monty Python. Formal barriers seem constantly to be torn down: fourth walls broken, half rebuilt and then trampled upon.

The first violin gives us a simple tune, shuttling backward and forward along the initial three notes (F-G-A) of an F major scale (which in fact mirrors the larger-scale design of the movement through extensive subdivisions in F major, G major and A major). The rhythm, however, is absurd, with the second violin crazily syncopating so that it displaces its peer's melody all over the place. The cello adds further notes to complicate matters, as does the odd insertion of a delinquent, heavily accented, E flat into the proceedings (with no rhyme or reason: it is entirely foreign to the harmonic environment).

Indeed, this rude interruption continues for some time, before Beethoven suddenly ditches the idea, only to instantly pick it up again in another key: E natural. Suddenly the calculation becomes clear: it allows the movement to travel back more conveniently to F. This is Beethoven at his most deliciously exasperating: teasing us, toying with us, but then showing us the absolute mastery he has over musical logic. He is both dangerous anarchist and clear-headed town planner, the man with both the bomb and the blueprints.

The trio section is no less insane. It runs through keys, moving from F to G to A, but with plenty of surprises on the way. The A major section is vast. It commences much like the other two, before the first violin begins a hyperactive, feverish dance led by a squealing folk tune. And that's not all: below it, the three other voices play a frenzied whirling figure, which they repeat no less than fifty – fifty! – times, fortissimo. Even by Beethoven's peculiar standards, this is eccentric, and the effect is magnificently strange (just as he wanted it to be).

We stagger out of this giddy dance into a repeat of the scherzo, which is handled brilliantly as once again Beethoven tears the movement to pieces, logic and cruelty going

hand in hand (in a manner not unlike the vast commotions of the *Diabelli Variations*). At the very end, Beethoven brings back the rhythms of the earlier E-flat interferences, but this time in what else but F major.

### 3. *Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo.*

Here, one last time, we enter into Beethoven's cherished variation form, in a singing pastoral idyll of supreme wonder and fascination. Beckett, Ionesco and the surreal are banished, and the Forest of Arden swings back, in all its rustic beauty. Coming after such splendid, disorientating chaos, this movement breathes loveliness and a profound, inexhaustible beauty. Yet it is important not to detach it from the rest of the quartet, to know that it is part of the same sphere as the bedlam Beethoven has just touched on. Both were vital aspects of his world.

The scherzo's shards of broken material provide the building blocks for the opening of the *lento assai*. That movement had ended with several very high F major chords. Now, at the start of the slow movement, the viola enters, playing a low F, onto which the second violin adds an A flat and the first violin a D flat, before the cello provides two D flats. The chord of D-flat major is accomplished.

If Beethoven's earlier music is not necessarily known for its great melodies (he doesn't need them), late Beethoven overflows with them, and this movement is a prime example: the theme on which he builds his variations is exquisitely Schubertian. After instituting the new harmonic world of D flat, outlined above, Beethoven asks the first violin to play a hymn, *sotto voce*. Everything is kept down, taking a long time to move from the violin's lowest string, before it rises and falls in quiet bliss. The cello adds its own double notes, while the middle voices provide tender ruminations. Biographical interpretations are usually dangerous, but it is hard not to think of Beethoven leaning on a rural gate in Gneixendorf, on an early autumn afternoon in 1826, breathing in the beauty of the world around him and conceiving this gorgeous music, a respite from the ravaging hell his body was undergoing.

From here Beethoven can let his four variations flow, each one building a new layer of depth and meaning as it unfolds. The first maintains similarities of style to the theme but now with more emotional depth, heightened in part by playing in a higher register. The

second variation slows everything down further, taking us into a realm of compelling reverence and mystery, while flirting with C-sharp minor. One fretful passage is reminiscent of the 'beklemmt' ('anxious') section of op.130's Cavatina – that shadowy centre of Beethoven's oeuvre – acting like a sudden stab of pain in the side of the wistful composer.

After this, variation 3 has the cello carry the melody with some lovely imitations from the first violin. Between them, the middle voices of the second violin and viola provide accompaniment cut from the same fine cloth but growing in dark passion as the variation proceeds (much of this variation recalls the opening fugue of op.131). The final variation has the first violin take the tune, though with more fragmentations to its utterances. This is music of great beauty, touched by immense pain, but Beethoven is clear there should be nothing self-indulgent here. 'Semplice' ('simple') says his marking, and things should be conversational, comfortable, unfussed, the patient at ease with their suffering, their mortality, but still sad that the beauties of the world will soon be taken away forever.

Lost in utter wonder and reflection, Beethoven's last slow movement evaporates into the air, a stunning, inimitable, unrepeatable mixture of the Classical and the Romantic.

#### *4. Grave, ma non troppo tratto – Allegro.*

The slow introduction to the finale starts by persistently presenting the 'Muss es sein?' ('Must it be?') motif with the viola and cello – and with some stark tenacity, with added thoughts on top from the two violins. It is repeated four times; F minor looms large. 'Seriously and slow, not too drawn out,' says the marking. Is it mocking us? The world has suddenly seemed to shift a long way from the natural honesty of the slow movement. All is extreme, sardonic, tense – or is it? We slow to adagio and soften to pianissimo. Things are very subdued, insistent, enigmatic.

Suddenly the smiling, boisterous F major allegro begins. It has been a joke after all. 'Es muss sein!' 'It must be!' comes the delighted answer to the tortured question. We move forward in strained sonata form, a second subject in A major joining the farewell party with some wonderfully vigorous material that bolsters the quartet, providing a real freshness of feeling (though it is in fact distantly related to the slow movement's main theme). Later on, Beethoven seems to – one final time – audaciously revive the spirit of Bach's polyphony, with

some suggestions of the fugue in B minor from book one of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

The recapitulation section makes sure to relocate the 'Muss es sein?' motif from the slow introduction back into the quartet, this time with the distressed, apprehensive effects heightened even further, before Beethoven asks for the development/recapitulation sections to be repeated again, along with the exposition. After a brief reluctance to continue towards the conclusion, expressed via a couple of bars of *poco adagio*, we're in the coda.

Here, an extended passage of charming, lively pizzicato in *pianissimo* takes us to a final, brief four-bar *fortissimo* with all four instruments playing in unison, the deliberate and immediate contrast a last Beethovenian joke, the composer mocking us (and himself) for taking the movement's enigmas so seriously. It asserts itself powerfully over all the earlier qualms and is surely the ideal way to bring down the curtain on Beethoven's extraordinary string quartet career.<sup>118</sup>



## Afterword by John Simpson

Having, like you, just finished this extraordinary and exciting book, it's my task to write an afterword for it. What, you might ask, can an elderly journalist, who has spent the great majority of his life thrashing around the world's nastiest trouble spots, add to such an exquisitely thoughtful account of some of man's most refined artistic achievements? Nothing in the way of technical understanding, certainly, and very little in the way of historical insight; David Vernon has done all that to a remarkable and satisfying degree in the previous pages. Perhaps the one thing I can most usefully do is to say what Beethoven's quartets mean to someone who has lived with them for nearly sixty years, in bad times and good – and sometimes very exciting times indeed. Quite simply, Beethoven's string quartets have infused and supported and solaced my life.

First, though, a word about the extraordinary man who wrote this book. I confess I've never actually met Dr David Vernon in the flesh, but I've come to understand what makes him tick by reading his almost daily effusions on Twitter: 'Why do I write? I write out of love, out of passion for things I'm interested in, hoping to pass on some of that love to others. As a species, we desperately need music and literature – indeed, we're barely a decent species without them.' Quite right; and David has certainly passed on some of that love to me. He made me re-read Nabokov and appreciate the novels far more the second time. He taught me to turn naturally and instinctively to Bernard Haitink for Shostakovich's Eighth Symphony. He has got me to appreciate Wagner a little more; and his only real failure, so far, has been to persuade me that I should read more than a couple of Yukio Mishima's troubled, difficult novels; but I know I will succumb, because David's extraordinary range of knowledge is impossible to resist. And all this on one of the most trivial of modern social platforms, where most people want to tell you about themselves, their dogs, their hatred of Boris Johnson and their adoration for Jeremy Corbyn, or – in messages to me – their angry

longing for the BBC to be defunded.

David uses the 280 characters which Twitter allows for something altogether different: he educates and enthuses, in an age where most people seem to think that if classical music has any function at all it's to *relax* them. It doesn't seem to occur to many in the Classic FM age that music should also make us angry or joyful or reflective or deeply sad. Like many others, I often switch to Classic FM when Radio 3 decides to play drum music from the Solomon Islands or devote an afternoon to Berio, Cage or my late and very charming friend Harrison Birtwistle. But when I do, of course, I'm likely to find that Classic FM has opted for music from *Star Wars* or is on an advertising break, and I have to go elsewhere for something decent to listen to.

During the time I've been reading David Vernon's tweets, and subsequently his books, he has opened up all sorts of new doors to me; for which I'm profoundly grateful. But he didn't introduce me to Beethoven's string quartets, even though this book is full of information and analysis which I've found remarkably enlightening. The quartets themselves have been a part of my life ever since I first heard the start of No.8 in E minor while sitting in a flat overlooking Greenwich Park in London in 1968. The first bars, broadcast by Radio 3 from the Wigmore Hall, were enough to grab my attention, and I ran over and started to record the rest of the performance on the Uher tape recorder which had been issued to me for interviewing people.

It was several years before I had the money to buy a vinyl record of the No.8 quartet and others, and was able to listen to it with the opening few bars and without my wife's voice saying, 'What's happening?' And me going 'Shush, – I'm doing some recording.' In the decades that followed I bought as many of the string quartets as I could get in cassette form, with that horrible hiss on them, and then replaced the cassettes with CDs: far better and more satisfying. And now we can all download everything Beethoven and indeed just about everyone else ever wrote to our phones, so Beethoven's string quartets come everywhere with me.

Slowly I gravitated to the last quartets and found myself playing them in my hotel rooms in all sorts of difficult places. They have enlightened, charmed, disturbed and sustained me in some of the world's greatest crises: Iran during the revolution of 1978–79, Buenos Aires

during the Falklands War, Lebanon during the terrifying hostage-taking years, Beijing in the run-up to the Tiananmen Square massacre and its aftermath, Berlin at the fall of the Berlin Wall, Baghdad during the First Gulf War, Sarajevo during the long-drawn-out siege. I listened to No.12 on headphones in the boiling heat as our boat chugged its way up the Rio Envira, a tributary of a tributary of the Amazon in the farthest reaches of Brazil, on our way to meet a tribe that had never before seen someone who wasn't an Amazonian Indian; and I listened again and again to No.16 during the invasion of Iraq and the years of American and British occupation that followed, when nothing else quite helped me deal with the death of friends, with my own injuries, and with my sense of despair at the enormous, bloody tragedy unfolding all round me. I sometimes got very low indeed during those years in Iraq, and nothing other than No.16 seemed to work in keeping me going.

So I owe a great deal to Beethoven and his quartets. And although I'm no musicologist and last played an instrument – a flute, which was confiscated from me in Uzbekistan on the grounds that it could be used as a weapon – decades ago, David's charming, hugely informative and deeply insightful book on them will now go wherever I go, as essential as my toothbrush, notebook, phone, fountain pen and reading glasses. And just like the quartets themselves, it will help me through the stresses and difficulties of the world. Thank you, dear David. You are a great benefactor to your fellow human beings.

*John Simpson is the BBC's world affairs editor. His programme, Unspun World, is broadcast weekly on BBC Two, on other BBC television and radio outlets, and on iPlayer.*

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<sup>114</sup> The entire symphony is constructed around the notes F-A<sup>b</sup>-F and the phrase 'frei aber froh', 'free but happy', by then Brahms's own personal motto, and itself adapted from his violinist friend Joseph Joachim's own moniker, F-A-E: 'frei aber einsam', 'free but lonely'.

<sup>115</sup> Oscar Wilde, *De Profundis* (1897).

<sup>116</sup> 'Muss es sein?' and 'Es muss sein!'

<sup>117</sup> Now catalogued as WoO 196.

<sup>118</sup> There would, of course, be an encore: the alternative finale for op.130.

# APPENDIXES

## **Further Reading:** *Books on Beethoven*

### **The Beethoven Quartet Companion**

*ed. Robert Winter and Robert Martin*

A dynamic, highly readable and wide-ranging introduction to the world of Beethoven's string quartets, taking in a number of sociological and historical, as well as musical, perspectives. It is divided into two parts: first, five substantial essays examining a range of issues relating to the life and works, including performance practice, audiences and Beethoven's Vienna; second, a comprehensive quartet-by-quartet guide to the music.

### **The Cambridge Companion to Beethoven**

*ed. Glenn Stanley*

A helpful addition to the great literary and musical series from Cambridge University Press, this Beethoven edition offers an all-embracing assessment of the composer's life and work. We are offered angles on Beethoven as a private individual, as a member of Viennese society, as a professional musician, before the book delves into each of Beethoven's genres – piano, chamber, orchestral, vocal, stage and sacred – looking at issues of style and structure along with a range of historical and performance standpoints. Further essays examine how Beethoven has been interpreted in art, literature and other music, deepening our understanding of the composer's enormous cultural impact. Endlessly captivating.

### **The Beethoven Compendium**

*ed. Barry Cooper*

An invaluable and immensely thorough guide to Beethoven's life and works from a huge range of contexts and perspectives. It offers a very detailed chronology of the composer's life,

discussing significant contemporaries and the historical background of the music as well as Beethoven's philosophy, religion and influences.

### **Beethoven's Quartets**

*Joseph de Marliave*

First published in 1925, this fabled book is showing its age a little: references to Beethoven as 'the Master' on nearly every page begin to grate after a while, as do the archaic typographical choices ('IIIrd' and 'IXth' for 'third' and 'ninth', and so on, though these can be rather endearing). The author is also given to some unreflective and grandiose statements mixed in with occasional unusually grumpy refusals to engage with certain parts of the music – the Große Fuge is curiously dismissed (exactly a century after its composition, the work was still, apparently, confusing listeners). Marliave's insights, however, are often very valuable: the book moves in wonderful detail through all the quartets, as well as offering a number of historical critical perspectives spanning from Beethoven's own time to the author's. An essential book in many ways, but one that needs to be read with a certain caution and patience. Its use of highly technical language and jargon will sadly be disconcerting to many non-musicians.

### **The Beethoven Quartets**

*Joseph Kerman*

A classic of Beethoven scholarship, Kerman's work-by-work guide to the quartets is full of highly detailed analyses, broad in understanding and written in a style that is often a little dry but by no means as turgid as some musicology can become. Kerman is useful in bringing in a number of wider musical and cultural topics to his discussions, although, as with Marliave's book above, the use of specialized musicological language and terminology will be a barrier to many.

### **The Galitzin Quartets of Beethoven: Opp.127, 132, 130**

*Daniel Chua*

Though often hard to follow amid its dense, impenetrable academese, this is a fascinating

book which assesses many of the wider philosophical and cultural issues around these first three of the late quartets: opp.127, 132 and 130. Through investigations that exhume characteristics typical of the exterior structures as well as the hidden dynamics of the music, Chua understands the *Galitzin* Quartets as sweeping critiques of both music and society (a point of view first suggested by Adorno).

### **The Beethoven String Quartets: Compositional Strategies and Rhetoric**

*Leonard G. Ratner*

A mannered and loquacious book, but nonetheless full of some expedient insights into how Beethoven put his works together across his career. A tome not to be diligently read cover to cover but to be consulted from time to time to gain some wonderful takes on how composers actually work.

### **The String Quartet: A History**

*Paul Griffiths*

A useful blend of history and musicology, Griffiths's book is a shrewd and readable guide to the long history of this very particular musical form. Full of beneficial comparisons as he charts the string quartet's evolution: its changing and immutable faces.

### **The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven**

*Charles Rosen*

Along with perspectives on Haydn and Mozart, this classic work of musical scholarship contains endless insights into Beethoven's place within the Classical Holy Trinity – angles we may tend to forget as we chase Beethoven the Romantic and Beethoven the Modernist. A book to continually access, consult and savour.

### **The Symphonic Repertoire: The First Golden Age of the Viennese Symphony; Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, and Schubert**

*A. Peter Brown*

A huge and fascinating book exploring the inheritance (and immediate legacy) of

Beethoven's symphonies. Though big, it is fairly accessible, written in an engaging and highly informative style that seeks to understand the vital connections between these great composers in the first flowering of the symphony.

### **The Cambridge Companion to the Eroica Symphony**

*ed. Nancy November*

An extremely methodical and stimulating series of essays devoted to this seminal work in not only Beethoven's output but Western music. Chapters thematically cover its context and genesis (including pieces on heroism, periodization, the symphony in general and publication), before moving on to several sections devoted to musical analysis along with the reception of the symphony in a variety of settings.

### **The Beethoven Sonatas and the Creative Experience**

*Kenneth Drake*

Rather than follow the usual chronological order of Beethoven's piano sonatas, Drake places them in groupings that display certain characteristics of the music, approaching them as a search for meaning and purpose. Via some fascinating ideas, he explores a huge range of issues related to Beethoven's (and others') treatment of the keyboard as a means of expression: touch, articulation, line, colour and silence as well as the management of musical concepts. An unusual but immensely rewarding book.

### **Beethoven: The Emergence and Evolution of Beethoven's Heroic Style**

*Michael Broyles*

Although at times a little bland, this is an often very useful book in determining exactly how Beethoven's music developed, as well as the ways in which it sought to compel itself upon its listeners' ears, minds and very being.

### **Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph**

*Jan Swafford*

Following from his excellent Charles Ives and Brahms biographies (and prior to his Mozart



one), Jan Swafford here tackles Beethoven. Although Swafford has a few verbal tics which can aggravate a little over the course of such a big book, on the whole this is an extremely comprehensive, enjoyable and thought-provoking biography which also contains wonderful musical analysis for most of Beethoven's works. (For some reason known perhaps only to its author and publishers, the index, at least for the first edition, is appalling – so haphazard and woefully sparse as to be virtually a waste of time. A real shame for such a big book and especially when one wants to consult Swafford's very good scrutiny of particular works.)

### **Beethoven: The Music and the Life**

*Lewis Lockwood*

Written with a good deal of clarity and sense, this is an admirable guide to Beethoven's life and works, with some especially useful chapters and subchapters on themes such as Beethoven's deafness and his relationship with his publishers. We are taken closely, intimately, into Beethoven's world, seeing him for both the artistic titan and the flawed human being he was. Full of imagination but never fanciful, Lockwood is an intelligent, engaging and very perceptive writer.

### **Beethoven and the Construction of Genius: Musical Politics in Vienna, 1792–1803**

*Tia DeNora*

Positioning the life and career of Beethoven in its social context, this beneficial book re-evaluates and broadens the idea of genius, exploring the fickle, shifting world of late eighteenth-century Vienna, in particular following the goings-on of the small circle of aristocratic benefactors who helped the composer's early success.

## Further Listening 1: *Beethoven's Quartets on Record*

String quartet groups, when preparing or performing, rehearsing or recording, obviously need to make many crucial decisions about how to interpret the music, choices – or judgements – which are both unambiguously and more subtly interrelated.

Issues over rhythm and tempo are central to how a quartet operates: What is to be the basic pulse of a movement or a section – and how might this influence (say) the texture of the piece? Should a certain phrase be highlighted via a swifter tempo (and is this what Beethoven might have wanted?). Moreover, how do such assessments relate to the other movements? Then there are questions of dynamics and balance: put simply, how loud or soft should a passage be, both in terms of the group and each voice in the quartet? And is what Beethoven puts on the score (as with tempo markings) sacred gospel or interpretative guide? Again, the relationship between movements (and players) may be crucial in arriving at such verdicts.

Phrasing and intonation, as well as tone colour, are further necessary evaluations the quartet must discuss: How loose and laid-back or squashed and intense will a passage be played? What pressure or level of attack will the bow be coerced to provide? How might the melody or harmony be enhanced by changes to the players' inflections? How will these relate to the shape of the phrases being produced? If there are repetitions, will they be identical or delicately altered according to the developed circumstances of the material? How do the beginnings, middles and endings of phrases relate to one another, as well as to the larger shapes of the quartet?

Governing all this, of course, are the much broader ideas relating to the general character or temperament of individual sections/movements/quartets. How sullen is this opening meant to be? How sweet this adagio? How anarchic this finale? Beethoven famously, even

infamously, shifts his moods at a fair pace, but string quartets still need to decide the overall character they want their interpretations to communicate. Do we consider op.95 genuinely 'serious', or is it a joke? If we do think it a joke, how late do we want the punchline to arrive?

With the earlier sets of quartets (the six of op.18 and the trio of op.59), questions perhaps also need to be asked about how the players want the collections to dialogue and negotiate with one another. And, indeed, this is something all sixteen quartets are ultimately invited to do, both among themselves and with the wider musical culture(s) in which they find themselves.



Beethoven's string quartets, as we might hope and expect for music of this magnitude and importance, have been well served on record. Dozens of complete cycles exist, of which this brief survey can only mention some personal favourites. Although a record label will be given along with the quartet's name, no catalogue number, etc., will be listed since these change all the time and are likely to complicate rather than assist a search – as well as being slightly obsolete anyway in the era of downloads and streaming.

### **Takács Quartet (Decca)**

One of the great achievements in recorded sound and, for me, a clear first choice among some exceptional competitors. Made in the divine acoustics of Saint George's Bristol from July 2001 to July 2004, this set glows with passion, understanding and enjoyment. The Takács Quartet always create a beautiful sound, but never at the expense of the musical arguments that need to be made – and they're not afraid to be a little rough when Beethoven calls for it. Their dynamics and tempos are superb, with some wondrous scherzos in particular and slow movements that breathe but are not allowed to lose momentum. This is not sentimental music, and the Takács never let it be. Calling their playing 'sober' might seem like criticism, but it is the highest praise: they are marvellous vehicles for Beethoven, letting his art think, speak and sing. Technically impeccable, they have prepared their material wonderfully, with meticulous attention to Beethoven's often fastidious but

(especially for the late quartets) crucial details. Yet, for all this careful preparation, their performances are full of life, full of searching inquiry, full of fun. There is no such thing as a 'perfect' or 'definitive' recording of anything – that is a false and impossible ideal – but the Takács come close here. An absolutely essential set.

### **Busch Quartet (EMI/Warner)**

Music from another world, but a world we need to still hear, and hopefully learn from. The sound, from the 1930s, is a little ancient, of course, but the humanity, profundity and spiritual truths of these quartets shine through the fuzz and across the decades. Ignore the sound – or, better still, rejoice in its hazy warmth – and simply bathe in the compassion and benevolence this extraordinary group of players bring to this music. This is playing that has an exceptional style and elegance of phrasing, emphasizing expression above any technical sophistication, but it never loses its way or is anything less than gripping. If you're in any doubt, sample the way they locate every ounce of pain, hope and emotion in the Heiliger Dankgesang of op.132 without ever once sounding indulgent or self-pitying. Alas, we only have the late quartets from the Busch (plus op.18/1, op.59/3 and op.95), but this is sufficient, and we shouldn't be greedy for a complete set from this long ago. Required listening and indispensable for anyone that cares about these quartets.

### **The Lindsays (ASV)**

The second recording from the Lindsays, this is a set filled with joy and physical vitality. Beethoven's quartets have rarely seemed as alive, as vital, as modern: the Lindsays play like they were written just this morning. But there is deep understanding, too – which is, indeed, linked to their sense of energy and enthusiasm. These players know these pieces should not be milked or desiccated but allowed to roam free, and if that means the odd missed note, then so be it. Wonderfully natural, communicative playing and a glorious, life-enhancing set. (Their first cycle, now on Decca, is also well worth pursuing. Although there is more of a sense of finding their feet there, some of the risks they take are splendid.)

### **Alban Berg Quartet (EMI/Warner)**

In many ways, the ABQ are the suave aristocrats of Beethoven quartet playing. They are unfailingly elegant and noble, perhaps missing some of the vigour and excitement we might want from time to time – but these are never dull recordings. Indeed, there is a fluidity in their playing that immediately commands your attention and keeps you hooked. Refined, urbane and full of distinction. (This refers to their studio recordings from the late 1970s / early 1980s. Their late-'80s live cycle, also on EMI/Warner, has less debonair magic but is still worth a listen.)

### **Quartetto Italiano (Philips)**

As we might expect, these are immensely chic recordings – but they are not superficial either. Like all really good couture, they are built to last, and this is a style that never goes out of fashion: polished, tasteful and smart.

### **Végh Quartet (Naïve)**

From Italian chic to Hungarian charm. Labelling this set 'academic' might put some people off, but the Végh Quartet really do have an intellectual depth to their playing: they seem to understand all the metaphysical and ethical dilemmas within this music. But, goodness, they can play, too, putting their wisdom to excellent use. If this set feels a little old-fashioned, a little tweedy and unsophisticated – with some not always spotless manners – then we can forgive them, because we need their insights. Beethoven with a twinkle and ineffable charisma. (This refers to the Végh's second cycle, from the mid-1970s.)

### **Emerson String Quartet (DG)**

Accomplished, well-adjusted, self-confident and full of experience. Sometimes the effortless erudition of the ESQ, especially in the faster movements, can make you think there is nothing else to their playing. But then there is yet another flash of insight as they show you the particular way a dynamic passage should go, or the special delight of an interplay between two instruments. Undermine or overlook this set at your peril: it is full of acumen as well as reliability.

### **Medici String Quartet (Nimbus)**

For many, me included, this was an inexpensive entry point into the universe of the Beethoven string quartets – and, like many others, I soon put them aside, chasing more ‘sophisticated’ versions. A big mistake, for these are immensely enjoyable readings. No, they’re not as polished as the Takács or the Emerson, but they are full of pleasure and intuition that occasionally stops you in your tracks. And the recorded sound is lovely. A worthy part of any collection.

### **Belcea Quartet (Alpha)**

Natural and contemporary, this is a set to brush away any lingering cobwebs and to simply delight in, for it is chamber music of real excitement and spontaneity. Sometimes when listening, you feel the Belcea are encountering this music for the very first time and we are privileged to be a part of that voyage of discovery with them. You really sense Beethoven would have loved their playing and would be quite likely to join them in the bar for a glass of something invigorating afterward...

### **Vermeer Quartet (Teldec)**

Thoughtful, perceptive – and occasionally thrilling. This is a set that manages its playing very well, a sense of disciplined administration which actually sanctions the players to go for broke at times with some exhilarating results. Worth spending time with, if not perhaps ideal for a first experience of these works.

### **Budapest Quartet (Sony)**

Sometimes this set seems to get further into these works than any other. The BQ know how deep and complex this music is, and they know, too, how to shape the dramas Beethoven creates, so that each quartet becomes a fascinating piece of theatre. Intense and illuminating.

### **Quatuor Ébène (Erato)**

Absolutely incandescent playing from the marvellous Ébène Quartet. This is electric

Beethoven and barely touches the ground – indeed, this set was recorded in cities around the world between May 2019 and January 2020. We really do get a sense of the vehement impulsiveness and scorching violence of this music, of how it must have sounded to its first audiences as well as how compelling it remains for us today. Set to become a classic of contemporary Beethoven quartet playing.

### **Amadeus Quartet (DG)**

The Amadeus Quartet are not interested in glitz or glamour; they are in the business of supreme music making of the highest quality and commitment, playing with wonderful spirit and a sense of genteel courtesy. These records are among the most gratifying of all: full of emotion, dedication and well-mannered zeal.

### **Leipzig Quartet (MDG)**

A set of immense integrity and persuasion. Throughout their journey across the sixteen quartets, the Leipzigers bustle and shine in equal measure, showing you energy and sorrow, agitation and the sublime. Assured and full of natural flair that never becomes ostentatious. A less well known set, but worth investigating.

### **Orford Quartet (Delos)**

The Orford have a gorgeous tone, and their playing is full of command, but are they a little too self-aware, too self-conscious in their commitment, which becomes awkward at times, especially when their dynamics drag the music? It is all a bit too ponderous, lacking the anticipation, elation and thrill these works should offer.

### **Smetana Quartet (Supraphon)**

The Smetana's late-'70s/early-'80s cycle is a lyrical wonder and comes with some beautifully engineered sound. A splendid blend of composure, passion and self-confidence which is never self-conscious; it is always in the service of the quartets' overall demands and intentions.

### **Hagen Quartet (DG)**

Diplomatic, dedicated and full of sensitivity, these are experienced players who bring their knowledge to Beethoven without any sense of superiority or overconfidence. They know how to navigate these tricky works, and the results speak for themselves.

### **Guarneri Quartet (RCA)**

'Tradition' isn't a dirty word when playing is as cultured and shrewd as this. The Guarneri might seem stable, faithful and a touch outmoded, but they bask in bringing their brilliant understanding of these quartets to us. Immaculate, intelligent, discriminating: you find yourself returning to them again and again.

### **Hungarian Quartet (Erato)**

One of the great complete sets from an earlier age, with a *Harp* Quartet, op.74, that will break your heart. The Hungarian's early-'50s cycle is a gem of the classical catalogue and deserves to be in all serious music collections. The playing is smooth and gratifyingly uniform (their later, 1960s, cycle is inclined to be more individualistic) but with some energetic tempos that celebrate the exuberance of these works. Not for every day but for special occasions, late at night and with something twinkling in the glass...



## Further Listening 2: *The Quartet Beyond Beethoven*

The following offers a short (sadly shorter than deserved) guide to some of the string quartet repertoire – from Haydn to Hindemith, Mozart to Maconchy – beyond the sixteen central works this book has explored. It naturally cannot include anything approaching all the varied minds who have tackled this immensely challenging yet rewarding genre, but it hopefully offers a useful survey of some of the best works and cycles around, from across its long history and up to the present day. It is obviously to some extent a personal selection, though it does endeavour to be as comprehensive as possible, and thus includes many lesser-known quartets and composers. (It is mainly ordered via region, not in order to confine or restrict but simply for ease of reader navigation.)

### Classical Vienna

The composer of a soaring cycle of works with boundless formal and expressive sophistication, Joseph Haydn (1732–1809) essayed some sixty-eight quartets. At least two-thirds of this number might be considered chamber writing of the very highest order: opp.20, 33, 50, 54, 55, 64, 71, 74, 76 and 77 (most of which are sets of six, sometimes split over two opus numbers). They are ultimate paradigms of their genre, shaping what was to come, inspiring and intimidating all who followed, presenting the ultimate standard of judgement.

Haydn's op.20 (1772) were *the* vital development for the string quartet, a set which was truly groundbreaking and rule-setting, a convincing set of pioneering masterpieces which confirmed the new procedures and formal arrangements. Here musical textures are made intriguing, beguiling; intellectual negotiations turn knottier and more complex; witty

gestures become commonplace. Some finales are even accorded fugues to grant them greater structural credence. This set confirmed the string quartet's powerful, influential arrival – and ability to stay. It was a crucial as the *Eroica* would be in the symphony.

Op.76 (1797) were Haydn's final complete set of six and should be heard as far as possible as a group, as one might listen to a concept album. Like the *London* Symphonies from earlier in the decade, op.76 are a mixture of fashionable fascination and emotional-philosophical insight: stimulating, capricious, varied and resourceful, full of wit and freedom. They sum up Haydn's colossal achievements in the genre, with some thrilling opening movements and serene slow movements that anticipate the later Beethoven. These works showcase everything Haydn was able to do, and at its height. (Op.76 would be followed only by the great op.77 pair, from an unfinished set of six, where everything is simpler, music distilled to an even purer form of refinement and grace.)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791) wrote twenty-three string quartets, and although he would perhaps achieve even greater things in his six string quintets, his works for four voices are exceptional, the equal of Haydn's – indeed, the six so-called *Haydn* Quartets (1782–85) are worthy of their moniker. Here the theatricality of the opera house, Mozart's supreme fiefdom, is brought to the elegant world of the quartet, and their emotional range is considerable. Mozart's last three quartets, the *Prussian* Quartets, turn to leaner textures and more ambiguous arguments, developing that wondrous sense of Mozartian doubt which makes so much of his music so profound, so human. Disillusionment and frustration mingle closely with bubble and sparkle.

Born just as Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) was considering his first quartets, Franz Schubert (1797–1828) would go on to write several masterpieces in the genre, but most especially his final three. No.13 in A minor (1824), the *Rosamunde*, is a melancholic work, reminiscent of the *Unfinished* Symphony, while No.14 in D minor (1824), known as *Death and the Maiden* after the song its music is derived from, is perhaps the most played of all string quartets – yet its devastating power has never allowed it to become a hackneyed piece. Building on the emotional developments of Mozart and Beethoven, here Schubert manipulates both individual parts and group textures (singing solo lines can become alarmingly swamped and swallowed by the other voices) to create a work of pure Romantic

clout and considerable influence. His final quartet, No.15 in G major (1826), is no less formidable: vast and ingeniously repetitive, it is a mini–mountain range of musico-emotional explorations all contained in one solid box.

### **Germany, Russia, Bohemia and France**

Three German composers in particular would continue the work undertaken by the great Classical giants from Vienna. Felix Mendelssohn (1809–1847) wrote six quartets, and they are full of ascending songs, with melody as their defining, controlling element. Sometimes they feel too sane, too sweet, but nonetheless, they are fascinating works which need careful attention for their subtler concerns to blossom. Robert Schumann (1810–1856) wrote three quartets, and his third, in A major (1842), is perhaps the best. Like his piano works, this work is fairly episodic, always striving to break away from formal patterns and investing the strings with some glorious colours and percussive effects. Johannes Brahms (1833–1897) also wrote three, and each offers an elongated melody which then drags the listener down into the emotional depths, a chamber realm but with orchestral textures and sonorities. Yet this added bulk is never mere poor writing or yearning to be symphonic: it is a superb realization of what four strings are capable of.

In Russia, Aleksandr Borodin (1833–1887) wrote two quartets, of which only the second (1881) is a masterpiece: a narrative work exploring love and marriage, it is – perhaps because of its unusual subject matter – structured in very formal terms, with four movements in strict sonata form, helping to contain the story elements. The melodies of this quartet have become famous, taking on a life of their own beyond classical music, but they are perfectly positioned in the architecture of the quartet and work brilliantly alongside the prescribed arrangements. Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840–1893) wrote three quartets which are gradually becoming better known, recognized as the fine and intricate works they are. All the expected Russian emotion is here – folk songs and tragic closet dramas – but contained beautifully within the quartet form and, as in his symphonies, employing a range of musical techniques (like some superb counterpoint) to govern, steer and exploit. They are anything but naive or sentimental.

Antonín Dvořák (1841–1904) gave us fourteen string quartets. All of them are fascinating (and some of the earlier ones in particular are vast), but it is the last five which are considerable strokes of genius. One of the finest cycles from the second half of the nineteenth century, they are an infectious sequence, full of gorgeous textures and inescapable earworms, with some especially wonderful writing for the viola part: imagination and exquisiteness in glorious harmony.

Leoš Janáček (1854–1928) wrote two late quartets (*Kreutzer Sonata* in 1923 and *Intimate Letters* in 1928) amid the flowering of his magnificent late operas. Both quartets are autobiographical in nature, as well as showing us just how powerful a writer for the stage he was, with numerous quarrels and dialogues between the strings. These are truly ‘romantic’ pieces, exploring the nature of love and emotion, as well as the central European mode of storytelling.

Claude Debussy (1862–1918) and Maurice Ravel (1875–1937) wrote just one quartet each, but both are works of astonishing beauty and originality. Debussy’s, from 1893, imports all the innovations his great orchestral works were undertaking, so that new directions in harmony and tonality – not into atonality or chromaticism but modal forms beyond major or minor scales – utterly change how a string quartet can sound. Everything seems airy, aimless, floating in the sky or on the sea, and with this work, the twentieth-century string quartet truly began. Ravel’s (1903) is a constant on the concert calendar and shows the influence of Debussy’s work: flexible, fluid, fluent, it is an ethereal piece with heavenly shifting colours.

## **Return to Vienna**

The Second Viennese School provided less familiar, but no less significant, contributions to the string quartet repertory. One of the leading musical figures of the twentieth century, Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951) wrote four quartets, and they chart his wider progression from Romanticism to Modernism. Dangerous chromaticism characterizes No.1 (1905), while by No.2 (1908) the step forward to the twelve-tone scale is evident as musical keys disappear into atonality and Expressionism. A soprano voice is added to the string quartet,

too, offering the gaunt, dispossessed airs of a vagrant that accentuate the sense of anxiety and trouble. No.3 (1927) and No.4 (1936), the latter written after Schoenberg fled to America from the Nazis, are completely atonal quartets – though, since the transition has now been made, they offer less apprehension and even a comforting rhythmical topography which is both congenial and accessible.

Alban Berg (1885–1935) wrote two quartets, and their atonal expressiveness – along with that of Schoenberg's third and fourth quartets – has mocked the idea that atonality is inaccessible. Berg's op.3 (1910) is a two-movement work of great originality, while his *Lyric Suite* (1926) is a harsh and deeply moving six-movement quartet containing a secret programme. It is, in truth, a latent chamber opera, concealing both vocal and narrative elements, allowing us to reconstruct them for ourselves in our own heads.

Anton Webern (1883–1945) composed numerous Expressionist miniatures for string quartet, and they are a precious bag of gems, some as austere as diamonds, others as warm as rubies. A strange and wonderful collection of atonal and nearly atonal works, hard to programme for concerts but worth exploring on record.

### **Hungary, Poland, the Soviet Union – and Brazil**

Béla Bartók (1881–1945) wrote six quartets which have become central to the repertoire, and they stand beside Haydn's, Beethoven's and Shostakovich's as belonging to the very greatest of the genre from any time or place. They are a devastating psychological survey of not only Bartók's life but the first half of the twentieth century and are full of shadowy tableaux, misty hallucinations, passion, confusion and disorientation. They explore violence, torment and courage, while also engaging folk ideas to enrich both their sentiments and their scope, alternating between bright sunlight and night terror via a range of musical techniques and devices (including experiments in tonality and structure, as well as in how the basic voices of the quartet sound together). In tackling these extraordinary and innovative works, players need to balance clarity with complexity, as well as the severity of the contrapuntal writing with his contagiously exciting folk imports. Bartók's six quartets are hypnotic, gruelling masterpieces – a sequence never to be forgotten once heard and an unavoidable,

indisputable part of the history of the string quartet.

In Poland, Grażyna Bacewicz (1909–1969) wrote seven string quartets that, like Bartók's, take us deep into the calamities of the twentieth century while also offering a profoundly personal vision. Yet however conditioned by socio-political and private circumstances of their creation, these pieces stand apart as musical works of considerable power and prominence: Bacewicz showcases (and often generates) the shifting styles of the century, so that she is both a barometer and catalyst for change. And few writers of quartets – from any period – have understood so profoundly the unique sound and possibilities of the string family. An irreplaceable cycle.

A Pole who later settled in the Soviet Union, Mieczysław Weinberg (1919–1996) wrote twenty-two symphonies and seventeen string quartets, and both sets are gradually becoming better known. The quartets are perhaps less immediately distinctive than the symphonies, but they are a better gauge of Weinberg's journey as a composer, as through this genre we magnificently observe his changing style and his ceaseless quizzing of musical form. He employs a range of harmonic devices and lyrical games to probe the nature and status of this most exclusive and refined musical medium, with numerous inventions and coordinated experiments along the way.

Not only great in themselves, Weinberg's quartets are a vital context for understanding those of his close friend and admirer, Dmitri Shostakovich (1906–1975). The two composers lived near one another in Moscow, sharing ideas on a daily basis, and both suffered at the hands of the tyrannical regime (Weinberg's father-in-law was murdered on Stalin's orders in 1948). Shostakovich himself wrote fifteen symphonies and fifteen string quartets but their composition was not evenly matched, and indeed, we can see a marked shift in Shostakovich's concerns after the miseries of the Second World War: after it, he wrote six symphonies but thirteen string quartets; before this time, he had written nine symphonies but just two quartets.

If Shostakovich's symphonies largely give us the public face – the mischievous irony and multifaceted anger, though with a heightened inwardness in the later works – the quartets are a private diary of disappointment and subdued determination amid the horror of strategic state oppression, full of personal opacities, desperate rage and wretched revelations.

These fifteen works use the string quartet form – and the very instruments themselves – in an unrelenting, unsparing fashion: ferocious, forsaken, insistently desolate. There is a physicality, a savagery, to these pieces which accentuates their disturbing mixture of emptiness and grace.

One of the supreme sequences of quartets, they offer some of the most harrowing music ever composed, yet their bleakness is part of not only their attraction but their power, for these works extend hope and consolation unlike any other – when approached by listeners in the right way. There is suffering in this music, but there is compassion too. Compassion for the pain of those who suffered alongside Shostakovich, and especially for those who had no voice or were silenced. It is music possessed of an immense inner strength and integrity, quietly rejecting violence and oppression. But it is music which takes us inside anguish and grief as well, showing us their corrosive action and long-term damage.

After Shostakovich's first two, relatively simple, quartets (1938 and 1944), Nos.3 (1946) through 10 (1964) are gifts of melody but dark boxes of tragedy, too, taking us to distressing places via some thrilling techniques and astounding abstract narratives. An even more fraught state of anguish takes over with Nos.11 (1966) to 14 (1973), as atonality and ruthless dissonances creep further into the musical language, and No.12 from 1968 is a masterpiece of excruciating chamber theatre, with passages of wild exuberance and poignant exultation. These four works seem bound inexorably together, like *Hamlet*, *Lear*, *Othello* and *Macbeth*, or Goya's 'Pinturas negras.' The final quartet, No.15 (1974), sanctions a return to a simpler harmonic realm, but with six consecutive adagios is a unique and unsettling sequence – all barren textures and harsh silences – to end in grief one of the great cycles of string quartets.

Apparently far from the grim realities and secluded sorrows of Soviet Russia, over in Brazil Heitor Villa-Lobos (1887–1959) created a remarkable series of seventeen string quartets, combining contemporary European modal modernism with folk tunes and local traditions. No mere sunny South American flippancies, however, these works are gaining ground as multifaceted, elaborate and thoughtful additions to the quartet repertoire, as players, listeners and commentators begin to appreciate the skill with which Villa-Lobos reconciled Brazilian influences with European conventions.

## The North

Norwegian Edvard Grieg (1843–1907), Dane Carl Nielsen (1865–1931) and Finn Jean Sibelius (1865–1957) all wrote excellent works for string quartet, of which the greatest is the last's *Voces intimae* (*Intimate Voices*) from 1909. An often brooding and slightly eccentric five-movement work, it contains a remarkable inwardness of character, as the voices quietly converse and inter-instrumental dialogues form the heart of the musical material. The discussions seem to be – like the composer's great cycle of symphonies – logical-dialectical quests for serenity, moving towards an emotional equanimity.

Across the twentieth century, and just into the early twenty-first, three Danish composers created quartet cycles of extraordinary range and power, and, as we might expect from the land of Søren Kierkegaard and Hans Christian Andersen, these sequences mix anxiety with tranquillity, ambition with doubt, innocence with cynicism. The first of the triumvirate, Rued Langgaard (1893–1952), wrote seven quartets which showcase not only his intense instability but his fierce break with convention. The music shifts from dignified self-assurance to wild psychological terrains, fluctuating between sumptuous Romanticism and even more daring spiritual dramas.

Vagn Holmboe (1909–1996) composed twenty string quartets which, despite showing the clear influence of both Stravinsky and Shostakovich, are marvellously inventive and original works. Energetic, spontaneous and highly alert, these works are rooted in Nordic landscapes – both mental and topographical – while also revealing Holmboe's interest in folk traditions from further south. Holmboe's twenty-first string quartet was completed by his pupil Per Nørgård (1932–), who himself has gone on to write some ten significant and challenging works for the genre, the last of which is from 2005. Full of choleric disputes, Nørgård's quartets present many intense emotional states and conflicting points of view and are rarely an easy listen, but their spontaneity makes them absolutely compelling contemporary works.

In Britain, Elizabeth Maconchy (1907–1994) wrote a cycle of thirteen quartets which must be considered one of the great string quartet sequences of the century. Spanning 1932 to 1984 – i.e., from Schoenberg's *Moses und Aron* to the Smiths' 'Heaven Knows I'm



Miserable Now' – Maconchy's work is constantly asking questions about what a string quartet can do, why it sounds the way it does and how it can sound different. She has a huge range of languages, textures, techniques and emotions, each facet developing over time as she explores and re-explores intense beauty, savage dissonance and the mysterious logic of the string quartet. An unmissable series.

Maconchy's friend Ina Boyle (1889–1967) wrote just one quartet, in E minor, and it has only recently received its premiere commercial recording. Long overdue, it was nonetheless worth the wait. This quartet, from 1934, is an austere but bewitching work that weaves wonderful sinuous lines and contains a central adagio of intense emotion and heartfelt beauty, as well as some playful Irish jigs that are highly infectious.

Benjamin Britten (1913–1976) toyed with the string quartet in his youth and later published three major mature works in the genre. Musically and thematically linked to his final opera, *Death in Venice* (1973), the highly expressive Third Quartet (1975) is a profound and inventive masterpiece to stand with anything else in the century, with an opening movement, Duets, that explores all six possible combinations of instruments in the traditional string quartet configuration. Probing the mysteries and challenges of life, love and death, this is a work to be treasured as one of the most thoughtful and overwhelming in the genre.

Robert Simpson (1921–1997) wrote fifteen magnificent string quartets to sit alongside his eleven splendid symphonies. Quartet No.9 (1982) is perhaps the key masterpiece, and surely one of the greatest of all string quartets written in the twentieth century – if not beyond. Lasting an hour, it is a vast palindrome, a set of thirty-two variations (and a fugue) on a theme by Haydn (the minuet from his symphony in G, No.47). Full of twins and mirrors, echoes and distortions, whirlpools and black holes, it is a miracle and a triumph of chamber music writing.

Influenced strongly by the theatricality of Handel and the spiritual depth of Beethoven, Michael Tippett (1905–1998) wrote five string quartets, with a long gap between No.3 (1946) and No.4 (1978), during which his major operas (*The Midsummer Marriage*, 1955; *King Priam*, 1962; *The Knot Garden*, 1970) were composed. The quartets are a lively mixture: there is the melodious No.1 and the agile, playful No.2. No.3 abounds with

counterpoint and various intriguing textures, while the more dissonant No.4 has an unbroken series of movements in homage to Beethoven's op.131, before No.5 closes the cycle with a dazzling drama.

Peter Maxwell Davies (1934–2016) was commissioned by a record company to compose the ten eponymous *Naxos Quartets* (2001–2007). The landscape and culture of Davies's adopted Orkney Islands pervade these works, as do more specific socio-cultural extramusical concerns. These vary from the composer's outrage at the American-led invasion of Iraq in 2003 to Bruegel's vast, encyclopedic 1560 painting *Children's Games*, along with a tribute to the Baroque architect Francesco Borromini (1599–1667) and a celebratory gift to Elizabeth II (1926–2022) on the occasion of her eightieth birthday in 2006.

The highly experimental Brian Ferneyhough (1943–) has written at least eleven works for string quartet, including six more formal works (if that word can ever be used with Ferneyhough), in addition to several looser pieces like *Sonatas for String Quartet* (1967), *Adagissimo* (1983) and *Silentium* (2014). A key figure in the New Complexity movement, which has sought an intricate, multilayered interaction between various evolutionary processes in music, Ferneyhough's work for string quartet has taken the medium to some of its most audacious and unanticipated places. The famous album cover produced for Ferneyhough's string quartets, featuring a boat dwarfed by mighty ocean waves, has come to both symbolize his approach and even influence how we experience his music – as an invigorating challenge.

## **Disparate Voices**

Other quartets and composers are less easy to organize. The German Paul Hindemith (1895–1963) played in and founded many string quartet ensembles, performing at various times both the viola and second violin parts. He wrote six quartets, and they are a wonderful exploration of Romanticism and neo-Classicism, mixing a cooler formalism with immense generosity and warmth, in particular in No.4 from 1921.

Austrian-born American Erich Wolfgang Korngold (1897–1957) wrote three string quartets which ooze opulent, luxurious textures and delicious harmonies. This is eloquent,

though sometimes hectic, music infected by irresistible, refined contemporary cadences, but all housed in brilliant structures that remind us the composer grew up in Vienna and knew his Haydn. The distant Viennese sounds of various Strausses (Johann's waltzes and Richard's *Rosenkavalier*) also mingle in the reminiscing air of the Second Quartet (1933), while the other two show how the quartets both anticipated and overlapped with Korngold's Hollywood career, sharing his film scores' energetic, seductive charisma, and disclosing the porous, parasitic (and essentially pointless) boundary between 'art' and 'entertainment'. The First Quartet (1923) contains a march that anticipates *The Private Lives of Elizabeth and Essex* (1939), while the Third Quartet (1945) goes even further, stealing a spooky subject from *Between Two Worlds* (1944) for its scherzo and the love theme from *The Sea Wolf* (1941) for its slow movement.

In France, Darius Milhaud (1892–1974) wrote eighteen quartets between 1912 and 1950, of which Nos.14 and 15 can, bizarrely but ingeniously, be played simultaneously as a string octet. Not to be outdone, Karlheinz Stockhausen (1928–2007) wrote his *Helikopter-Streichquartett* (1993) to be played by the four traditional quartet instruments while hovering above the ground inside a foursome of airborne rotorcraft (and which forms part of Stockhausen's immense *Licht* opera cycle).

The American pioneer Morton Feldman (1926–1987) conjured further extremity and devotion (from players and listeners alike) in his string quartet No.2 (1983). A typical performance lasts between five and six hours, and it is – by far – the longest quartet in the canonical repertoire, requiring the musicians to manoeuvre moment to moment what they are doing, constructing a cosmos from the smallest particles. They generally play very slowly and very quietly, and the overall effect is overwhelming, a gradually encroaching force of galactic power. In a sense it is more polemical performance art than music making, but the work is also an absorbing commentary on time, consciousness and endurance, almost becoming a part of your very being by the end, an addiction, a compulsion, coexisting within you. Although the impact is best experienced live, Feldman's quartet does exist on YouTube should the reader have a few free hours.

Also in America, Charles Ives (1874–1954) wrote two quartets (in 1900 and 1913): the first is an anthology of American folk songs, while the second is an exploratory treatise on

polytonality. His compatriot Elliott Carter (1908–2012) wrote a sequence of five highly abstract quartets that, while hard to love, are fascinating to investigate, as are those from the Canadian R. Murray Schafer (1933–2021). Schafer's thirteen string quartets, composed between 1970 and 2015, are a startling blend of theatre and comedy, taking us in some ways all the way back to Haydn and Mozart, as well as enclosing a form of acoustic ecology which explores the relationship between human being and their environment. Philip Glass (1937–) has written eight mature quartets (1966–2018), not including one as a new (1998) score for the 1931 horror classic *Dracula*, directed by Tod Browning and starring Bela Lugosi as the eponymous blood-boozler.

New Yorker Steve Reich (1936–) has written a powerful, disturbing work for string quartet, *WTC 9/11* (2011), a dissonant threnody memorializing the events of September 11, 2001, on its tenth anniversary. Setting the strings against engineered voices, it twists and merges the shocked sounds of air traffic controllers and bystanders, their tonalities taunted and reproduced by the playing of the quartet. Finland's Kaija Saariaho (1952–) has written a number of mesmerizing works involving string quartets, including her *Nymphéa* (1987) for string quartet and electronics, which juxtaposes translucent, elusive surfaces with cataclysmic hordes of sound. Correspondingly, Jonathan Harvey (1939–2012), for his string quartet No.4 (2003), placed live electronics alongside the traditional instruments, with movements repeatedly dying away and being reborn – a musical scheme which also expressed his hopes for the continued life of the age-old string quartet form.

American Gloria Coates (1938–), who has lived in Munich since the late 1960s, has a distinctive voice in her ten numbered string quartets, combining dissolving, indefinite textures with a love of patterns – palindromes, webs and mirrors frequently structure her work. Japanese composer Akira Nishimura (1953–) has written several string quartets, of which perhaps the most interesting is No.2 (*Pulses of Light*) from 1992, with its extremely punitive sound world with angry slashed notes on the violins and musical ricochets around the four voices. *Pulses of commotion* alternate with minimalism, with sparks, trills, glimmers and drones conjuring the different characteristics and densities of light. A masterpiece of refraction and variety.

Turk Ahmet Adnan Saygun (1907–1991) composed four quartets, of which the first

(1947) is perhaps the most fascinating. Mixing modernism with traditional Turkish dances, it combines French Impressionism with local folk songs (Saygun introduced Bartók to Turkish music and clearly learned the art of melding traditional popular music with classical forms from his great Hungarian colleague). Israeli Chaya Czernowin (1957–) has written one string quartet, from 1995, which reconnoitres some fascinating sonic jurisdictions in its small space, while Israeli American Shulamit Ran (1949–) has used her quartet No.3, *Glitter, Shards, Doom, Memory* (2014), as an intriguing, poignant tribute to victims of the Holocaust, employing emotional directness to devastating effect via a collection of avant-garde techniques.

*Helix Spirals* (2015), from American Augusta Read Thomas (1964–), looks to science for its inspiration and is a considerable display of colours, textures, harmonies and rhythmic arrangements. A commemoration of the discovery of DNA replication, in opening the quartet fizzles and fizzles with a range of glittering zings, pungent twangs and acerbic pizzicatos in a kaleidoscope of combinations and dynamic ideas. Later, musical lines spiral and entwine like a double helix, repairing and replenishing themselves in a series of marvellously hopeful transformations. It is the work of Crick, Watson, Meselson and Stahl, and the mechanisms of intricate biological processes, all brilliantly converted into a string quartet.

Korean Isang Yun (1917–1995) wrote six string quartets which seek to engage in a dialogue between a range of chronological and geographical spheres. No.6 (1992) was written in Germany's Black Forest after a long period of illness: it frequently utilizes gliding, sliding chords in addition to declamatory gestures to express burden and liberation, before moving on to jazz-like dances and laconic repetitions which recall Shostakovich. Jamaican Eleanor Alberga (1949–) has written three string quartets (in 1993, 1994 and 2001), the first of which is a dazzling, dizzying work inspired by the composer's love of physics and the never-dull fact that we are all made of stardust. Briton Daniel Kidane (1986–), who is of Russian and Eritrean heritage, wrote his *Foreign Tongues* for string quartet in 2015, a piece which investigates the idea of diverse languages expressed simultaneously – each instrument represents a different system of communication. A fascinating new perspective on the whole history of the string quartet and a work not to be missed.

Elsewhere in twenty-first century Britain, child prodigy Alma Deutscher (2005–) wrote, at age seven, her movement in *A major for string quartet* (2013), which channels memories of Mozart and Schubert with infectious waves of playful melody and an intricate interplay between the instruments. Scot Helen Grime (1981–) has written two string quartets (in 2014 and 2021), the latter a response to the Covid-19 pandemic, lockdown and the composer's own pregnancy with her second child. The work's uncertain harmonies and disordered textures in particular convey the sense of multiple, ever-changing unknowns, before the jubilant delivery of the final movement.

Stephen Johnson (1955–) followed up the rhapsody and pain of his *Angel's Arc* (2018) for clarinet and string quartet with his *String Quartet* (2021). An enthralling, often emotionally shattering work, it also revitalizes the intimate conversations of Haydn's quartets, showing that not only is the future of the string quartet in good hands but it has forgotten none of its past either.

## About the Author



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He has written extensively on classical music and literature, and his first three books, *Disturbing the Universe: Wagner's Musikdrama*, *Beauty and Sadness: Mahler's 11 Symphonies*, and *Ada to Zembla: The Novels of Vladimir Nabokov*, were published to wide acclaim. He lives in Edinburgh.