BEETHOVEN

The Complete Quartets

THE ORFORD STRING QUARTET

DE 3038

Volume VIII

Opus 18, No. 6/Opus 135/Opus 133

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DE 3038

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
The Complete Quartets, Vol. VIII

String Quartet in B-Flat Major, Op. 18 No. 6 [26:25]

1. Allegro con brio (6:34)
2. Adagio ma non troppo (7:38)
3. Scherzo: Allegro (3:11)
4. La Malinconia (3:39)
5. Allegretto quasi Allegro (5:04)

String Quartet in F Major, Op. 135 [24:00]

6. Allegretto (6:14)
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10. **Große Fuge, Op. 133** (15:05)

ORFORD STRING QUARTET

Andrew Dawes, violin
Kenneth Perkins, violin
Terence Helmer, viola
Denis Brott, cello

TOTAL PLAYING TIME: 65:50

Beethoven took the challenge of the String Quartet with utmost seriousness. He spent over two years composing the six Quartets, Opus 18, and preceded this labor with a lengthy “apprenticeship” in the form of his string trios, Op. 3, 8 and 9, and the elegant arrangement for string quartet of his piano sonata, Op. 14 no. 1. In 1799 he dedicated an early draft of the Op. 18 no. 1 to his friend, the violinist Karl Amenda. Even in its unperfected version, the quartet was already a masterpiece, and, as Beethoven’s sketch books show, one which had undergone painstaking revision and self-criticism. But a year later, with the publication of the first three of the Op. 18 works, Beethoven wrote to Amenda, urging him “Do not lend your quartet to anybody because I have greatly changed it: for only now have I learned how to write quartets properly, as you will observe when you receive them.” A six-year chasm separates the last of Op. 18, completed in 1800, and the three “Razumovsky” Quartets, Beethoven’s next endeavors in the medium. The intervening span was a period of vast stylistic growth, and so too were the thirteen years between 1811 and 1824, isolating the last of the “Middle” Quartets (Op. 95 in F Minor) from those of the “Late” period.

Although the differences between the “Early,” “Middle” and “Late” quartets are readily apparent, all three groups of works clearly represent Beethoven’s respective phases at their highest peaks of development. Even in the early Op. 18 Quartets, Beethoven is his own Titan, taking his stylistic and technical leads from Haydn and Mozart, to be sure, but inflecting them with an aura of his own. And in these Op. 18 pieces, one also discovers motivic links and structural innovations that lead inescapably to the miracles of his last quartets a quarter-century later.

To call Beethoven’s string quartets influential would be to indulge in grievous understatement, for in fact, the creative ebullition — as stated in these miraculous works — sparked tremors that shocked the annals of composition for more than a century. Consider, among countless examples,

the almost outright quotations from Op. 132 in Mendelssohn's early A Minor String Quartet, Op. 13, or the hovering of Op. 127's spirit about Schumann's Piano Quartet, Op. 47. The course of music history might have been completely different had Beethoven, Mozart and Schubert each lived another twenty years, but even lacking this conjectural extension, we can find premonition of Bartok's quartets in the Große Fuge and in the finale from Op. 127. Beethoven not only forced the world of music to listen with new ears, new values, new aesthetics; he also forced new technical standards to come into being. He had little use for the status quo, although he borrowed from "tradition" even when setting it on its ears. To the critic who expressed bewilderment over one of the "Razumovsky" quartets, he replied, "Oh they are not for you, but for a later age!". And to the hapless Schuppanzigh, who complained that one particularly hazardous passage was unplayable, he screamed, "Do you think that I care for your damned fiddle when the spirit seizes me?". But for all his reputation for irascibility, Beethoven could, and sometimes did, accept criticism. When his publisher voiced concern that the Große Fuge was an overly arduous and aesthetically unsuitable ending for the Op. 130 Quartet, he confounded all expectations and composed another, far more appropriate, finale. And with all the fist-shaking and gristly intensity, one also finds a lyricism and repose, not to mention a shattering humility. Have there ever been utterances so emotionally disarming as the "Hymn of Thanksgiving" from Op. 132, the Lento Assai from Op. 135, the Cavatina from Op. 130? Or, for that matter, the wondrous slow movement of Op. 18 no. 1?

It is for such miracles that Beethoven's String Quartets have been regarded as perhaps the ultimate pinnacle of Western Music — one of civilization's sublime wonders....

Quartet No. 6, in B Flat Major, Op. 18, No. 6

As already noted, the ostensible "First" of the Opus 18 Quartets was

composed *after* No. 3 in D Major. Conversely, there is reason to believe that the work under discussion, Op. 18 No. 6, was *followed* chronologically by No. 4 in C Minor.

In many ways, this B-flat Major Quartet is structurally the most innovative of the set. But, by first giving us three movements that are formally unexceptionable, Beethoven keeps that fact in abeyance until the Finale. The opening **Allegro con brio** is a giddy affair, full of dizzying momentum. Its impetus in large part results from the rotary eighth notes that pass back and forth between second violin, viola and — in the development section — cello. The first subject, with its turn followed by broken sixths in upward motion, is somewhat reminiscent of the "Turkish" section in the last movement of Mozart's A Major Violin Concerto, K. 219. This idea dances its way into a bridge passage characterized by syncopes and biting staccato scales. The second theme proper is a more lyrical affair, although its jaunty dotted figure and grace notes keep us from forgetting the pervading thrust of the movement. The development is broken down into several stages — beginning with the first subject and all its aspects, then (after a bar and a half rest) addressing the bridge passage's scales. Again, the first theme is worked over, but this time in more gentle fashion. In fact, Beethoven quite uncharacteristically lets his development calm to a tranquil *pianissimo* — thus arriving at the recapitulation in a manner more usually deemed "Mozartean" than "Beethovenian." The terse format of this opening movement dispenses with both introduction and coda but (to compensate?) Beethoven directs that *both* halves are to be repeated — a request only rarely granted in performance.

The quietly meditative **Adagio ma non troppo** is in the subdominant E-flat major. The first four bars of its opening melody are sung by the first violin. The second violin takes up the balance of this eight bar period while the displaced leader deftly interjects embellishing side comments. After a four bar subordinate clause in which all four players partake, the theme,

now decorated by punctuating arpeggios, returns to the first violin while the three lower voices furnish a playful *ostinato*. A new section introduces the ominous cloud of E-flat minor — its eerie character is further emphasized by the gaunt unison between first violin and cello, both played *pianissimo* two octaves apart. After this central diversion, the opening melody returns, now decorated by a much more active and complex rhythmic *ostinato* backdrop.

The third movement, marked simply **Scherzo: Allegro**, is a fine early specimen of Beethoven's fondness for rhythmic deviltry. Using the devices of offbeat *sforzandos* and a scansion that shifts back and forth between the written 3/4 metre and what *sounds* like 6/8 (sometimes divided into twos: at other times, into threes) Beethoven torments his listeners in delightful fashion (particularly those who are incessant foot-tappers!). The Trio, with its dancing sixteenth notes before the beat, sets things back on an unambiguous course. We will encounter a like kind of rhythmic displacement in Op. 74, and in Op. 135.

But as noted, the real surprise of this quartet is its astonishing last section. The blitheness of the foregoing three movements simply leaves us unprepared for the searing intensity of the *Adagio* that now follows. Beethoven directs that it be played "**La Malinconia:** *Questo pezzo si deve trattare colla piu gran' delicatezza"* (Melancholy: This section is to be played with the greatest delicacy of feeling). Here, in effect, are the seeds of early Romanticism — the *Stato d'animo* (brooding) that was in the air at the time, and which was shortly to prove so popular, both in the opera house and in the realm of instrumental music. This means, of course, that, for all the fervor, one must allow for a certain tongue-in-cheek theatricality, a bit of melodrama, in the despair.

Still, coming in Opus 18, this long introduction (like the already mentioned slow movements of Op. 7, Op. 10 No. 3 and Op. 18 No. 1) brings a new emotional depth remarkable in itself, and even more so since it is

thoroughly integrated with the jaunty, tripping **Allegretto quasi Allegro** that follows in its wake. As with the *Grave* of the *Pathétique* Sonata's first movement, Beethoven returns to *La Malinconia* at two later junctures (this foreshadowing the format in the final section of the Op. 110 Piano Sonata with its synthesis of *Recitativo, Arioso* and *Fuga*).

It was at about this time (1799) that Beethoven had first inklings of his impending deafness: justification enough for feelings of melancholy.

Quartet No. 16 in F Major, Op. 135

There is a quizzical little piece, composed around 1818, in one of Beethoven's sketchbooks (subsequently published as *Werke Ohne Opus* No. 60 in the Kinsky-Halm index). This "*Ziemlich lebhaft"* (somewhat lively) is less than a minute long but offers 39 measures of intricate rhythms and intense voice-leading. And though written for the pianoforte, its textures and colors are plainly transferable to stringed instruments. Beethoven's last string quartet (and, save for the new finales to Op. 130, his last composition) commences in a manner remarkably close to that obscure *Klavierstück*.

Having scaled peaks of inspiration hitherto unknown, and having stretched formal materials and expressive dimensions to surreal limits in the other late quartets, Beethoven set more modest goals for himself in Op. 135. The work is in many respects a regression: for one thing it is cast in the conventional four movements; for another, it is less than half as long as the other late quartets. Nor does it take itself particularly seriously. But simplicity, as we all know, can have its own sublimity. Beethoven's Op. 135 certainly proves the point: it is almost as if the composer was consciously being spartan, eschewing innovation and pretension (but *not* profundity), in order to prove his observation that "what I write now bears no resemblance to what I wrote formerly: it is somewhat better."

From its initial phrases, the opening **Allegretto** establishes the irrefutable

certainty that Op. 135's brevity is a concision born of economical authority, not from dearth of inspiration. Every little gesture has its function here: note the masterstroke of the recurrent figuration of two upward thirty-second notes: it is the first thing one hears from the viola beginning, but already, in the second measure, its reiteration by the first violin gives the figuration a new, gently satirical meaning (akin to a thumb on the nose). Observe, too, the jovial alternations of droll *staccato* with delicate *legato*: or of *arco* and *pizzicato* — not to mention the quick juxtapositions of loud and soft dynamics (typical for Beethoven). And, once again, we hear thematic material engagingly shifting, leapfrog-style, from instrument to instrument (but this time in the most good-natured manner).

Teasing syncopations emphasize the levity of the **Vivace** second movement. In this masterful scherzo, each of the four instruments accents differently — the first violin places the stress on the second beat of each 3/4 measure; the second violin, on the third; viola on the first; and cello, on both first and third (the scoreless listener is further disoriented by unison E flats that intentionally throw the rhythm completely off kilter). The central Trio, played at the same tempo, has the first violin dancing and leaping all over (at one point, from a high B flat to a G more than two octaves lower). In the meantime, the others reiterate, with increasing obstinacy, a five-note *ostinato* derived from the first fiddle's initial burst of exuberance. The scherzo's *da capo* is followed immediately by a seven bar coda that replaces the previously noted E flat unisons with the finality of F major chords (the last of them, played *forte*, comes as a snappish shock).

The slow movement, **Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo**, is Beethoven's farewell to variation form. Two measures hauntingly establish the tonality of D-flat major, and out of the sustained chords, the first violin's song emerges, *sotto voce* — a hymnal melody of haunting beauty. Four succinct variations follow in the continuous, flowing manner already noted in corresponding movements of Op. 127 and 131. The second of these, *più*

lento, slips enharmonically into the key of C-sharp minor and then to its relative E major. If Op. 135 as an entity can be said to represent a return to stark simplicity, its third movement represents that cultivation of barest essentials in its purest distillation.

Over the first page of the last movement, Beethoven cryptically writes "*Der Schwer Gefaßte Entschluß*" (a decision made with difficulty). Then he places in juxtaposition two motifs which recur in the ensuing Finale: the cello's **Grave ma non troppo tratto** *"Muß es Sein?"* ("Must it be?") and the first violin's answering *Allegro "Es muß sein! Es muß sein!"* ("It must be!"). In fact, the two ostensibly conflicting ideas are closely related — the second being an inversion of the first. The two mottos are intertwined with yet another theme that first appears in the cello part in the key of A major (at bar 53. Just before the end, this last melody returns, played by all four instruments in delicate *pizzicatos.* Then, picking up their bows once more, the players drive the work to a good natured but resolute conclusion.

All of us are accustomed to seeking (and finding) the deepest philosophical contemplations in the last quartets of Beethoven. So it might disappoint you to hear it suggested (by Beethoven scholars more learned than your annotator) that the composer was, in this instance, in all probability, facetiously pondering not the essential question of life itself, but a problem of less than earth-shaking import such as whether to pay the inevitable rent to his insistent landlady!

Große Fuge in B Flat Major, Op. 133

The wisdom of Beethoven's decision to write a second finale for Op. 130 works two ways: Not only are the first five movements of the quartet better served by the replacement; the *Große Fuge* itself — which, as we will now discover, is actually a three-part work replete with introduction and epilogue — better stands as a self-contained entity...

Very often, the torrents of creative inspiration will break the floodgates of

reason and Beethoven, confronted by endless fugal possibilities for the *motif* he used for Op. 140, momentarily lost his sense of proportion: instead of erecting, for the quartet's summation, a consummating monument, he found himself with a structural white elephant (or, less poetically, with some eighteen minutes of music of beastly difficulty).

The *Overtura* commences with striding unisons proclaiming the germ cell which is to form the basis of the entire composition. Two more statements of the same idea follow in speeded-up form. Then, in contrasting *meno mosso e moderato* tempo (the original indication is *Allegro*), a more flowing variant foreshadows the future shape of the subject in the second fugue. Returning to *Allegro* tempo, there is one further statement of the same motto, each of its notes detached from the others and sounded in cryptic echo effects similar to those heard in the *recitativo* of the Piano Sonata, Op. 110.

The first *Fuga* is, along with the finale to the Seventh Symphony, a Dionysian revel — one of the most purely orgiastic, grating and insistent musical sequences ever devised. The instruments literally saw away at a rhythmically obsessive pattern for 128 bars of unrelenting *fortissimo, sforzando, forte* and *ben marcato.* So wild is the *mêlée* that one is almost apt to overlook a curious feature: in this opening section, the actual germ cell is relegated to the secondary role of counter subject.

The first Fuga ends with a surprising and abrupt modulation to G-flat major and the second Fuga, *Meno mosso e moderato,* begins. In its flowing, lyrical treatment of the thematic material, this curvaceous and (relatively speaking) ingratiating interlude leads to the third, and longest, section, *Allegro molto e con brio.* The tonality has reverted to B-flat major and the homecoming is celebrated by a new, lighthearted incarnation of the fugue subject — ebullient and dancing. But further adventures are awaiting us imminently: the mood becomes frenzied and active again, but the delirium this time is less abrasive, with the instruments dodging in and out of the

undulating trills like firefighters on a herculean (and successful) rescue mission. The trills, of course derive from the fugue subject itself.

Elements from the first two fugues are recapitulated (along with the jaunty beginning of the third). Then, just before the end, there are outright quotes of these ideas, much like those heard in the introduction of the Ninth Symphony choral finale. The rhythmic obsession of the first Fuga, now accompanied by hammering triplets, drives the piece to its conclusion.

Harris Goldsmith

Co-Producers: *Marc Aubort / Joanna Nickrenz*
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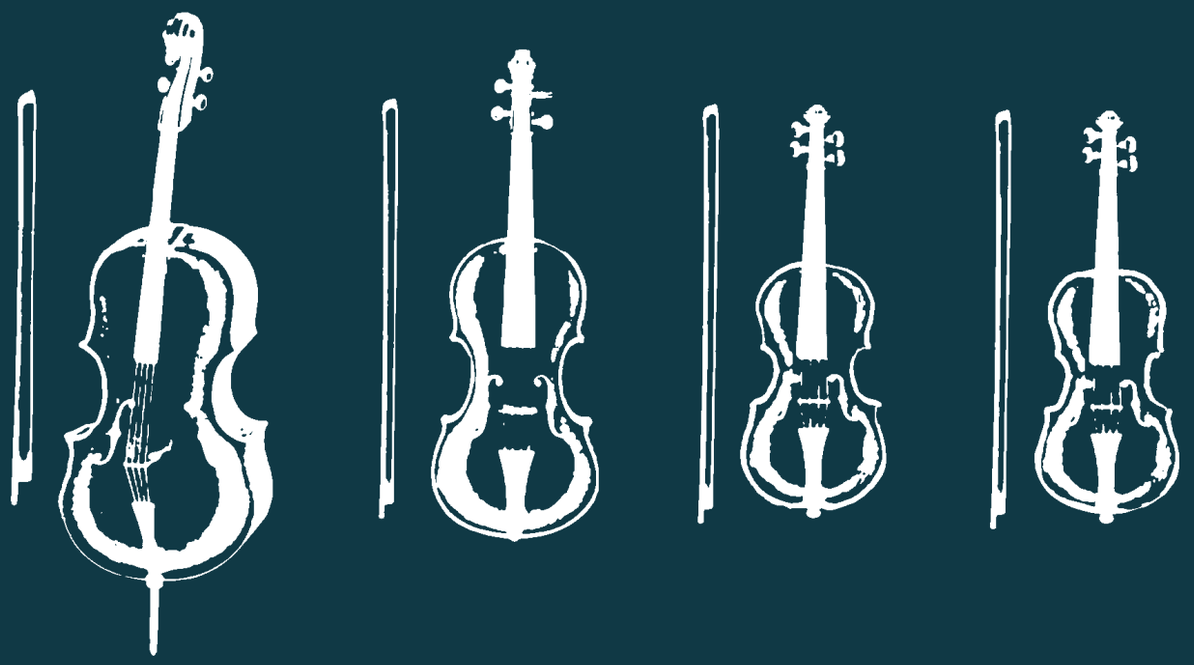
OPUS 135



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