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Beethoven opus 135

The String Quartet in F, opus 135, was the last complete work Beethoven composed, only a few months before his death in March 1827. It is traditionally grouped together with his other late quartets, opp. 127, 130, 131, 132 and the *Grosse Fuge*; but it's hard not to wonder what Beethoven would have thought of that grouping. Certainly opus 135 is the black sheep of this bunch. Where the other quartets are monumental in scale, sprawling in their expressive reach and scope, and often searching for a new formal basis for the quartet genre altogether, opus 135 stands apart: tightly reasoned, having an airy and transparent texture, playful and teasing in so many places, it is the work of a composer who seems to have suddenly attained some new, simple truth after miles of struggle. It is more similar in length and structure to his early opus 18 quartets than to the later ones, and yet it could not be mistaken for an opus 18 quartet: it is a greater and deeper achievement than those quartets, yet somehow less ambitious, less reaching, at the same time.

The first movement is as spare in texture as any quartet movement Beethoven ever wrote. It begins with a four-note question in the viola, colored with a mock-serious minor note in the cello; the first violin answers with a giggling echo. Right away the composer is signalling that here he will have nothing to do with the old, earnest questions of existence or fate; this is to be put aside, at least for the time being. What ensues is a genial, often Haydn-esque Allegretto in 2/4 time, which ambles along, four friends sharing a melody or two between them, breaking it into fragments so that everybody gets a piece. The movement is a typical sonata form, with all the responsible sections of exposition, development and recapitulation; but it feels more like an airy distillation of that form, with its spareness, its fragmentation, and its economy of means. It is music that speaks to us about the process of creating, a blueprint where we see all the parts laid out before our eyes, and are given a glimpse inside Beethoven's mind as he fits them together.

The second movement is a quicksilver scherzo. The parts at the beginning stage a rhythmic comic act, ill-fitting and awkward, everyone sitting on the wrong beat, then suddenly falling heavily onto a unison E-flat that is also off the beat, stuck in the wrong meter for awhile before righting itself (sort of). This section is abruptly succeeded by a more brilliant one featuring a set of rapid upward scales in the first violin, playful and yet tense and expectant. Then an extraordinary eruption occurs, a fortissimo section where the lower instruments are stuck in an infinite whirling loop while the first violin, berserk, goes off on an impossible tangent. This eventually spirals down to a quiet

unison, where, for a brief instant one hears the four simple pitches that the movement is based on. Finally the opening section returns in all its bumptiousness.

The third movement: a dark hymn, a whispered prayer. In early sketches, Beethoven designated it “Süsser Ruhegesang oder Friedengesang”, a sweet song of calm or peace. It is one of the half-dozen slow movements that stand at the pinnacle of his late-period achievement, and it serves as the expressive center of gravity for this quartet. In fact it is a theme with four variations, but they unfold in such a continuous fashion that this is not immediately obvious. Set in D-flat major, it feels a universe away from the sunny F major key of the rest of the quartet; we have been pulled out of the public eye and find ourselves hearing an intimate confession. The theme is in the lowest register for all four instruments, husky and sorrowing. The first variation lifts us higher up, visiting some painful harmonic moments, but maintaining much of the tone of the original. In the second variation, we are taken to the minor key; the flowing rhythms of the earlier music are lost, and replaced with stony, halting steps. This is one possible answer to the prayer, an unthinkable rejection, a bereft state. Some measure of relief comes in the final two variations, as we return to the major, and the cello reassuringly takes the melody. The last variation is the most extraordinary part of the movement: the first violin, winged, hints at the theme in gentle, gasping rhythms, while the other instruments describe simple upward arpeggios. It is a movement that overflows with forgiveness and love, but is also full of great sadness.

The final movement bears a strange inscription: “Der schwer gefasste Entschluss”, or “The Difficult Resolution.” The slow introduction, which features a rising minor-key question in the lower instruments, is marked “Muss es sein” -- must it be? Here we have the Beethoven who poses difficult questions, literally. This brief introduction reaches an anguished climax before subsiding. Then follows the main Allegro section, joyful and affirmative, marked “Es muss sein!” -- it must be! Two-thirds of this movement then unroll with barely a cloud on the horizon. All is happiness, high jinks, carefree melody, playfulness. It is all the more shocking when the minor-key introductory question -- muss es sein -- returns gigantically, terrifyingly, and almost without warning. It is one final struggle; and this time, it appears, the beast is tamed, the doubts laid to rest. The music dances away through the coda, teasing, pianissimo, and is crowned by one final boisterous affirmation.

There has been endless debate about just what this “difficult resolution” was, and many theories have been advanced. Is it about facing and accepting death? Is it another weighty philosophical question? Is it the laundry bill that has to be paid? Beethoven’s note to his publisher hints that it might simply be

the necessity of finishing the composition, and bidding farewell to a favorite genre: "Here, my dear friend, is my last quartet. It will be the last; and indeed it has given me much trouble. For I could not bring myself to compose the last movement. But as your letters were reminding me of it, in the end I decided to compose it. And that is the reason why I have written the motto: "The difficult resolution--Must it be?--It must be, it must be!"

Note by Misha Amory