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## **Beethoven opus 18 #4**

What is it in theatrical masks, those frozen faces, that so captivates us and draws us in? Ossified and yet vibrant, masks, reaching outward from their still essence, draw forth our emotional heritage. Despite their immobility they become potent and resonant symbols that pierce us to the core. Certain tropes of theatricality are like that as well. Dramatic clichés catch us unawares and render us vulnerable to their charge.

Paradoxically, from within the string quartet's arena of intimacy Beethoven, in his c minor quartet, Op. 18 No. 4, creates a work of the theater, an exploration of symbol and clever caricature, emblematic more than evocative. Keys have flavors, and c minor had already been associated with *sturm und drang* in the works of Haydn and Mozart, as well as in those of Beethoven himself in the piano trio, Op. 1 No. 3, the string trio, Op. 9 No. 3, and the "Pathétique" piano sonata, Op. 13. However, works that more deeply and darkly explore the philosophical underpinnings of c minor, such as the Fifth Symphony or the last piano sonata, still lay in the future. In this quartet Beethoven, unusually, stays in c (minor or major) for all four movements, and in various ways keeps exploring masks, disguises and dramatic device. He opens the piece with an unrelenting elemental pulsation in the cello and an unstable theme, with displaced sighs and jabs, atop. This is angst made audible and palpable, rhythmically restless, replete with distortion and suppression, eminently operatic. These are volcanic rumblings that lead, inevitably, to eruption and a simple caricature of conflict, the one against the many, an Olympian hurling of thunderbolts as a competition between the gods. Again, all is consciously primitive theatrical trope. After this idea is punctuated by an exclamation point of sorts, a single unison note changes the scene, one that in a symphony would be a horn's proclamation. It is a sort of *deus ex machina* that announces the major mode come to save us, heroism personified in a single pitch. The phrase is followed, however, by the tragic mask replacing the comic one, the same figure drawing us back into minor, albeit only momentarily, reminding us that Beethoven, the distributor of masks, is a conjurer.

When we arrive at the second theme, in major as expected, we might recognize it as the barely refashioned first theme, the spell reversed so the old witch is restored to her youthful beauty as a princess. And so it goes throughout the movement. We are held in doubleness, under the power of a clever Sophist. (And in fact this second theme that would most usually be drawn into the minor mode later in the movement steadfastly refuses to do so and remains a foil to the first theme,

undermining the expected tragic or serious cast of the movement.) The first theme is Caliban, the second, Ariel; both are emanations from a single enchanted island. Beethoven is Prospero, puppet-master of the theater of our emotions, and he wields his magic staff with aplomb.

The quartet is without a slow movement, as if to go there the composer would have to relinquish his thespian's costumes and speak more confessionally. The second movement replaces the missing slow movement with a playful one, clocklike in its mesmeric regularity. It begins with the character of innocence and the veneer of the scholarly, aping the start of a fugue, children playing at serious discourse. Even the opening, a couldn't-be-simpler thrice repeated pitch, dons several masks during this clever movement, borrowing disguises rather than growing or transforming, from teasing to chuckling to pompous to mysterious to tender. The movement also opens with the selfsame two pitches as the first movement, a flirtation in the villain's eyes.

Again these pitches are used to catapult us into the third movement, a Punch and Judy show of a minuet. Belying his fairly moderate marking of "Allegretto," Beethoven indicates a speed for the movement that is certainly too quick to be danced to with any decorum, and, as if that weren't enough to discourage any attempt at elegant dancing, he throws in jagged offbeat accents with abandon. Although Haydn and Mozart have quartets with minuets in minor that are defiant or strong, this minuet that deals in mock anger is an innovation. The trio section is more acquiescent and attempts to take wing and leave behind the shackles of the minuet

proper. But somehow it can't help looking back over its shoulder at the last moment and, after three hesitant, whispered chords, it gets pulled back into the room and, devilishly, is forced to try to dance at fever pitch, even faster than before. It is a sort of parody of a dance of death and it whirls by in a flash.

A new character enters the scene in the final movement, an itinerant gypsy, fiddling with virtuosity and pride and stamping his foot for emphasis. (The stomping may be another version of the repeated notes underpinning the opening of the piece, of the theme of the second movement, or the trio of the minuet.) His music alternates with visits with other characters. In the first a suave and elegant suitor appears. It shouldn't surprise us at this point that a closer inspection reveals him to be the gypsy himself in borrowed garb, as evidenced by echoes of the contours and figuration of the opening tune. A third music starts with four taps of a magic wand traveling up the quartet from lowest instrument to highest, and each tap is nothing but the quick, ornamental filling in of the rising interval announcing the suitor. All

is shapeshifting, Prospero's magic. Some demoniac fiddling sets us up, after a theatrically suspenseful pause that echoes the moment waiting to collapse back into the minuet in the previous movement, for a wild, breathless "Prestissimo" romp, all swagger and panache. And then, a last moment reprieve as the major mode arrives and evaporates up into the stratosphere, having vanquished the evil minor for good. Or has it? The piece ends with three repetitions of the same two pitches that started all the movements but this one, now filled in with the notes in between. This is also the material that formed the four magic wand taps earlier in the movement, but now they are rooted in place, defiant. (They are possibly also a gruff answer to the elfin start of the second movement.) Beethoven places them only on pitches that belong, equally and enigmatically, both to c minor and C Major, adding nothing else. He thus refuses to tip his hand toward one or the other, relishing this ambiguity, surely with an impish grin, as the curtain snaps shut.

Note by Mark Steinberg