

The music from Beethoven's middle period of creativity, sometimes known as the "heroic" period, is justly beloved. A keen observer and portrayer of our pains and foibles, our struggles and desires, Beethoven in this period displays our capacity for strength and dignity. He depicts our power to restore order and justice in the face of chaos and tyranny, to assert the potent human will, to triumph. He speaks to us of the importance of our place in the grand scheme of things, of a privileged point of reference. He tells us that we matter, that we can enjoy responsibility for the world in which we find ourselves. For Beethoven in this period our inner states are reflected in the truth of the outer world. The middle period works are works of Ego, works that make us feel vibrantly alive and embodied.

Although it is most often classified as one of the middle period quartets, the Quartet in f minor, Op. 95, is philosophically cut from another cloth, a prescient gateway to the late style. This is the only one of his quartets with a nickname given by the composer: the "serioso." Indeed it wrestles with serious issues; for most of its compressed length it is a rather tortured piece. But Beethoven is not one to represent suffering without catharsis. Here that catharsis seems born of eternal, omnipresent freedom recognized, rather than freedom hard-won.

Many have been puzzled by the ending of this work. Not dissimilarly many have been perplexed by Chekhov's description of his four great plays as comedies, with their vivid depiction of heartbreak and difficulty, of souls estranged and asphyxiated. Perhaps Chekhov saw them thus through recognition of a greater peace and purpose in the unfolding progression of historical time, that which renders all human concerns miniature and illusory. Beethoven's f minor quartet concerns itself predominantly with a sense of oppression; often the music is immured, airless. Visions of escape, resistance and control over Fate present themselves, but in the end understanding comes from elsewhere.

The material of the piece is tightly coiled, often as if trapped in a cage: figures dart upwards only to collapse down on themselves, test foundations by digging downwards only to claw their way back up. The opening gesture of the first movement does both, then stops dead in its tracks as if to assess the situation. The phrase that answers throws itself against the bars of its cage, desperate to escape, to no avail. When there are intimations of escape in the movement the music is as if wrested from its foundations by an outside hand into the vulnerable realm of untethered vision, the far realm of hope and dreams. These moments of being artificially lifted out of the plane of earthly existence all revert to brutal actuality, and by its end the first movement exhausts itself railing against inevitability, evaporating.

Throughout the work the most basic functions of melodic direction upward and downward become powerful archetypes, reaching, plummeting. The second movement introduces itself with a hesitant echo of the first movement's opening, tentatively feeling its way downwards with a short upward turn which, instead of closing the loop as in the initial statement in the first movement, leaves the door ajar. The Stygian opacity of the first movement has given way to shadow, and through the shadow some moonbeam coolly penetrates, softly radiant, the phrase drifting upwards. This music in D Major replicates the same key relationship in Beethoven's predominantly f minor music for *Egmont*. In that work the D Major material represents Liberty appearing as a vision to the imprisoned Egmont. (I am indebted to an essay by Seow-Chin Ong for this insight.) This is followed by a rather extraordinary single note exchange between the inner voices, each calling out across a chasm, the other perpetually beyond reach. These notes are pulled from the opening 'cello gesture, now stripped of its will to explore further. It is reminiscent of a Beckett scene, characters suffering doubts in parallel, unable to connect. This ushers in a fugal section whose subject, after an initial leap up, spirals inevitably downward. The voices again do not so much empathize and discuss as experience their loneliness side by side. The movement ends with the calls across the chasm, again leaving the door ajar.

What enters is a wrathful form of the downward spiral of the fugue subject from the second movement: jagged, galloping downhill, inexorable. Jovian thunderbolts fly. But as in the first movement, some outside force comes to lift the music away, again a prisoner's vision, this music ever floating upwards. The two ideas alternate, but the energy of the movement's ending is that of the guillotine.

This leads to the darkest moment of the piece, the opening of the last movement. It would not be out of place to assign this wrenching music to one of the Seven Last Words on the Cross: "Father, father, why hast thou forsaken me?" And the first two such questions confront silence. Bleakness gives way to anxiety and broken sighs throughout the main section of the movement, and again figures reach up with no stability only to fall back on themselves. And then, when the music has all but vanished, there is the coda.

In his book *A Journey in Ladakh: Encounters with Buddhism*, Andrew Harvey writes "Buddhism is, in fact, essentially 'comic,' in the highest, philosophical sense...[its] vision is in the deepest sense comic because it denies any final significance to individual striving or tragic awareness, any ultimate importance to the agonies and vicissitudes of the Ego." So Beethoven seems to feel here. The music flutters, ascends, evinces a sort of liberated joy. Some commentators have seen this as a reflection of the ideas of political liberation which were much in the air and certainly much in Beethoven's consciousness at that time. Perhaps. But my own reaction to this extraordinary peroration is that it may be something different from the exultation of victory; it is instead a leave-taking from the Ego's tribulations. Here is awareness of some greater space, a space that holds and allows the suffering without succumbing to it. The relationship of this coda to the rest of the piece is that of the resurrection to the crucifixion. All is let go and rises.

Note by Mark Steinberg