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Beethoven Quartet opus 18 #2

Beethoven's "early quartets", the six works published as Opus 18, were written during the closing years of the 18th century. In a sense they are very much creatures of that century. Beethoven in 1799 was a former student of Haydn's, a worshiper of Gluck, and an aspirer to the throne of the then-popular composer Luigi Cherubini. The biographer Maynard Solomon documents how, after hearing the Mozart c minor Piano Concerto, Beethoven turned to a fellow composer and exclaimed, "Cramer! Cramer! We shall never be able to do anything like that!" But he meant to try. Unlike the later Beethoven, the shatterer of creative molds and ways of musical thinking, this young newcomer to Vienna was bent on making his name in an established field, of doing the traditional forms as well anybody had ever done them (or, he hoped, better). To this end, the opus 18 quartets are brilliant pieces, brimming with character and impetuosity, yet residing largely within the expected structures and scope of a string quartet written by a Mozart or a Haydn, any time during the previous 25 years.

The second of these quartets, in G major, is a case in point. The music is genial, filled with sunlight. The first movement enters the room like an elegant stranger: courtly bows, witty conversation, suspenseful pauses. The writing for quartet here is very tightly knit; one of Beethoven's favorite devices, a unison statement followed by a silence, is to be found everywhere in the opus 18 quartets, and he exploits it to full rhetorical advantage in this opening, using it now as a challenge, now as a tease. The second melodic idea in the movement is disarmingly simple, stated in rhythmic unison, impeccable manners wed to clever repartee. Later in the movement, Beethoven puts on a mock show of learned seriousness, introducing a little fugue that builds in tension to a disapproving climax, followed by a shocked pause. After the quartet shuffles around, wondering how to put the pieces back together, the cello part pulls out a (metaphorical) trombone for three blasts, and the good times resume. The movement ends exactly as it began, with the same simple phrase and its teasing silences.

The slow movement is a *cantilena*, warm and intimate, wherein the first violin sings an aria of devotion, richly ornamented. We seem to be transported, for the time being, from the quartet chamber to the opera stage, where the soprano sings her love with coloratura flourishes. The closing statement of this first lyrical section is again a unison statement followed by pauses -- a whispered farewell. What happens next is an utter surprise: the same motif is turned into a lively game of catch, the lovers' cherished keepsake snatched up by

friends nearby and tossed from hand to hand. This game lasts for all of sixty seconds, whereupon the calm aria resumes, now an enriched duet between first violin and cello.

The third movement, a playful Scherzo, harps almost single-mindedly on a single skipping rhythm throughout its main section. It is by turns graceful and elephantine, but remains entertaining throughout as it journeys through its many moods and keys. The stay-at-home trio section, by contrast, hardly leaves its C major house; the miracle here is that after starting out pompous and heavy-handed, the music sprouts triplet wings and flits from room to room.

The Finale opens with a single voice, the cello, inviting everybody to come out and play. This movement is all about games: copycat, hide-and-seek, leapfrog, and chase scenes, played at full speed. A favorite game is "guess my key" -- the music will seem to start out in one key, then think better of it all of a sudden and try again in a different one, evoking a childlike delight. The movement concludes with a bout of "Ring around the Rosie" and collapses in a triumphant heap.

Note by Misha Amory