

Music in the Park Series
St. Paul, MN

Sunday, January 31, 2010

The Pacifica Quartet

Simin Ganatra, violin, Sibbi Bernhardsson, violin
Masumi Per Rostad, viola
Brandon Vamos, cello

Program

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

Quartet in D Major, Op. 18, No. 3

Allegro
Andante con moto
Allegro
Presto

Quartet in F Major, Op. 135

Allegretto
Vivace
Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo
Der schwer gefasste Entschluss: Muss es sein? Es muss sein!
Es muss sein! Grave, ma non troppo tratto; Allegro

Intermission

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

Introduzione: Andante con moto; Allegro vivace
Andante con moto quasi Allegretto
Menuetto: Grazioso
Allegro molto

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Ludwig van Beethoven
Born December 16, 1770, in Bonn
Died March 26, 1827, in Vienna

Quartet in D, Op. 18 No. 3

Allegro ~ Andante con moto ~ Allegro ~ Presto

Although a Beethoven notebook dated 1798 is filled with fifty-eight pages of sketches for the D major quartet, scholars conjecture that a missing notebook contained even more preliminary studies for this composition, which is believed to be his very first mature string quartet. Overall, it is exceedingly quiet and pensive and is clearly indebted to the Classical masters for its concept and formal organization.

Calmly and tenderly, the first violin floats the main subject, with its striking opening interval of a minor seventh, over the soft sustained chords of the other instruments. The broad cantilena line of this subject is different from the melodies constructed of pithy motifs that characterize so many other pieces by Beethoven. The second subject, also stated by the first violin, is slightly more agitated than the first; the staccato bass line adds to the feeling of unease and disquiet. Following the exposition and development, Beethoven brings back most of the material from the exposition and ends with a short coda.

The warm, simple theme of the Andante cantabile is presented, uncharacteristically, by the second violin. Poetically conceived and richly textured, the movement is in neither rondo nor sonata form, but falls somewhere in between. Its serious nature, great length, and especially careful realization seem to suggest that Beethoven attached a central importance to this movement. Although it has been faulted by some for lacking a depth of feeling, no one denies its obvious sincerity.

In keeping with the generally contemplative mood of the quartet, the third movement has neither the rhythmic verve of a minuet nor the sparkling vivacity of a scherzo, the typical quartet third movements. Instead, Beethoven supplies what might be called a gentle and graceful intermezzo. Especially attractive is the minor-key trio, a marked contrast to the opening in major and distinguished by flowing passages in the violins over descending scale fragments in the other instruments. The major opening section returns after the trio.

The energetic Presto combines in equal measure the unceasing flow of a perpetual motion, the rhythmic drive of a tarantella, and the melodic turns of a Mexican hat dance. The movement's surging motion is liberally seasoned with sharp and abrupt changes in dynamics until the bombast plays itself out, and the movement ends with a whispered farewell.

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Ludwig van Beethoven
Born December 16, 1770, in Bonn
Died March 26, 1827, in Vienna

Quartet in F, Op. 135

Allegretto ~ Vivace ~ Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo

Der schwer gefasste Entschluss: Muss es sein? Es muss sein! Es muss sein! Grave, ma non troppo tratto; Allegro

Op. 135, the sixteenth and last complete string quartet that Beethoven wrote, represents a sharp departure from the other late quartets. For one thing, the work is quite short, vying with Op. 18, No. 2 as the briefest of them all. One possible explanation of its brevity is supplied by the composer's friend, Karl Holz, who reported that Beethoven, believing that his publisher had not paid him enough for the work, had said: "If [he] sends circumcised ducats he shall have a circumcised quartet. That's why it is so short."

In addition to the modest length of the quartet, the work has less emotional intensity and spirituality than the other late quartets, and a deeper sense of calmness and peaceful resignation. Those who hear it in a serene acceptance of the inevitability of death refer to a letter Beethoven sent with the quartet to his publisher, Moritz Schlesinger: "Here, my dear friend, is my last quartet. It will be the last; and indeed it has given me much trouble. For I could not bring myself to compose the last movement. But as your letters were reminding me of it, in the end I decided to compose it. And that is the reason why I have written the motto: "The difficult decision-Must it be?- It must be, it must be!"

For some listeners, Op. 135 represents a return to middle-class taste, "a touch of Biedermier," the conservative movement in the decorative arts of the early 1800s. Brevity, accessibility, and the use of more traditional compositional techniques were some of the particular qualities that Beethoven associated with music written for the bourgeoisie. The fact that Beethoven dedicated the quartet to Johann Wolfmayer, a cloth merchant, and not an aristocrat, lends some credence to this belief.

And finally, the light and humorous Op. 135 following the profundity of Op. 131 (in order of composition) seems to fit Beethoven's penchant for turning to amore buoyant work after creating music of great depth and personal involvement. The relaxed geniality of Op. 135 probably also provided Beethoven with a much needed release from the intensity and emotional involvement with the works that preceded it.

Beethoven composed his final quartet during August and September 1826, finishing it on October 30 at his brother's country estate in Gneixendorf, Austria. It was published in September 1827, and the Schuppanzigh Quartet gave the premiere in Vienna on March 23, 1828, almost one year to the day after the composer's death.

The opening movement's warm, conversational tone derives in part from its first subject group of five separate motifs, each with its own inflection and character, and tossed from instrument to instrument as though engaged in informal discourse. An ascending staccato arpeggio and a frolicsome descending run are pitted against each other in the second subject. With supreme confidence and assuredness, Beethoven develops the material he has introduced, brilliantly expanding the various motifs and presenting them in intriguing new guises and combinations, before bringing them back for the recapitulation. A coda based on motifs from the first subject ends the movement.

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The swift and scintillating Vivace functions as the Scherzo movement; it is propelled forward by its pointed syncopations and cross accents. A rising scale in the viola and cello and a repeated note accompaniment introduce the contrasting middle section, which continues the breakneck tempo and sends the first violin out into death-defying acrobatic leaps while the others doggedly repeat an ostinato measure a full forty-seven times! The movement closes with a shortened reprise of the opening section.

The Lento assai is a sublime example of Beethoven's most inspired "interior music." It was added as an afterthought to the originally conceived three-movement quartet. Over sketched for the simple main melody, in the key of D flat major, which Beethoven associated with the expression of sentiment, he wrote: *Susser Ruhegesang. Friedengesang* ("sweet restful, peaceful song"). Simply and lovingly, Beethoven puts this eight-measure, stepwise moving melody through four variations played without pause that never rise above piano ("soft") dynamic level to create a section of rich, satisfying beauty and repose.

The final movement, *Der Schwer gefasste Entschluss* ("the difficult resolution"), asks the question *Muss es sein?* ("must it be"). The answer is the ringing affirmation, *Es muss sein! Es muss sein!* ("It must be! It must be!"). Although in his letter to Moritz Schlesinger, Beethoven assigns a profound meaning to the exchange, its origins were simple, even humorous. Presumably, Beethoven refused to give Ignaz Dembscher, a government official and friend, a copy of his quartet, Op. 130, because Dembscher had not attended the premiere performance. Wanting to set matters right, Dembscher asked Karl Holz to intervene. Holz suggested that Dembscher send Schuppanzigh, whose quartet have the first performance, the cost of the subscription, 50 florins. Dembscher asked, "Muss es sein?" and Holz replied "Es muss sein!" When Holz recounted the story to the composer, Beethoven burst into laughter and immediately sat down to compose a canon on the dialogue. Later Beethoven expanded the musical material of the canon into the quartet's last movement. In slow, solemn tones the two lower stings pose the question, a setting of the words, *Muss es sein?* And in forceful, joyful musical phrases, the two violins deliver the exultant response with which Beethoven may indeed avow his triumph over death.

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

Introduzione: Andante con moto; Allegro vivace

Andante con moto quasi Allegretto ~ Menuetto: Grazioso ~ Allegro molto

The subtitle "Hero" (or "Eroica") refers to the last movement of the quartet and acknowledges its truly mighty conception. Just as Beethoven's Eroica Symphony vastly expanded the scope of symphonic writing, so the grandiose finale of the third "Rasumovsky" quartet made all previous string quartets seem modest by comparison.

The eerie introduction that opens the quartet, without any forward motion and seemingly suspended in time, seems to contradict Beethoven's tempo direction, Andante con moto ("moderate speed with motion"). The jaunty first theme is, in effect, 'kicked off' by a short upbeat and long arrival note - a rhythmic figure that remains important throughout the movement. Several other first group themes gradually lead to the start of the exuberant second subject - sustained note, which is imitated in order by the viola, cello and second violin. The development section provides flashy virtuosic passage work for all the instruments with frequent reappearances of the short-upbeat/long-resolution motto. The exposition skips the first theme and deals entirely with the triumphant second melody before the arrival of a brief sparkling coda.

The second movement has variously been described as a "lament" by Vincent D'Indy, the "mystery of the primitive" by Joseph Kerman and "some forgotten and alien despair," in the words of J.W.N. Sullivan. These reactions are mostly evoked by the first theme, a heavy, despondent violin line over repeated cello pizzicato notes. The melodic interval of the augmented second, with its Middle Eastern overtones, adds to the poignancy of the effect. The dispirited opening serves as the perfect foil to the warm, frothy second theme that follows. Both themes are developed and returned according to traditional sonata form, but in a surprise move, the composer brings them back in reverse order.

Beethoven probably returned to the traditional eighteenth-century minuet style for the third movement because a brilliant scherzo would have been inappropriate before the monumental finale he had in mind. The first part is gentle and languorous, despite a great deal of inner rhythmic drive. The sharper and more penetrating trio precedes a repeat of the Menuetto and the brief coda that leads, without pause, to the finale.

The last movement starts softly, but at a very fast tempo, with the viola playing the theme alone. The second violin enters with the same melody while the viola continues with a countermelody - a fugal treatment in which one theme is successively imitated by the individual players. The cello and then the first violin join in with the original melody to bring the section to a powerful climax. As the movement proceeds, Beethoven audaciously juxtaposes homophony (accompanied melody), on the richly textured polyphony (independent voices) of the opening fugal section, with absolutely thrilling results. Beethoven endows every note, from first to last, with a force and energy that propels the musical line irresistibly forward. He also calls on the players to stretch their tonal resources to the very limit, to produce the maximum sound possible. The result is a movement of stunning impact – a triumphant conclusion to this most impressive work.

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