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Beethoven Opus 18, #6

The last of Beethoven's opus 18 quartets, number 6 seems especially to affirm his debt to Haydn. Like its companions, this quartet on the whole favors wit and surprise over melodiousness. Despite hewing faithfully to Classical forms (at least in the first three movements), the piece recalls the fondness of Haydn for sudden stops, changes of mood, rhythmic elegance, and economy of material.

The first movement is extremely compact, a characteristic that is emphasized by the incredibly fast metronome mark added by Beethoven in later life. The piece explodes out of the gate with a brilliant, arpeggiated melody accompanied by a whirling accompaniment. The second theme may lack the kinetic energy of this opening idea, but makes up for it in terseness, as the whole quartet remains in rhythmic unison throughout its statement. The movement leaves the listener with a feeling that not one note more than necessary was used: no digressions, frills, or codas. The second movement is also strict in its form, but has the quality of a tender aria, and plays on the most beautiful sonorities of the quartet timbre. Perhaps the most memorable moment of the movement is near the end, when the music slips briefly into a glowing, hushed C-major restatement of music that previously was only heard in minor keys. The third movement, a Scherzo, is humorously off-balance in its syncopated rhythms, which are omnipresent in the main section; a quicksilver Trio serves as contrasting material. The final movement is immediately arresting. It opens with an extended slow section, operatically entitled "La Malinconia", or "Melancholy". Something more intense than ordinary melancholy is contained in this wandering music, which interrupts its own glassy flow with painfully stabbing chords. Resolution comes in the form of the movement's main section; this is a rondo with a spinning, cheerful demeanor, never content to remain in one place for long. It has the quality of being compressed, or abbreviated, by the gravity of the "Malinconia", which makes a second appearance late in the movement: there isn't enough room for these two incompatible personalities, and they are each vying for the upper hand. Ultimately the lighter music has the final word, as a brilliant Prestissimo brings the work to a close.

Note by Misha Amory