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Beethoven Quartet, opus 59 #3

For so many, Beethoven's music seems to represent a protagonist to whom they would like to relate, who represents the best version of who they might be. As heroes of great epics rise above struggle and difficulty to triumph, so does Beethoven's music so often seem to surmount uncertainty and threat to emerge victorious. His is a life-affirming worldview, at once inclusive and individual; it compellingly represents the individual's capacity to find his or her way toward earned joy through strength of spirit. Perhaps this characterization of Beethoven is blind to some of his subtleties, to shades of doubt and tenderness, but the Beethoven of the C Major String Quartet, Op. 59 No. 3, fits extremely well with this conception.

Surely the opening of this quartet looks back to Mozart in his C Major String Quartet, K465, nicknamed the "Dissonant" because of the disorienting harmonies in the introduction to its first movement. Beethoven goes even farther than Mozart in this respect, dissolving both any stable sense of a key and any sense of pulse as the piece begins. It is rather like the opening of Hamlet: "Who's there?" All is uncertainty and fog. But of course there is no sense of arrival and discovery without having been at sea, and so Beethoven plunges us into the alien currents directly. In one sense this introduction is the antithesis of Mozart's, replete with challenging silences and stagnant, hanging unresolved harmonies where Mozart underpins his exploration with constant motion. Only at the very last moment does Beethoven discover a portal, the dominant seventh chord that must lead to the key of C Major at long last, but rather than allow this resolution he pauses on the chord, with a sense of promise and potential, and expands it into a cadenza for the first violin. Even after this there is a brief turn away from our key (to d minor) before the final, celebratory affirmation of C Major (the chord with which Haydn chooses, in the Creation, to illuminate the final word of "and there was Light!"). There is great significance, as well, in the rhythmic motif with which Beethoven introduces the main part of the movement, a short lifted note leading to a sustained chord. It is rather like a brief, energized intake of air before a comforting exhale or a quick recognition of something full of promise which is then held for a moment in one's gaze. It seems a kind of pointing gesture, and it is the gesture on which the movement will largely be based, as if there is a saturation of wondrous things to behold that the composer will point out to us.

The arrival at C Major suggests unalloyed joy in its rhythmic ebullience, and Beethoven even hints one more time at the d minor that almost derailed its arrival in order to once again revel in its banishment as the final remaining clouds are blown away. An athletic virtuosity informs most of the movement, replete with leaps and arabesques, and high registers are often exploited for brilliance and the sense of possible escape from gravity and mundane concerns. At the recapitulation of the start of the Allegro vivace the moment of return is disguised with trills and the earlier violin cadenzas are expanded as if under a magnifying lens, so that the sense of time is once again obscured. This is only a mild flirtation with timelessness before the music finds its way back to its joyful enthusiasm. The movement has an extremely brief coda which hovers in uncertainty for a brief moment as if recalling, tongue-in-cheek, the feeling of the introduction and the recapitulated cadenzas before accelerating into a bright cadence, tossing all of that aside for good.

The exotic Andante con moto quasi Allegretto is most likely a nod toward Count Razumovsky, the Russian commissioner of the three Op. 59 quartets, in its somewhat brooding demeanor. A patient tolling underpins the main theme, which at the end of the first section is taken up in the melody by the three upper voices, suggesting a melancholy ennui reminiscent of Chekhov. The character of this movement is unusually subtle for Beethoven, and although there are impassioned, almost stormy moments (visitations from outside to which the movement responds with quiet resignation), it more often expresses sadness as a light wistful air and joy as a weightless brightening, and thus the muted expression of the movement serves as an expressive foil to that of the first.

The Menuetto grazioso is both moderate and awfully well-behaved for Beethoven and, although there is the fun of a boisterous, buffoonish trio, it joins the second movement in pulling back from any kind of extreme expression. Beethoven is careful in balancing the quartet, with a sort of centrifugal force pulling the more heightened expression toward the outer movements. This fairly innocent Minuet turns briefly dark in its coda, mockingly menacing and threatening, ending on the same dominant seventh chord that launched the main part of the first movement and setting the stage for a brilliant finale. It is like the moment in a Shakespearean comedy or a Mozart comic opera where the audience is aware of the mistaken identities that will be uncovered in the last scene. There is a great feeling of expectation as we watch the woes of the characters involved, aware that all will be set right anon, even as they cannot see it coming.

At the arrival of the last movement revelations indeed come fast and furious. It begins with a fugal exposition where instrument after instrument enters with a virtuosic, quicksilver theme, ten bars long instead of the expected classical eight, as if the theme takes wing and soars. It feels as if one by one the masks come off and all are involved in a whirlwind celebration of energy and possibility. And, in fact, this theme has been prepared by the themes of each of the previous movements, each of which is a pre-echo in some sense of the contour of the head of this new theme. Partially because of this, the eruption of the last movement feels like something that is revealed at long last, having been close at hand all along, and something liberated. It is a perpetual motion and thrives on speed as a visceral thrill (this from before the days when machinery took away our connection with bodily speed of motion). One of the most celebrated movements in all the Beethoven quartets due to its infectious energy and jouissance, this movement must have been in the mind of the young Mendelssohn as he composed the exuberant finale of his great Octet, another great favorite of chamber music lovers everywhere. Just before the final rush to the finish there is a rhetorical break in the proceedings, where the entire quartet outlines d minor in unison before a startled silence. Not coincidentally, this is a counterbalance to the d minor visited before the exhilarating arrival of C major in the first movement. By now it is only an empty threat of darkness, a comic stern moment which instantly releases into an effusive and euphoric glorification of C Major, of light and life, and especially of the human capacity for dynamic vitality and strength.

Note by Mark Steinberg