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Bartok Quartet #6

In 1939, haunted by both the looming specter of the Second World War and burgeoning personal difficulties (first and foremost his mother's grave illness and death), Béla Bartók produced what was to be his final string quartet, his sixth. It is a curious and powerful work, seemingly two distinct quartets amalgamated into one: a poignant lament which reveals its full dimensionality in stages as the piece progresses, and, sandwiched between occurrences of the lament, a more conventional set of tripartite movements, ranging in character from playful to bitterly sarcastic.

Although it is the music of the lament that gives this piece its truest profile, we know now that at the start of his work Bartók had not yet included it in his plan. He began with a contrapuntally alert movement (now the main, fast section of the first movement), filled with quicksilver exchanges of material, replete with clever inversions and intertwinings. There is folk-like music here as well and, although the music is consistently characterful, ranging from good-natured teasing to agitated muttering, it is rather more objective than personal. The second movement is a march, reminiscent of the Recruiting Dance of the Contrasts for piano, clarinet and violin. It has a nasty, pompous edge to it, a caricature that brings to mind the military horrors growing in Europe at that time, the start of a war that was to displace Bartók from his beloved Hungary forever. Bartók sets up a foil for this rigid, sometimes oddly limping march with a wild, rhapsodic trio section. The third movement proper is a Burletta, or burlesque, distorted, ironic and sarcastic. It displays all the trappings of comedy, yet there is bile just beneath the surface (think Charlie Chaplin in *The Great Dictator*, perhaps). In this case the trio section is a gentle, folk inspired, brief reprieve, a moment of innocence recalled.

The formal plan of the piece is most often described as an introduction preceding each of the first three movements, with the introductory material becoming the driving force of the entire fourth movement. The introductions explore what I have called the lament, marked *Mesto*, or sad. This starts as a solo viola (single) line. Before the second movement it is in two parts: the 'cello primary, colored by a quiet but richly textured contrapuntal line shared by the other three instruments. Prefacing the third movement it comes as a three part texture. The last movement then explores the material at greatest length, and with four independent lines. For me, the experience of performing the piece suggests a slightly different relationship between materials. It has never felt to me that the *Mesto* material is introductory in any sense, but rather that it is turned away from time and time again, a sadness that is temporarily pushed

aside, eyes averted, by engagement with some more outer world. Upon the return to this material it feels like the real music, the true topic of the work, is found anew. Finally the last movement completely inhabits this world, as well as exploring the shadow it casts looking backward at the “real” world of the main part of the first movement. It is a feeling somewhat echoed by Bartók’s actual working process. He had originally planned for the fourth movement to have a four part version of the Mesto followed by another quick movement, folk inspired and dance-like, and even sketched out a good deal of music for this version. But this final time he found himself unable to turn away from the world of the Mesto. Whether this is due to his mother’s death, the horrors of the war, his impending exile, or to purely artistic compulsion we will probably never know. The piece is unimaginable today in any other form, so powerfully does its trajectory speak to our way of living in the midst of grief and loss.

It is telling to examine the final three notes of the Mesto theme as first stated by the viola, for they give us a quotation from Beethoven’s final quartet, Op. 135, under which Beethoven writes “es muß sein:” “it must be.” And so it must; despite all that is to follow, it is the Mesto material that reveals the genuine soul of the piece, the truest and only possible worldview at that moment. A further Beethoven reference follows, when the full quartet responds in unison to the alienated solo viola line. For anyone who is familiar with the earlier work, this response will inevitably bring to mind the Overtura of the Große Fuge, that monumental final movement of the original version of Beethoven’s Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 130. Not only does this Beethoven movement represent mighty wrestling with the forces of chaos we encounter in the world, but it shatters the world of the previous movement, the famous Cavatina, the movement Beethoven claimed he couldn’t recall without its summoning a tear to his eye. Thus in retrospect the opening of the Bartók may take on the emotional resonances of the Cavatina, an exploration of immense vulnerability and, quite significantly, the inability fully to give voice to our very most significant and intense emotions. (For those familiar with the Beethoven, I refer to the “beklemmt” section of that movement.) Ultimately the Mesto music gives us not passionate wailing, but sadness beyond comprehension and beyond expression. It cries out not to another soul, but into the abyss, speaking of immeasurable loss but without loss of dignity.

For all its contrasts, the Sixth Quartet is not a dramatic, narrative piece (like the Second Quartet, with which it shares the idea of a slow, emotionally difficult final movement). Instead it has the aspect of a villanelle (such as Dylan Thomas’ Do not go gentle into that good night), circling around its central idea until its most direct and potent revelation at the close of the work. There is continual reclaiming of and reengaging with the powerful opening mood. In this case the fullest unveiling of the Mesto material, in four voices and significantly extended

in length, is followed by a reflecting back upon the material of the first movement proper. This last movement then becomes also an expression of memory in the midst of despair, the games of the first movement now muted and transformed by mature reflection, disengaged yet arrestingly poignant. Any trace of artifice is now dissolved.

At the very close of the work, following the introduction of eerie, otherworldly gasps and whispers, the viola, lonely once again, sings out the opening of the Mesto theme, still where it was at the start of the piece. Finally, under a hollow sustained fifth the 'cello gives only the first five notes of the theme, pizzicato, in chords. Strangely, the device is most akin to the ending of Haydn's Joke Quartet, where we are conditioned to expect a certain continuation and are left in the lurch, as it were. Here, however, we are left with infinite expectation and a sense that the Mesto theme cannot, in fact, be complete. Its resonance trails off into memory, into emptiness.

Note by Mark Steinberg