

We are told that Beethoven's Quartet in D major, opus 18 #3, was actually composed first, before any of its opus 18 companions. That it did not retain pride of place when the group was published -- ceding the first position to the more muscular and substantial F major quartet -- may have to do with the young composer's desire to make a strong first impression. However, in hindsight, this quartet would have made for an extraordinary *entrée* in its own way, with its delicate and ethereal opening: the first violin plays a slow, two-note rising figure, leaving us briefly in doubt as to what key we are in, and even what tempo, before the other voices enter with smoothly supporting harmonies and we are ushered into the main flow of the music. What a gentle and evocative first few steps to usher in this transformative cycle of sixteen string quartets, so central to the genre!

Though no less brilliant than the other quartets in opus 18, this quartet may well qualify as the airiest, the most weightless of the bunch. All four movements begin with quiet music, and even after the dramatics and fire that follow, the work as a whole leaves a delicate impression. The first movement, after its still and lucid opening, eases forward into a quicksilver flow, rife with balletic gestures and unexpected changes of texture. It is, on the one hand, a full-fledged sonata movement, well balanced and proportioned in all of its parts; on the other hand, like the slight and elusive opening gesture, it feels slight and elusive as a whole. Even the most unified, forceful passages are lean and athletic, evoking more a duel with rapiers than one with heavy swords.

The second movement, shifting unexpectedly to B-flat major, presents a shadowy, lovely foil to the D major brightness of the first movement. Opening in the instruments' low registers, with a new reliance on chromatic language, the movement is all about different kinds of intimacy. The low and whispered communion of the opening gives way to a coy, dancing arabesque, then a teasing, halting figure traded between lovers, and finally returns to the opening idea. This material is developed across the movement, and becomes deeper and more passionate as we are transported to darker keys and ever more twisted chromatic motion. Perhaps the most dramatic gesture comes to pass in the coda, where the four voices unite for an impassioned and energetic declaration which serves as a capstone for the movement's loving message.

The third movement is the quartet's scherzo. As with opus 18 nos. 1 and 2, Beethoven clearly feels that brevity is the soul of wit here. But brief and clever as it is, there is also something gentle in this music, perhaps even wistful in places as it wanders from key to key. The contrasting minor section in the middle of the movement is over almost before it starts, consisting of a few brief and sinister scampers up and down the scale, before it evaporates and the friendly main section returns.

The Finale is a brilliant Presto. Like the first movement, it starts in one voice delicately, without fanfare; but unlike the first movement, there is no sweetness intended here. It is all energy, fun and games. Beethoven shows off his contrapuntal agility brilliantly, and invites the players to show off their digital agility as best they can. Although the music starts reasonably -- quick passages that move smoothly along scales and small leaps -- the figures soon grow more disjunct and demanding, so that the instrumental lines often have to galumph awkwardly over leaps as large as an octave, making for goofy and humorous effects. Between its virtuosity and its scope, this last movement becomes a culmination of sorts for the piece, seeming to outweigh the more delicate opening movement in a reversal of roles. However this may be, Beethoven subverts expectations one final time at the end, as the quartet closes with a teasing, quiet whisper.