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Beethoven Quartet opus 127

Stylistic evolution is a major theme in any discussion of Beethoven's oeuvre, as it is with artists such as T.S. Eliot and Picasso. For a man whose uncanny perception of the profundities of the human condition shone through his music from the very start, from a larger-than-life soul and intellect, it is deeply meaningful to see how life experience and philosophical questioning over time comes to be reflected in the art work. Beethoven is in fact the quintessential example of the idea of a late style in music, of a broadening of insight and the willful manipulation of form and rhetoric to accommodate that insight.

Coming out of his "middle" period, the so-called heroic style epitomized by works such as the Eroica Symphony or the Op. 59 quartets, Beethoven's vision of the world and of his, and by extension mankind's, place in it underwent a radical metamorphosis. Ego, the primacy of effort and the battle of ideas begin to dissolve and make way for a vision of wholeness, of a sacred order. All that he had explored with the sense of a human protagonist in his music shifts so that the composer no longer seems so much in the world as of it. Beethoven was deeply interested in Hindu and Brahman philosophy at this point in his life (as was fashionable at the time) and copied into his notebooks numerous statements from their sacred texts. The relationship with time, will and vision all move in new directions in the late quartets.

In the E-flat Major quartet, Op. 127, in particular we find a spiraling inwards, a refutation of earlier models of drama and struggle. There is an omnipresent sense of dissolving into acceptance and clarity, and for Beethoven it is an uncommonly tender and introverted work. The quartet opens with a curious framing device. It begins with a grand chordal announcement (marked *Maestoso*), one which, due to the key, it is hard not to associate with the Eroica Symphony. As the phrase reaches upwards it comes to rest not on the expected dominant harmony but on the sub-dominant. In emotional terms this means that instead of reaching up toward a chord that will validate the strength of the home key the phrase falls gently back into a more subjective, even subjunctive, key area which is a release from the key in which we begin. It is a pulling back, a turning away from the expected outer triumph toward self-acceptance and a ruminative kind of exploration. This first harmonic move very much sets the stage for the way the piece will operate as a whole, and in fact turns out to point also to the key of the otherworldly slow movement as well as to a central pitch of the finale. The main theme of the first movement appears at this moment, dissolved into with all the voices either keeping their previous pitch or actually sustaining through the moment of arrival. The boundary is a watery

one, that of entering into a meditative state, and the flow of the music is simplicity itself, with tenderly falling phrases. At the moment of expected dramatic contrast, the second theme, Beethoven thwarts these expectations and gives us a theme of a sadder cast but refusing to engage in dialectic with the first theme. The opening *Maestoso* music returns two more times in the movement, the first announcing the development section. But the second comes early in the structure of the whole and then fails to appear to announce the recapitulation, the moment when we should feel a true sense of arrival and coming to terms with built up conflict. Instead the music subsides into the return of the first theme in a way that suggests a refusal to wrestle with the material and instead melts into serenity. The coda of the movement could hardly be more filled with intimate tenderness, the public music of the *Maestoso* having been left far in the past.

The second movement is a set of variations on a prayerful theme introduced with hesitant half gasps that echo the harmonic ploy of the opening of the piece, once again gently descending into the subdominant. A theme of infinite patience and grace opens up into an extraordinary set of transformations. Already in the first variation the climaxes give us a pre-echo of the climax of the entire work in the coda of the *Finale*. The second variation enters the world of play, evoking the natural joy and wonder in children's games, in this case an acrobatic game of leapfrog between the violins. The center of the movement rises up to a distant, unexpected and radiant key area where the theme achieves a sense of religious ecstasy sung out in operatic style. It is a simple shift, and yet it reveals an entire world tangential to the one in which we typically dwell, as if Beethoven is able to lift us out of the plane of our existence. I am reminded of the moment in Edwin Abbott's *Flatland* where a sphere lifts the protagonist, a square, out of the plane in which he lives and suddenly, with dizzying and overwhelming insight, our hero can see the insides of seemingly impenetrable figures from his world. The sense of clarification from a distance is as if we been privileged to see into the beyond. As we are gently placed back in the mortal sphere the illumination of this insight continues to glow; the beauty of our world glimmers and grows more rarefied. Despite a dark interlude, the theme eventually gets spun out into a gossamer line, initially in the first violin, accompanied by undulating pulsations derived from the introductory gesture of the movement. The coda of the movement recalls the parallel universe shift of the middle of the movement within the space of three measures, a final reminder both of Elysium and of the reflection of its splendor in our own world.

The *Scherzo* again has an introductory gesture, but this one is finally straightforward and playfully announces a movement which is filled with clever contrapuntal games and serves as a foil to the depth of the previous

movements. Lines that skip upwards are answered by others that flip them upside down, reminiscent of the leapfrog variation in the previous movement. The music gallops and flirts with the idea of a more graceful dance without ever giving in to it. Again in this movement we find a boundary dissolving device, a single chord that stutters, changes to minor, then begins to pulsate and whirl, leading into a tornado-like torrent, transporting us to an Oz where there is a folkish, perhaps pagan stomping dance. This whirling music teases with a brief reappearance at the end of the movement, just enough almost to throw the main rhythm of the movement off course, but all is righted at the final moment for an enthusiastic ending.

The Finale begins with a curious opening gesture, vigorously emphasizing the A-flat sub-dominant that has been so important earlier in the piece. It is an arresting moment, rich with personal struggle and striving; it wends its way downwards in curious curves, tempted in many directions at once. Yet when it lands at the bottom it is in the home key of the piece, with a melody that is both gentle and folk-like in its quiet yodeling. The theme itself emphasizes the A-flat twice before lifting it upwards so that it can gently topple over and find its way back home. This rising idea of A-flat to A-natural to a B-flat dominant that can release into the home key is an encapsulation of the function of this movement, a lifting out of contemplation back into the world with a renewed sense of harmony with what is. The most touching and exalted boundary dissolution comes in the coda of this final movement, where Beethoven holds time prisoner with an ellipsis that blossoms into a trill. The trill contains the A-flat once again and then releases that pitch, and with it the tether of self-hood, into a visionary reflection of the perfection that surrounds us. The great painter Mark Rothko said “all teaching about self-expression is erroneous in art... knowing yourself is valuable so that the self can be removed from the process.” For Beethoven in the late quartets, as evidenced in Op. 127 and particularly in this lustrous coda (and like in Rothko’s mature paintings), the self is dissolved into a broader and more inclusive vision. Effort is replaced with acceptance and the profoundest love.

Note by Mark Steinberg