

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
String Quartet No 10 in Eb “Harp”, Op. 74 (1809)
Poco Adagio — Allegro
Adagio non troppo
Presto
Allegretto con Variazioni

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
String Quartet No 11 in f minor, Op 95 “Serioso” (1810)
Allegro con brio
Allegretto ma non troppo
Allegro assai vivace ma serioso
Larghetto espressivo — Allegretto agitato — Allegro

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
String Quartet No 12 in Eb Major, Op 127
Maestoso, Allegro
Adagio ma non troppo e molto cantabile
Scherzando vivace
Finale

Ludwig van Beethoven **String Quartet No. 10 in Eb “Harp”, Op 74**

Beethoven had ample reasons to throw himself into his music in 1809. For the first time in his life, he was free of financial worries, as three of his aristocratic patrons had pooled their resources to provide the composer with a living allowance, so that he could commit all his time to composition. This provided Beethoven with an excellent reason to dig in and write a masterful string quartet dedicated to one of his three patrons, Prince Lobkowitz. No longer would he amass quartets in sets of threes or sixes before releasing them: each one henceforth would be an event, and publishers would fight for the right to have them first.

The first movement, a *Poco Adagio* followed by an *Allegro*, while not exactly tranquil, shows Beethoven in a state of relaxed mastery, more the world of the Pastoral Symphony than that of the Eroica. The sonata form movement presents the traditional two themes for development; between them you will hear the exquisite pizzicato transition that gives this quartet its nickname. Two of the players play pizzicato arpeggios while the other two play *arco*. In 1809, this was a novelty, and Beethoven repeats the pizzicato effect later when he combines both themes together. There are splendid chordal passages, and, in the coda, the solo violin gets to do some helter-skelter work on top of the “harping” of the other players. Joseph Kerman calls this movement one that is “ostentatiously at peace with itself,” marked by “an unintellectual feeling of inspired spontaneous play.”

The second movement, *Adagio non troppo*, is in Ab, a traditional point-of-remove from the home key (it’s the subdominant). Beethoven is even more casual here than in the first movement. There’s a lovely theme that Beethoven elaborates and repeats three times, with two interludes that begin to drift into shadow but are pulled back. This is Beethoven in a new collar, charming his audience, holding his fierce powers in reserve. There is a tale that Beethoven proposed marriage in 1809, and there is in this movement an atmosphere of hushed, expectant, withheld emotion. (The lady refused.) The movement, like hope, simply fades away at the end “*espressivo morendo*,” a dying fall.

With the *Presto*, we are swept into the “Beethoven sound.” Beethoven switches here to the relative

minor key of C Minor (which shares the same scale as the home key of Eb), and four-note patterns hammer away, echoing the Fifth Symphony. Like the legendary C Minor symphony, this is formal, controlled, not a note wasted. There is an almost joking use of counterpoint throughout the movement, which almost certainly reflects how Beethoven spent another part of the year 1809: hiding in a basement while French troops occupied Vienna. The composer passed this time, when not shielding his ears from the incessant cannon fire, writing counterpoint exercises for Prince Lobkowitz (his patron was also his pupil).

For the finale, Beethoven returns, surprisingly after what he has just unleashed, to the drawing room. The *Allegretto con Variazioni*, returning to the home key of Eb, is wistful, playful, everything at ease. Some remote keys are touched upon, and the coda masterfully reclaims the expected arrival home at the tonic key. Beethoven seems to be smiling, the French military storm over, saying, “It’s perfectly all right to have a good time.”

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) String Quartet No 11 in f minor, Op 95 “Serioso” (1810)

With a nickname like “serioso,” we expect four dour musicians to hack away through four interminable movements, as an equally dour audience winces and squirms, a few members glancing nervously at their watches, and others marking time waiting for something resembling a coda. Beethoven, at the end of the “Middle Period” that produced the Razoumovsky quartets (almost symphonic in their drama and weight), used the Op. 95 quartet as a launching pad into the completely new, laconic and compressed language that would characterize his final quartets. Beethoven’s admonition to “seriousness” really means, “on guard, players and audience — this is not going to be a Haydn quartet! Nor, for that matter, even what you *think* is a Beethoven quartet!

Although the details may not be apparent to the passive listener, players and musicologists grappling with this quartet recognize that the tonalities and harmonies Beethoven employs seem to represent storm, stress, and struggle. Is there “meaning” in this? I take it as an almost existential statement that the universe is a place where things take unexpected turns, and where trite and happy resolutions may be a fool’s solace. It’s a world-view in sound closer to ancient Greece than to modern Europe. Or perhaps it suits Vienna after the Napoleonic wars – since Beethoven had seen his city invaded and his aristocratic patrons driven from their palaces.

The key of F minor is always associated, in Beethoven, with music of defiance and great drama. The first piano sonata of his youth hurled its gauntlet at the foot of Haydn, in F minor. The great middle-period *Appassionata* piano sonata is in F Minor, too, and I have always regarded its finale as a romantic depiction of an Alpine thunderstorm. And there’s the great storm sequence in the Pastoral symphony, also set in F minor.

From the outset of the first movement, Beethoven alerts us that he is going to hurl thunderbolts with his themes, and his harmonies. There’s no let-up. Dainty bridge passages and cadences are by-passed in favor of abrupt and brilliant changes. The instruments don’t “fiddle:” they are four philosophers, poised in a life-and-death struggle with the tension-laden material.

Musicologists have gone to great length about how the first movement uses the tension created by a half-tone slide of the theme (a “Neapolitan step”) to throw everything off balance; how Beethoven modulates to unexpected keys that create strange tensions around the key of Db; and how makes even the expected return to the tonic at the end unexpected because of what has come before. A variety of uncanny half-tone slides throughout the movement lead to strange places and undermine the listener’s desire to hear a sweet, diatonic “tune.” This movement, which seems to pass so swiftly in its titanic compression, is like opening a door into a room in which a tornado has been imprisoned. Or it is like being struck between the eyes by a god.

The second movement, *Allegretto ma non troppo*, starts with a chromatic cello solo. The notes are chosen, like the footsteps of someone walking on a carpet littered with broken glass, note by painful

note, and the destination is uncertain. When the melody is picked up by the other strings, we find ourselves in the world of D Major – normally a bright tonality, a happy place to be. But D Major is so remote from where the first movement left us that what we feel is dislocation, a quietude that does not comfort, the desolation of Troy, abandoned by its gods. A fugue appears, and mingles with the disconsolate main theme. Tritones, the evil intervals regarded as the bane of Western music, begin to appear, and the fugue builds up to its own catastrophe. The opening chromatic cello theme attempts to come to the rescue – the fugue resumes. The fugal voices, more compressed upon one another, come in quicker and seem to find a way to toss around the tritons that want to disrupt. A serene coda follows, as though the fugues were just nightmares of the intellect. And perhaps they were.

Even Beethoven may have reeled back from what he had just done, and it may be no surprise that the ensuing *Allegro assai vivace ma serio* is a kind of grumpy scherzo. Musicologist Joseph Kerman called it “a march – a serious, three-legged, tough little quick-march.” The central Trio section has a kind of half-hearted chorale theme that doesn’t quite materialize. Beethoven accomplishes some odd key changes and transitions, with an almost awkward abruptness, and then the “march” returns to end the movement.

The finale starts with eight bars marked *Larghetto espressivo*, which serve to drop the level of tension momentarily, letting the listeners clear their brain cells. The *Allegro agitato* that ensues offers a Russian-sounding, dancing theme. Even though the episodes in the movement are as far-reaching as those that came before, the return to the familiar lilt of the main theme makes Beethoven’s explorations and digressions more decorative than threatening. He is painting bold colors on your wall, not tearing your house apart and rebuilding it.

But how does one end a “serious” quartet whose last movement seems to want to be a folk dance? Does another thunderstorm burst onto their heads, send them scattering, and end the piece with Olympian fury? Beethoven, long a careful student of Bach’s music, knew well that the old master sometimes tacked major-key chords onto the ends of minor-key movements. Beethoven’s own Egmont overture, written at the same time as this quartet, veers from tragedy to triumph through just such a switch from minor to major, and this is exactly what Beethoven does here. The coda bursts like a Rossini overture out of the shadows of F Minor and hurtles the work into a major-key ending. Some critics have regarded this as a failure on Beethoven’s part, but considering the abrupt shifts of tonality, dynamics and tempo throughout the work, can we not just regard this as another “surprise?” Deeper still, Beethoven may be telling us that while life may throw us its F Minor shadows, the ultimate meaning of life for mortals is the joy of living it, and such a joy can only be won in the full light of the major keys. We may struggle in F Minor, but let us celebrate in F major.

Ludwig van Beethoven String Quartet No. 12 in Eb, Op 127

When music critics talk about Beethoven’s last quartets, they either speak in hushed tones, quoting mystic passages from literature, or they go on and on and on about modulations and transitions and how Beethoven breaks all the rules yet creates a world and law unto itself. These quartets just are what they are. Critic Robert Haven Schauffler warns, “For the experience of hearing the last five quartets the listener should be prepared at least as carefully and seriously as a schoolboy for the university, or a freemason for initiation into the higher degrees, or a child for confirmation.” In simpler terms, if you bring everything you have as a listener to these works, they will transport you into a realm where music is about everything, and simultaneously about nothing but itself.

The Op 127 Quartet in Eb is the first of the “Late-Period” Beethoven quartets. It is contemporaneous with the Ninth Symphony and shares in its absolute mastery and sublimity.

An opening six-bar *Maestoso* passage (never repeated and its material never used again) leads directly into a lyrical first movement, marked *Allegro*. This is music of remarkable gentleness, and its power grows out of the counterpoint beneath. Beethoven’s last works are obsessed with counterpoint, in fact, and fugal and canonic passages abound everywhere, as the composer honed his own studies of

Bach and Handel. Yet Beethoven introduces his “antique” inflections in an unpredictable way, more continuous development than traditional sonata form. Which is my way of saying, “Listen for the contrapuntal intricacy but forget about sonata form. Just let the music unfold.”

The second movement, *Adagio, ma non troppo e molto cantabile*, begins with a melody that sounds as though it fell on the page, from the Muse’s lips to the composer’s pen. In fact, the melody was labored over, sweated through, hammered into its exquisite shape in endless revisions. Beethoven’s best ideas come out sounding as though they could be no other way than what they are. The melody attracts contrapuntal detail as a bee attracts pollen. Beethoven builds six variations on this complex theme, so elaborate that we do not sense that they are variations, and like the slow movement in the Ninth, we simply do not wish it to end.

The *Scherzando* movement explodes. It is everything that the preceding movements wish to deny. It comes from the world of Chaos, bombs and armies, attacks and counterattacks. Beethoven can still shake his fist. As in the Ninth Symphony, Beethoven uses the fugue to contain and express violence. No powdered wigs in this counterpoint!

Calm returns in the *Finale*, which has a folk-music quality in its themes, including a grumpy A-Natural that keeps colliding with the surrounding harmonies. There is a long “false reprise” in Ab before the music resumes its meandering to its proper Eb home key, with the bumptious A Natural providing some more rude-peasant tugs on the music well into the coda. This is Beethoven in his best humor.

Nothing in these brief program notes can do justice to the complexity of what Beethoven accomplishes in this work. Beethoven warned, “This music is not for you. It is for the future.” Even we, score in hand, can do little more than let this music sweep over us.

—Program Notes by Brett Rutherford