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Beethoven Quartet Opus 132

A poem by Dylan Thomas begins:

Your pain shall be a music in your string
And fill the mouths of heaven with your tongue

Art has the capacity to take on the burdens of existence and lend to them in reflection beauty and nobility which both console and edify. Ludwig van Beethoven was a man within whom the trials and triumphs of being resonated loudly. His ability to translate these into music was not something he took lightly; sensing the pressure of time in his final years he chose to renounce the felicities of life and devote his energies fully to composition. For Beethoven the act of composition was an act of giving, of doing for others, and the last years of his life saw the birth of a remarkable set of works which are indeed a gift. His late period works offer hope of transcendence through penetrating insight into the nature of suffering and difficulty. Inspired, perhaps, by the inherent intimacy and flexibility of the medium, Beethoven wrote five epic string quartets during these years.

The quartet Op. 132, in a minor, begins in shadows, tenuously searching, reaching towards the unknowable. The introductory material of the quartet encompasses the sense of the infinite within the merest of whispers filled with portent and possibility. The voices echo one another with a four note motif which is to permeate the first movement, unstable and yearning. A brief torrent of whirling notes unleashed in the first violin gives way to a restless theme which will be wrestled with throughout the movement. In all of Beethoven this is perhaps the movement which best embodies a sense of process. One gets the feeling of being inside the composer's mind and imagination as he wends his way through the argument, including not only forward progression but distractions and digressions as well, all integrated into the evolving shape of the movement. Beethoven displays here what musicologist Maynard Solomon calls the "potential for coherence within the fragmentary." In embracing disorder, the composer manages to create a compelling structure achieved through careful balancing of musical quanta. Coherence is earned through struggle with confusion, purification through tribulation.

The second movement perhaps owes its inspiration to its counterpart in Mozart's A Major quartet, K 464, a piece of which Beethoven was fond. As in that earlier piece the movement opens with a unison figure gently poised between the graceful and the austere. A more tender melody is then

intertwined with the opening material in a somewhat odd pas-de-deux. Irregular rhythms and slightly anxious expressive markings lend the dance a quirky, uncertain lilt. As if to assuage this unease the trio section could hardly be more open, simpler, or more innocent. Evoking bagpipes and childlike play, the flow of the music gets interrupted once briefly by an ominous and threatening pronouncement initiated by the viola and cello. It is a frightening moment, seemingly unprovoked, the darkness lurking behind our fragile states of happiness. It is quickly dispelled by the return of the bagpipes and then of the main dancing section of the movement, but the sense of portent hovers in the air even at the movement's close.

Certainly one of the most expansive of Beethoven's slow movements, the third movement is entitled "song of thanksgiving to God for recovery from an illness, in the lydian mode." This is a profound and deeply personal utterance, rooted certainly in biographical fact, but perhaps in metaphysical metaphor as well. The ancient modes, with a slightly different color than the major and minor scales on which most music of this period is based, and thus exotic in sound, suggest piety and devotion. (Among Beethoven's unrealized plans at the end of his life were a "pious song in a symphony in the ancient modes" and a "chorus in the ancient modes" as part of an oratorio.) Hymn-like sections alternate with sections marked "feeling new strength." In this quicker, far more ornate music, there is the sense of a vibration of the soul as it aspires upward toward heaven, of illumination born of a struggle with darkness. At each return of the hymn-like music it becomes more sensitive, more vulnerable. At its third and final appearance Beethoven writes in the score above the material which weaves through the intoned hymn melody "with the most intimate feeling." The movement builds to a climax of nearly unthinkable intensity, filled with love and recognition of the sublime. Its denouement leads to an almost complete stillness, with only the merest suggestion of a vibration within, a sense of peace. The last moments perhaps relate to something Beethoven had copied into one of his notebooks of this period, from an Indian religious text, "for God, time absolutely does not exist." This movement must be counted among the greatest of Beethoven's creations.

Having reached toward the celestial, Beethoven reestablishes the terrestrial with an "alla marcia." This march is one which continually dissolves into more delicate, playful music, as if unsure of exactly in which direction the march should head, not yet ready for a triumphant conclusion despite all that has preceded it. Uncertainty gains the upper hand with a quickening of the pulse ushering in a recitative in the first violin accompanied by quaking, trepidatious tremolos underneath. The most famous use of recitative to introduce a large scale final movement is surely in Beethoven's Ninth Symphony, and in fact the sketches for the theme of the last movement of the Op. 132 quartet were

originally intended for a purely instrumental finale of that work. Whereas in the choral finale Beethoven eventually wrote for the Ninth Symphony the recitative serves to cast aside doubt and obscurity in favor of light and joy, the route he chose to take in the Op. 132 quartet is wrought with further struggle. An anxious yearning characterizes this finale, with the composer indicating that the main theme should be passionately expressive. To an even greater degree than in the second movement where an inherently dance-like rhythmic meter is slightly distorted by unsettling surface elements, here the same meter is almost rent asunder by heaving, nervous figuration. No respite is to be had, even when more simply lyrical material attempts to assuage the unrest. About two thirds of the way through the movement the tempo accelerates and the music reaches fever pitch, with the cello crying out in the register usually reserved for the violins, approaching a feeling of terror. This is the crisis that at long last brings resolution, although not in one fell swoop. The key of A major is entered into gently, with a sense of freedom attained, open and soaring. The quartet gathers strength toward a conclusion affirming victory of the spirit, only to be thwarted by brief hesitation and uncertainty. When this moment of uncertainty is reached for the second time, however, there is hesitation no longer and the quartet ends having triumphed over adversity. Perhaps this is the greatest gift that Beethoven has given us. He grapples with the vicissitudes of our inner and outer lives, in full acknowledgement of our native suffering, and through the transformative power of art leads us to recognition of beauty and faith in humanity.