

Chamber Music Society - Beethoven Festival 2020

Sunday, March 1, 2020

Emerson String Quartet

Eugene Drucker & Philip Setzer, violins

Lawrence Dutton, viola

Paul Watkins, cello

Introduction and commentary

Listening to all of Beethoven's sixteen quartets in (nearly) the same order in which they were composed will provide an extraordinary opportunity to develop a comprehensive sense of his development over time, as his string quartets trace his development more in depth than does any other genre. He began writing them early and with only one rather long break of 14 years (between 1811-1824), he continued until the very end of his life. The six quartets of Op. 18 were composed relatively early; Op. 59, 74 and 95 are wondrous compositions from mid-life, and Op. 127-135 were all composed in his very last years. Beethoven's development was continuous and multifaceted, and the string quartets provide the optimal opportunity to tune into the process at given points in time.

We are all indebted to the late Ben Franklin, Past President of the Chamber Music Society, who proposed and facilitated this celebration of Beethoven's 250th year, remembering that to celebrate the 200th anniversary of Beethoven's birth in 1970, the Juilliard Quartet performed all the quartets for the Louisville Chamber Music Society, then under the leadership of Dr. Gerhard Herz.

Beethoven's early life was very difficult. He had little access to primary education and musical training, but he was fortunate to have grown up in Bonn, where the cultural life was under the auspices of enlightened electors and music-loving princes who fostered church and orchestra music, and opera. In 1781 at the age of 11, he came under the guidance of the newly appointed court organist, Christian Gottlob Neffe, a well-trained, experienced musician with whom he is known to have studied, among other works, the keyboard music of Johann Sebastian Bach and his son Emanuel Bach. Neffe soon took him on as deputy assistant organist, and in 1783, when Neffe became the director of both sacred and secular music, he appointed Beethoven harpsichordist for the orchestra with responsibilities for both rehearsing and conducting. In 1784, he finally began to receive a salary for his work in court. During this time, Beethoven studied and composed rather steadily, and developed into a fine pianist. In 1787 when the Elector installed a national theater, Beethoven joined the orchestra as the second violist from which vantage point he was exposed to excellent performances of a large repertory of opera. In 1790 when Haydn traveled through Bonn on his way to England, Beethoven was introduced to him and was encouraged to go to Vienna to study with Haydn on his return to the city.

When Beethoven moved to Vienna in 1792, he was seeking "fulfillment of long-frustrated dreams" in the words of Count Waldstein, his patron in Bonn, and had prepared himself for the moment. During the not insignificant number of years of practical training, Beethoven had developed his musicianship, became highly skilled at improvising and had composed a significant body of music, some of which he later revised and published. Ever the realist, his plan included some self-improvement and when it turned out that Haydn seemed uninterested in teaching him, Beethoven took additional instruction from Johann Schenk and Antonio Salieri (with whom he studied setting Italian texts to music). When Haydn left Vienna in 1794 for an extended stay in England, Beethoven arranged to study counterpoint with Johann Albrechtsberger, an esteemed theorist.

During this time, he also made progress in becoming a recognized factor in the brilliant life of the Viennese aristocracy whose support he needed in order to live in the city. Joseph Kerman creates a compelling argument about Beethoven's progress in composition during this time, particularly ones that involved the piano: a Piano Concerto in B-flat and a number of innovative Piano Sonatas, one in E-flat, Op. 7, a group of three, Op. 10, each of which seems to bring forth a new and bold idea of form, as well as the justly-famous *Pathétique*, Op. 13. There were also works for piano and other instruments—including some reworked earlier pieces: the set of Piano Trios, Op. 1, the first two already composed in Bonn and a more recent third in C minor (that ruffled Haydn with its boldness), and two unusually commanding sonatas for cello, Op. 5.

While the early quartets of 1801 manifest characteristics of Beethoven's style—motivic integrity, contrapuntal adeptness, a developing sense for monumental structure—they did not spearhead his development. He was a master of improvisation, the piano was his instrument, and he first found new expressive modes in the piano sonatas. He had serious challenges to overcome before the string quartet, eventually, would be the medium for his most elevated musical thought and compositional ideals. The task before him included learning to work with four independent individuals, each with a single line, each line with its own integrity. All of which is clearly different from working with one individual with two hands capable of creating a variety of textures—from single lines to massive chords—all or parts of which can be variously sustained by the pedal.

The four-piece ensemble poses challenges for creating varied color and exploiting the range of dynamics and it takes great technical skill, rhythmic sensibility and harmonic dexterity to build a grand vertical effect for a conclusion. At the extremes, the four lines are involved in mutual confrontation or they are moving together in close synchronization. The task is to figure out how to work with all the possibilities in between, so that the work as a whole builds interestingly with a logical development in which each segment relates to the others. The greatest challenge in composing for string quartet lies in developing the structural sense of musical lines, their "linear integrity." The greater range and flexibility of the piano makes it easier to sustain forward motion, to exploit the difference and opposition between registers, and to create immediate contrasts between segments. The master of the piano had to learn a new and different approach to expressing music.

Lessons with Johann Albrechtsberger developed Beethoven's natural instinct for counterpoint, for cultivating the equal participation of the inner voices as well as the natural opposition between the outer voices. Eventually he was able to build segments with large linear direction, and more so, to control them perfectly. We will see how Beethoven begins to alter the character of the light obbligato counterpoint of the late classical style already in early quartets of Op. 18, and we would be mistaken to try to hear them as Beethoven's "version" of Haydn or Mozart's classical style. These works already embody Beethoven's independent thought. In the three quartets of Op. 59, then, we find a texture that is far richer and more varied with a full expression of what (especially in the first one in F Major), exceeds the classical formulas. They have even been characterized as "symphonic" in their dimensions and their style. Of course, the gradual development can be traced in the compositions between Op. 18 and Op. 59: the first three symphonies, Second and Third Piano Concertos and the Triple Concerto, in the two Fantasy Sonatas, Op. 27 (includes the "Moonlight") the "Waldstein" Sonata, and the "Kreutzer Sonata" for violin and piano. Magically it comes together in these three quartets from his early middle years.

Quartet in A Major, Op. 18, No. 5

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Allegro
Menuetto. Trio
Andante cantabile
Allegro

Much has been made of the similarities between this quartet and Mozart's quartet, K. 464 in A Major. Beethoven long admired this work, having copied it to study as a 15 yr. old in Bonn, an item he retained among his papers until the end. Not only are the keys of the two works the same, but following Mozart, Beethoven also changed the order of the movements of his work, placing the minuet-trio second, and the slow movement—a rather long set of variations, also like Mozart—in third place. It is not as though other composers had not reversed the order of movements before, but it was quite unusual. Furthermore, beyond following Mozart's example, it indicates that at this point in time, Beethoven was interested in addressing the concept of the work as a whole. In this instance, placing the slow movement—more prone to contemplation—in close proximity to the final movement shifts some of the interest toward the last half of the composition, and creates a more balanced whole. This is perhaps the beginning of a development that plays out in unexpected ways in the late quartets, as we shall see.

The first movement of Op. 18, No. 5, is in sonata form and opens unusually with a rather extended theme of eleven measures that is stated only one time—that is, *here* we do not have an antecedent statement followed by a consequent. Instead, after the initial thematic statement (those eleven measures), Beethoven immediately begins a transition that moves directly to the second key area with a cadence on the dominant, E Major. After a short exploration with a contrasting second theme, beginning with the minor version (E Minor) of the dominant, Beethoven continues with new melodic ideas that follow one after the other in easy succession: self-contained scale motives with a short rise and fall, then more extended scales culminating in an extended rise followed by a dramatic three-octave fall in the first violin, and continued energetic arpeggios. Eventually light-footed passagework closes the exposition. The development mixes new ideas with variants on previous materials: some directly related to figures in the exposition, and others more “in the spirit” of the generally easy-going style. Like Mozart, he tends to vary familiar ideas, interspersed with introduction of new melodic material, that is, close enough to be in the “same spirit.”

The second movement, a Minuet and Trio, is simple in design, but very appealing. As Joseph Kerman remarks, it is “a pensive essay in classic grace,” and here it is the term “classic” that tells the tale. The opening 12-measure segment is the “heart” of the movement; played first only by the violins and then, accompanied by the violins, repeated in the viola and cello. The second segment introduces contrasting, slightly darker, material leading to a rather abrupt cadence on C# minor—with a singular *ff*, the only one in the whole quartet—before returning the opening material. In an easy-going style, the Trio incorporates something of a dance element with a little “kick,” *sf*, on the third beat of the A segments.

The third movement comprises a substantial set of variations in the subdominant key of D Major. A straightforward form, each variation set is cast in two parts: eight measures each, both repeated. Beethoven has shown his fondness for simple themes and this one is about as simple as one can be: the A segment is a four-measure phrase with a melodic line that falls the interval of a 6th and then rises back to where it started. The first four measures of the B segment contrasts with a two-measure phrase played twice before the four-measure A segment returns. All five variations, each one more rhythmically complicated than the previous one, follow the same model. A lengthy coda that begins in the surprising third-related key of Bb Major extends the fifth variation past a climactic half-cadence, to reach a short segment (Poco Adagio) that caps the movement with a hushed *pp*.

The last movement, an Allegro, is a sonata form with quite a bit of “easy,” or free, counterpoint. Again, as in the first movement, the exposition, once begun, moves expeditiously through two statements of the first thematic material, transitions and modulates to the secondary key, E Major. The subject of the second key area is a series of chords, *pp*, first in whole notes, then in half notes—syncopated—and is quite a contrast to the “running” eighth-notes of the opening segment. New material simply flows, one idea after another, until the end of exposition and its cadence. The development is varied harmonically and is at its most captivating as it moves easily along buoyed by a kind of “light” counterpoint.

As far as the quartets in Op. 18 are concerned, this melodic-centered, lighter texture found through-out the movements of this singular quartet, the fifth of the set—a change most likely inspired by his knowledge of Mozart’s composition—introduces a different, one could even say, a new character, in Beethoven’s work. It is not altogether successful, but as we will see, one will be able to look back at the three, nos. 4, 5 and 6 to discover some of the elements that contributed mightily to the later issues of style and form in Beethoven’s later development.

Quartet in Bb Major, Op. 18, No. 6

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Allegro con Brio

Adagio ma non troppo

Scherzo. Allegro. Trio

La Malinconia. Adagio. Allegretto quasi Allegro.

Tempo I. Allegretto. Adagio. Allegretto. Adagio. Prestissimo

With this quartet, the commission for Prince Lobkowitz was complete: six quartets, published in two sets of three. Taken as a whole, the three in the first set tend to work within the expectations of the tradition established by Haydn and Mozart, while the three in the second set point to an increasing tendency on Beethoven’s part to depart from previous practice. You might recall that in No. 4, he included two dances, a scherzo and a minuet, but no slow movement, and in No. 5, he placed the dance movement—a minuet—in second place followed by the rather long, slow set of variations, thus shifting the balance of the work. No. 6 as will be seen is still another step in this redefinition.

The first movement of Quartet No. 6 in Bb Major is a coherent sonata form, and “brisk” is the best description to catch its spirit. The movement is in “cut time,” that is, it is in 2/2 meter, and at two half-notes per measure, it clips along. In addition, the expressive marking, “Allegro con brio,” indicates a very fast tempo—as it usually means “as fast as one can play.” While the tune for first violin moves measure by measure, the viola subdivides measures into quarter notes, and the second violin chatters along in eighth notes. The cello, when it enters, is pretty much limited to a humorous echo of the first violin for the moment—at a distance of three octaves below. Thus, the measures fly by with each instrument working in its own “time zone.” The tune starts low in the first violin, then, propelled by the quick turning figure, it hops—one octave at a time—zig-zagging up through two octaves to land on the high Bb at which point, the violin and the cello greatly extend the phrase as they exchange humorous “barbs” using the turning figure from the violin’s first measure. The exposition continues with a transition to the second key area and a new, much subdued contrasting theme. All the elements from the exposition are skillfully used in the development: the hopping zigzag motif, the violin’s turn, and varied rhythmic subdivisions of the beat. Be on the lookout for two points of silence, the first preparing for quick, streaming scales that eventually engage all four instruments until final exhaustion, and the other signaling the recapitulation.

The second movement is an Adagio (“but not too slow”) in the key of the subdominant, E \flat Major, with the central contrasting segment in the parallel E \flat Minor. The movement is cast in a very simple and regular form (ABA'). Each section comprises four 4-measure phrases (aa'ba''), each one of which is varied when repeated (aa'ba''). And when the section (A') is repeated, the variations are varied once again. Think back to this straightforward and gracious essay in simplicity when the *La Malinconia*, also an Adagio—but a very different one—opens the fourth movement.

The third movement, a Scherzo, is a rhythmic powerhouse. Crazy with syncopation, it is like an explosion after all of the subtle, delicate rhythms of the first two movements. The Trio focuses entirely on the first violin as it trips along and manages to project a complete contrast to the scherzo by way of its rhythm and texture.

The center of gravity of the whole quartet, *La Malinconia*, opens the fourth movement. It was clearly a serious undertaking—such that Beethoven asks that it be treated with great delicacy, *Questo pezzo si deve trattare colla più gran delicatezza*. Throughout this passage, which brings to mind the composer’s struggles with his increasing deafness that stressed him on multiple accounts, there are elements that seem to capture worries that find no resolution, hence perhaps, the term “malinconia.” Each of three sections begins with a delicate, very quiet, slow-moving hymn that gives way to a series of sustained chords, one to a measure. These chordal series start quietly enough, but the intensity grows as chords alternate loud and soft and dramatic turns enhance each and every one. Finally, with no end in sight, the Adagio turns into a dashing Allegretto quasi Allegro in 3/8 time, in essence a sonata form without a development. As time goes on, this cheerful attempt to put more serious thoughts aside runs out of material and comes to a stopping point that opens the way for an abbreviated return of the Adagio. Interruptions follow as bits of Adagios and Allegrettos alternate, the last of which finishes the movement with a brilliant Prestissimo.

Quartet in C Major, Op. 59, No. 3

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Introduzione. Andante con moto. Allegro vivace
Andante con moto quasi Allegretto
Menuetto. Grazioso. Trio
Allegro molto

When we think back on the surprising, assertive opening chord of this quartet we realize that the work has already started—even *before* the first sound—with our own anticipation. And because of the sudden, inscrutable character of this chord, *f*, we are unprepared for and shocked by it, even as it fades into brooding silence...nor quite ready for the next one—*pp*, slightly changed—that follows...and also grows silent...Then a third chord, still *pp*, changed again, but now sustained, and slowly evolving, growing into the promise of a slow suspenseful continuation. Time passes, one change follows another, and as the pitches emerge they move step by step in both directions, and a wedge of sound expands until it commands, equally, the highest and the lowest register. A pause...and a consoling silence—still no sense of meter—followed by a long, still hushed quieted chord. And then with a joyous leap, the movement changes course and charges ahead. The Allegro vivace has arrived, rushing in with first one, and then a second, free-style recitative in the solo violin. In essence, these solo passages become a fluid bridge between the extended introduction and the full-bodied sonata movement that follows with its utterly joyous theme, a glorious and exuberant celebration of C Major.

With frequent offbeat, surprising, *sfs*, and repeated motives, the theme moves through the exposition tracing the musical space between the very high and the very low—indeed, like the introduction. The energy of this initial thematic statement continues unabated as its rhythmic drive forges on beyond the need for a complementary consequent phrase. Stretching progressively upwards until it reaches the high C *in alt*, it plunges headlong down to the lowest note on the instrument. Inventing new motives the theme pursues its course until it halts for a brief cadence on the dominant and

a new theme for the second key area. Like the earlier one in C Major this new theme also takes off after the initial statement, exploring possible extensions until it comes into a closing phase ending the exposition with a slightly extended cadence that makes great use of a little two-note figure—that is, only one short note followed by a longer one a half step higher. Listen for it, as this small element becomes integral to the development as a whole. At first, it plays along with some of the arpeggio figures from the exposition—not always as a half-step interval, but always a two-note figure. It eventually becomes detached and develops into full-blown octaves, *ff*, where it begins a long exploration, both in range and dynamics—becoming almost hypnotic in its repetition. At long last, it collapses into a trill that initiates the recapitulation bringing back the free-flying recitatives in the first violin. Once begun, the recapitulation take the expected course of action and the final cadence follows a very neat and efficient, unusually short coda capped by full-bodied chords.

For a sonata form, the second movement takes an unusual route, calling up substitute themes that take on circuitous formal tasks. It does not quite adhere to a formal outline but one does not really mind as its modally-tinged melody is restful after the energy of the first movement. Buoyed by the steady *pizzicato* in the cello, it seems slightly exotic (even perhaps a bit Venetian?). Selectively throughout the movement Beethoven calls for a number of accents and subtle changes in texture—delicate scales played *staccato* and occasional hoarse trills in the viola—and the voices move in exquisite counterpoint as they work through contrasting moments, always finding respite in the gently swaying tune in 6/8 meter.

While the third movement, a Minuet and Trio, follow the expectations of the ternary form (ABA'), there are interesting, if subtle elements to appreciate. For example in the repeat of the A section in the Minuet, the tune is in the cello leaving the upper voices to fill out a three-part accompaniment with quite independent character; it's as though another piece has sprung above the familiar theme. And while the Minuet is unrelentingly graceful, the Trio leaps and races for all its worth. Beethoven has supplied a rather substantial coda that briefly moves into and out of the distant key of E \flat Major, and does not quite come to a final cadence before taking on the last movement, a full-blown sonata form in the shape of a fugue. Its lengthy 10-measure subject is heard first in the viola...and one must pay close attention because this theme is so long that there is only enough space for it to be heard twice, once at the beginning and then at the recapitulation. Except for the very first note of the theme, all the rest are eighth notes—it quite flies by again in typically Beethoven fashion: great rhythmic drive—fast eighth notes—and slow-moving harmonic change. Listen for the last couple of measures in the fugue subject where it finishes with a figure that becomes a strong feature of the development, a pattern repeated four times: one note, repeated, followed by its upper neighbor, and back to the initial note. This is a marvelous movement: a fast-paced fugue subject, a counter subject in solid half notes, the whole dressed up with trills and syncopations; a wonderful passage in C \sharp Minor and a stunning coda...what more could anyone want?

Program Notes by Dr. Jean Christensen.

*The pre-concert presentations will be given by Jean Christensen beginning at 2 PM in room 135.
All are welcome to attend.*