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## **Beethoven Quartet opus 131**

I saw recently a striking illustration by William Blake. A woman in flowing robes with arms extended reaches and glances upwards, floating, suspended in air, yet is shackled by her ankle to the ground. She is the personification of the soul, reaching toward heaven whilst tied to the earth. It seemed to me a perfect visual manifestation of the opening figure of Beethoven's c-sharp minor string quartet, Op. 131, which despite an upward stretch finds itself forcefully pulled back down, a moment marked by almost suffocating heaviness.

It is an extraordinary theme, starting what is an extraordinary movement by any measure. Of all Beethoven's works, this is the only one to begin with a fugue, a rhetorical construction evoking the rigors of formal debate. In its weaving together of four voices all declaiming the same prophecy it conjures the sense of the chorus in a Greek tragedy. If this movement is indeed, as Wagner wrote, "the most melancholy sentiment ever expressed in music," perhaps it is a sadness born of the burden of prophecy. In his novel *The Story of Forgetting* Stefan Merrill Block writes, "Could there be anything more sad and more lonely than remembering what terrible things the future will bring?" In this quartet in c-sharp minor only this opening movement and the final, seventh, section are in that key. Yet the gravity of this fugue makes it seem the vantage point from which all else will be seen, against which all else will be judged, and to which, there is never any doubt, we will be compelled to return.

In its short denouement from a wrenching climax reminiscent of the Heiliger Dankgesang of Beethoven's Op. 132 (written earlier despite its opus number) the movement comes to rest, or rather to hover on a rising c-sharp octave, hollowed of all passion. Now we have the first transformative portal of the piece, for this is a work in seven sections, each connected to the last through some reconfiguring of the imagination. Here Beethoven takes that c-sharp octave and simply, gently lifts it up a minor second, to D. In so doing he trades a key with little natural resonance in a string quartet (due to tuning and natural overtones) for one that rings freely. Light is admitted and dance enters with it, albeit with hesitations and interruptions. And having experienced the distance traversed in finding this place we can appreciate that this alternate world, one where we can participate in life and see the reflection of the heavens above in our worldly joys, was right next door all along. It is no accident that this D is also the uppermost pitch of the cataclysmic chords at the climax of the first movement. This joy is real and vital, but is also a temptation which Beethoven feels we must ultimately relinquish in order to discover our true strength and dignity, as we will see at the close of the work.

The brief recitative section that follows is a formal pointing device, pulling us outside the work. Reminiscent of the oracular feel of the opening fugue, it also serves to refocus our attention on the set of variations to follow, the intimate heart of the work.

The theme of these variations is vulnerable and weightless, split between the two violins. This way of writing, in *hocket*, contrasts extremely with the opening of the piece, also shared by the violins. There each offers a full revelation, a *fait accompli*, but now there is an ongoing sense of discovery, the gentlest possible game of tag. (And games galore will take over the piece soon enough.) The very first downbeat of the movement is silent; the subsequent ones are lightened just where the music would naturally be heaviest so that the theme levitates. This is a pattern already set in the previous recitative, but here the missing weight, rather than lending its emphasis elsewhere, evaporates completely. The variations take many forms, sometimes ornate and fanciful, but often tending toward comedy or farce, almost as if avoiding the embarrassment of turning sentimental. Eventually, just after a variation featuring bucolic open drones, left off in mid-thought, our gaze is lifted anew toward the heavens and the still point of the piece is reached. The music is distilled to the merest *sotto voce* oscillation, and it is as if the faintest breath, the subtlest zephyr were somehow touching the very core of who we are. Poet Albert Goldbarth writes, "There have been nights, admit it, when you've thought you heard your name in the air, your name being sung, a recognition that you're a part of the star-resplendent sky and the musty vapors of earth -- they know who you are, you owe them for this special focus." Strangely, as this music unfolds, intimate and luminescent, disruptions begin infiltrating the texture. As in the Blake image there is something pulling us away, disallowing absorption into the beyond. This adamant refusal to dissolve into the empyrean will appear several more times in the piece and is perhaps what gives the piece as a whole its strength. There are remarkable transformations still to come, with *cadenzas*, the theme becoming anxious and stuck only to erupt in glittering trills and burbling cello figuration, but it all evaporates in the end, weightless again, slipping through our fingers.

We are not meant to dwell on this for long, as the cello breaks the silence with a brusquely teasing figure. This four-note motif gives birth to a *scherzo* that now celebrates not the supernal but rather the embodied joy of play, the naive games that seem to be common to all cultures. Here we have the lofty Beethoven playing peek-a-boo, catch, and tag and enjoying fake-outs and silly voices. The movement ends with an eruption of delight that is immediately reinterpreted on a new pitch, a forceful turning of the head to regard more weighty issues we have ignored long enough.

The sixth section has sometimes been seen as an introduction to the final movement, but while it is in a key that will lead us directly back, at long last, to c-sharp minor it is in no way an emotional preparation. This material in this short movement might easily blossom into a 20 minute slow movement in some late Romantic symphony. The depth of yearning, the straining upward and long, mournful sighing downward all make it seem the apotheosis of Romanticism and individual subjectivity. As wrenchingly beautiful as it is, though, its primary meaning in this piece seems to be as something truncated, something to be denied and cast aside.

And thus it is, in a brutal manner with a collapse of the lush, widespread texture into a single unison c-sharp. It is as if we have now passed the event horizon of the home key and are inexorably pulled back with no further real possibility of escape. There is a strength and a defiance to the writing which seem an insistence on Beethoven's part that despite our frailty and foibles there is a dignity in humanity and in our capacity to create meaning that holds its own against the temptations of other worlds. It is an assertion of the primacy of the will. The next theme to appear makes sense of the entire journey, for it is both a return and a transformation. Instantly recognizable as a version of the fugue theme that opens the work, sharing its exact rhythm with its pitches slightly shuffled so as to lean toward noble resignation rather than striving, its arrival brings a sense of inevitability. What the chorus has proclaimed at the start has come to pass; Fate has seen to that necessity. There are evocations of the beyond again in the second theme of the movement, a radiant cascading scale figure followed by a huge leap upward, and in fluttering upward scales in D major, a reminder of the second movement, but these can not divert the course of the piece from its preordained path.

Many have found the sudden turn to C-sharp major in the last moments of the piece puzzling, as it is too abrupt and short to convey a change of heart and truly establish the major mode (although it has been explored earlier in the movement). It is known from Beethoven's sketches that he was originally planning a further transformation, a softening of the opening theme into major, an idea that eventually found its full flowering in the sublime slow movement of the F-major quartet, Op. 135. That movement seems the epitome of consolation and peace. Here Beethoven, rather than aiming for consolation, shows only the reflection of the heavens in the eyes of the man whose feet are firmly planted on the earth, strong and proud in his humanity, holding an equally vast universe within.

Note by Mark Steinberg