

Reprintable only with permission from the author.

Beethoven Quartet opus 18 #1

Beethoven's opus 18 quartets are his earliest compositions for the medium, written in the closing years of the 18th century, when he was in his late twenties. The 1790s were a period of dense chamber music productivity for the composer: he composed about two dozen important chamber works in these few years, including his early piano trios, five string trios, some early violin sonatas and cello sonatas, and the popular Septet.

Beethoven was not an effortless creator, transcribing masterpieces fully formed from his head to the paper. Sketches for countless compositions, still available to us, betray the struggles he underwent to arrive at a work's final form. In the case of Beethoven's F Major Quartet, opus 18 #1, not only were there numerous sketches and attempts to evolve ideas for melodies, but also an entire, completed first incarnation of the piece, which the composer sent as a gift to his friend Karl Amenda. However, within a few weeks, he had a change of heart, and asked Amenda to show the work to no-one, for in the meantime he found that he had truly learned how to write a string quartet. And he generated a new version of the piece, which, taken broadly, seems very close to the earlier version, but in fact has been altered almost in every bar, in a thousand details of orchestration, harmonization, rhythm, texture and dynamic. In point of fact, the second version is a big improvement over the original, not only from a point of view of craftsmanship, but also as an expressive vehicle; and it was the new version that he published with its five companion pieces as opus 18.

It would be impossible not to compare the opus 18 quartets to the mature quartets of Joseph Haydn and Mozart, and innumerable critics, musicologists and historians have certainly done so. The young Beethoven was briefly the counterpoint student of Haydn, who wrote his most celebrated quartets just a couple of years before the opus 18s were written; and Beethoven was certainly acquainted with some of Mozart's greatest quartets. The opus 18 quartets, particularly opus 18 #1, have Haydn's stamp deeply imprinted on them, in respect to their geniality, innovation and wit. However, there is another layer to these early chamber works of Beethoven, a kind of hard-edged brilliance or impetuosity, which one does not encounter in Haydn's music. It is probably meaningless to describe a composition as sounding "young", but listening to Beethoven's early quartets, we can't help being aware of his impatience and ambition at this time in his life, his eagerness to prove his worth.

From a player's point of view, these demands of brilliance and impetuous character make themselves felt at once. In opus 18 #1's first, third and fourth movements, all of which are essentially genial and sunny, we need to grapple with Beethoven's quite rapid tempo markings, bravura passage work, rather complex contrapuntal writing and uncompromising unisons; at the same time, the work is a child of the classical period, and requires the same symmetry, grace and transparency as a quartet of Haydn or Mozart. The rather extraordinary second movement is another story. In this movement, according to one of Amenda's letters, Beethoven sought to depict, in musical terms, the tomb scene of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*. Beethoven's choice of key, d minor, hearkens back to Mozart's stormy and tragic associations with that key. But Beethoven's treatment of the string quartet goes beyond what Mozart's own great d minor Quartet attempted. In that earlier work, especially in the first movement, grief is the enveloping entity, surrounding all musical events; but in Beethoven's quartet we are asked to confront tragedy head-on, almost as an adversary. The opening is hushed, yet there is a feeling of heaviness in the steady rhythm of the accompaniment that oppresses the whispered theme. Although sweeter passages intervene, suggesting remembrance of happier times, there is never any doubt as to the movement's ultimate message. Particularly in the middle and in the coda, where the quartet is whipped up to a frenzy, denoting a truly Beethovenian raging against fate, it is clear that we have left the classical era behind, in some expressive sense, and we get a foretaste of what this composer will become in his later years.

Thus almost uniquely among his quartets, opus 18 #1 is a window affording a glimpse of Beethoven at a turning point. We hear Beethoven the student, absorbing and imitating Haydn's wit and capacity for surprise, as well as his prowess in quartet writing; Beethoven the classicist, handling standard structures with well-proportioned elegance and showcasing his melodic gifts, as he had done in several other works already; and Beethoven the self-determining artist, seeking to stamp his own voice ever more strongly on music that otherwise dwells within the formal constructs of his predecessors.

Note by Misha Amory