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## **Beethoven Quartet opus 130**

Most of us have felt at some point caught in the gap between feeling and expression, inchoate thought and language. Anyone feeling profound love or pain has likely searched in vain for words to convey the truest essence of those states. Even describing to another just why you find something amusing can be a challenge. It is by no means clear to what extent we need language to think, or whether there can be meaning in thoughts that transcends what can be translated into a formal language. When I write about music (including right now) I often feel I know just what I want to say until the moment comes when words must be found. The moment of writing sees the certainty of the thought evaporate. Was that certainty real or illusory? Does this suggest that there are thoughts that have a shape no word can fit? The relationship between form or language and meaning is one that seems an obsession in Beethoven's Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 130. Pushing at the boundaries of what music can or perhaps can't do, Beethoven wrestles with these questions in ways that at times have the nature of curious puzzles, and at other times profoundly grapple with the association between intimate experience and art. As Wittgenstein investigates the link of language and thought, as Gödel asks what truths may escape any given formal system, so Beethoven uses music to refer to and ask questions of itself, writing in Op. 130 a precarious piece that investigates and attempts to define the limit of what can be expressed.

The piece begins and certainties based on usually reliable assumptions quickly dissolve. A slow introduction leads, as expected, into a quicker main section, yet this is in turn interrupted by the introduction's return, and by the time the main section reasserts itself the doubling of the normal juxtaposition has thrown the claim to primacy of both types of music into doubt. In fact, their playing off each other remains a central issue in the movement, and the development section manages to create an undulating continuity out of the two note figure in the introduction which connotes only punctuation and closing. The repeated note motive that first appears in the second violin at the start of the Allegro completely subverts normal musical grammar: the two pitches are in the relationship of dominant to tonic, the strongest cadential formula in Western music, and yet instead of having the dominant fall to its tonic with a sense of finality (in accordance with gravity, as it should) Beethoven chooses to lift it upwards, deprive it of its expected harmony and introduce a sudden hush. Somehow this is music about the language of music, the composer playing with form and material, performing a balancing trick in coaxing the movement toward coherence, inventing as he goes principles of some non-Euclidean geometry governing a world that might or might not be able to exist.

Beethoven plays at testing the limits of musical language by refusing traditional rules and relationships. In many of the late works we come across music where we feel the logical working out of the proceedings in real time, a sense of living within the composerly mindset. This piece seems to be special in using that process to challenge or question the potency of music itself as an explanatory art form.

From the second movement through the fifth Beethoven writes a set of character pieces, in some sense in two pairs. This subverts the expected four movement set up of the string quartet, and sets forth the challenge of creating a convincing large structure out of miniatures, balancing unlike parts in preference to creating interlocking pieces. The music leans away from the sophisticated reasoning of most of his quartet writing toward the world of caricature and masks, each movement affording a differing exaggeration of character and mode of expression. And in the sense that tribal masks sometimes protect the wearer who intones sacred words and names from divine retribution, Beethoven's masks allow him to play at games of rhetoric otherwise far from the composer's usual relationship with larger forms. In writing music that is in many ways tongue-in-cheek he enters a sort of metamusical world, being at once composer and commentator. The quicksilver Presto investigates the extremes of contrast between its scurrying, furtive outer sections and the wild bombast of the intervening trio. In between is an odd passage in which the first violin line hovers three times above a moat of snapping crocodiles, the crocodiles taking the form of a minor second, motivically important throughout the work. The music teases with the idea of escape from motivic, rational writing, farther and farther away until it is pulled irrevocably downward back into the obsession of the opening section, decorated to become almost comically hyperbolized. The small movement teeters on the edge of rupture due to the highly stylized, almost farcical contrast of its sections. Its companion movement, provocatively marked "poco scherzoso" ("slightly joking") explores the possibility of mating two character pieces to produce a hybrid. Instead of separating out the elements as he does in the Presto, Beethoven blends together a tender, somewhat amorous Andante with a witty mechanical evocation of a clock (a popular musical trope of the period). For good measure he throws in, as well, a somewhat portentous figure, heard at the very opening, which shares the figuration of the amoroso theme, a sort of musical pun. Throughout it becomes difficult to know whether the music is heartfelt or silly; it is as if the movement is a precarious emulsion of oil and vinegar, able to stay together only for as long as it takes to hear it, a sleight-of-hand.

The succeeding pair of movements balance caricature against deep introspection. The "Alla danza tedesca" ("in the style of a German dance") is a

kind of manic waltz, a parody of rustic, unsophisticated style. Performance directions push the simple tune to the brink of the grotesque, and there are games played with awkward, almost absurd figuration, fitting the wrong rhythmic accompaniment to the first violin filigree, and bars in which the tune starts to go backwards before correcting itself. Just before the ending of the movement there is the briefest flirtation with something more loving and inward which is cast aside almost immediately as the movement ends rather abruptly, naive and pompous. The parody tests how much it is possible for music to make fun of itself, to contain both the underlying form and the commentary on this form at once. It is as if we meet an older person for the first time and detect at once his earlier self and the magnification of his personality traits that time has wrought, at once the prototype and the distortion. The *Alla danza tedesca* also serves as a powerful foil for the ensuing movement. Its key is a rude shock after the preceding moment, challenging the gods of cohesion with such a harmonic rift, but somehow its keynote then becomes harmonically a link into the inner sanctum of the work, the fifth movement. (And then into the finales, as if the piece needs to step outside of itself to find a way forward.)

In the Cavatina (originally a term for a type of operatic aria) the crisis of the piece is reached, the desolation of the inexpressible fully revealed. Our quartet had the privilege of playing this movement at the memorial service for the great astronomer Carl Sagan at the Cathedral of St. John the Divine in New York City. All the music for the service was taken from the selections Carl Sagan chose for the “golden record,” included on the Voyager spacecrafts, which was meant to represent life on earth and some of the greatest achievements of mankind, sent as a communication and an offering to any intelligent civilization that might intercept it. The prelude to the Cavatina on the occasion of the service was a recording of Sagan reading from his book *Pale Blue Dot*, speaking of Voyager taking a photograph of the Earth from the edge of the solar system, of the great importance the contemplation of this vantage point holds for all of us. In *Pale Blue Dot*, Sagan writes: “It has been said that astronomy is a humbling and character-building experience. There is perhaps no better demonstration of the folly of human conceits than this distant image of our tiny world.” Beethoven’s Cavatina indeed deals with the folly of human conceits, the frailty and vulnerability of our love and our tenuous ability to communicate it, indeed our deep lack of any true model of our inner states. And it touches on the richness of the human capacity for love as well as the loneliness of isolation in the chasm between feeling and expression. The singing line is shared mostly between the two violins, and although the very first part of the first theme ends with a too-quick, almost stammered half-cadence, as if the right word has escaped the singer’s lips even as the song has just started, the line manages to continue and blossoms into an infinitely tender, empathetic exchange. A

particularly touching moment comes in the exchange between the violins of the second theme of the movement. Typically a melodic idea first appears in a piece in its most simple version; if it is to be ornamented this happens in later repetitions. Here an idea traded between the violins twice comes in a slightly ornamented version and is only later sung in a more elemental form, as if the second violin reaches backward in time, searching for something more true, more pure, turning eyes inward and refusing any artifice. Painfully, the first violin fails to respond in kind, offering instead the most ornamented version of all, somehow lacking the trust or courage to grasp after the essence of what must be said. The gap in expression is palpable. The incongruity of the utterances opens a space for one of the most unsettling passages in all of music, with the first violin left in desperate isolation. Beethoven marks the passage *beklemmt*: oppressed, anguished, stifled. Along with a viscerally disorienting shift to a distant tonality the lower voices pulsate in a sort of primal vibration. The first violin is somehow overcome, no longer singing, no longer even able to connect one note to another, voiceless yet desperate to give voice. The line cannot find tears with which to cry, it gropes for language where there is none. Within the world of Op. 130 and its investigation of the limits of musical language and form this is the moment of revelation. The movement which is to sing loses its capacity to do so, or cannot find the inspiration to support it. Exquisite paradox: Music is inadequate to express what pleads to be expressed; this failure is flawlessly expressed by music. The Cavatina has an ending, one in which the idea of a fundamental vibration-pulsation meets the initial stammer of the movement and offers uneasy consolation, but there is little stable comfort to be had here. The fissure between depth of feeling and language too feeble to hold it in its entirety is too great for that.

Where to go from here? Perhaps the most obvious symbol of this work's engagement with problems of expression and narrative is the fact that the piece has two possible endings. At the premiere of the work it was performed with the Grosse Fuge ("Great Fugue") as its final movement, music of at times terrifying force, teetering at the boundary between chaos and order. In this most rigorous of musical forms Beethoven creates music that threatens at any moment to collapse, even flirting with the edges of madness or incomprehensibility. Having confronted the terror of music's failure in the *beklemmt* section of the Cavatina, Beethoven responds by locking himself in mortal combat with musical form and, although it only happens in the final moments, somehow achieving a sense of having been victorious.

Or is he? Bewildered by the Fugue, Beethoven's publisher convinced him to remove it from the piece, publish it separately, and write an alternate finale (the

last thing he ever wrote). From what we know of Beethoven's personality consenting to such a change seems highly uncharacteristic. Could it be that he welcomed the chance to respond differently to the crisis of the *beklemmt*? The alternate finale is much closer in feeling to Op. 135 (the last of the quartets) than to any of the other late quartets (including Op. 130), representing, perhaps, Beethoven wearing a Buddha's smile. The crisis is acknowledged, accepted, held as it is. Struggle is abandoned, equanimity allowed to blossom without denial of having stared into the abyss. Perhaps at the last moment Beethoven envisaged a different way forward.

Note by Mark Steinberg