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## **Beethoven Quartet opus 59 #2**

Beethoven's friend and student Carl Czerny reported that the second movement of the master's e minor string quartet, Op. 59 No. 2, was inspired by contemplation of the starry firmament and the music of the spheres. Increasingly alienated from quotidian society, hermetically trapped by his increasing deafness, Beethoven by 1808 considered that his artistic mission would be fulfilled only in conscious transcendence of the physical and the mundane. One can easily imagine how thoughts of the supernal music would feed his sense of awe, beauty and possibility in contrast with the earthly woes of mankind. A symbol of looking beyond, the *Molto adagio* evokes wonderment and songful rapture in its long, spun-out melodic arches and the radiance of its E Major tonality. Alongside the sustained singing is an evocation of the rotating celestial spheres as a sort of musical clock, a mechanical ticking away underlying the pulchritudinous harmonies. This trochaic rhythm appears in multiple guises, both machine-like and human, ranging from objective to hyper-expressive and vulnerable. It is as if Beethoven cannot help being in awe at once of the infinite grandeur of it all and of the clockmaker himself, of the power and precision of creation.

The quartets of Op. 59 belong to the period of Beethoven's expanding forms, his experimentation with the creation of universes of his own. These are structured so as to cohere not organically but rather by design, labyrinthine explorations steered by conscious reasoning, a human counterpart to the music of the spheres. This quartet starts with a "Big Bang" of sorts, an abrupt starting of Time. The chords are as if to introduce a recitative, the entrance of a narrator, but instead open onto an expectant silence. Twice into the vacuum come quantum fluctuations that self-annihilate almost as quickly as they appear. Silences sizzle with energy. There is little to hold on to, and yet the listener is captured. The abruptness of this opening is akin to the start of Coleridge's *Rime of the Ancient Mariner*: "It is an ancient Mariner, / And he stoppeth one of three, / 'By thy long grey beard and glittering eye, / Now wherefore stopp'st thou me?'" The wedding guest stopped by the mariner is entranced, hypnotized by the old man's "glittering eye" and thus "he cannot choose but hear." So are we seized by the start of Beethoven's narrative, and, as for Coleridge, where symbols and images reappear throughout the epic poem and lines repeat as incantation, motives and abstract musical ideas serve to guide the listener and organize the argument. The attention grabbing first two chords permeate the first movement, underpinning, punctuating and interrupting. The fleet main theme is as well an elaboration of this arresting motif. We hear it once, and then, after an intervening

silence, once again, lifted up to a pitch level just above where we heard it first. This lifting just above turns out to be a Beethovenian obsession, not only here but throughout the late quartets as well. In Op. 59 No. 2 he visits tangential worlds atop the tonic and the dominant, the two harmonic pillars of any key. The sense is often of escape, of being lifted out of the mortal sphere, stolen away from the weight of reality, perhaps in recognition of a presence beyond the material. The feeling of a complex narrative, with multiple rhetorical framings, digressions and suspenseful delays, flavors the first movement throughout. It is never in doubt that Beethoven is in control of how this story will be told, and the message is as much about the inherent power the narration has to liberate us as anything.

The Op. 59 group of quartets was commissioned by Beethoven's patron Count Razumovsky, and in honor of the Count's Russian heritage Beethoven included a Russian tune both in this quartet and in No. 1 of the group. Here the tune shows up in the trio section of the third movement, the central musical paragraph that is flanked by repetitions of the opening paragraph. As such it needs to be led into, and so Beethoven is put in the position of being a *Jeopardy!* champion; he must concoct the question whose answer is the already given tune. He begins the scherzo with the same notes that stop the listener in his tracks at the opening of the whole piece, but now they launch into a precarious teetering dance. In preparation for the revelation of the tune Beethoven creates music paradoxically both regular and terribly unstable. The only hint of stability in the main section comes where the music comes to harmonic stasis, and this is on the lifted harmony that we hear just at the start of the first movement, a suspended moment temporarily defying the gravity of the tonic. Most often classical quartets feature a contrasting key for the inner movements, a change of color palette. Here Beethoven works in monochrome, with each movement in the same key (or with the same tonic, whether major or minor) and thus there is a particularly potent sense of home, the pitches of the half-step slippages away remaining consistent throughout. When the trio section is revealed it comes at first playfully, a gleeful release introduced by the inversion or mirror image of the first notes of the movement (and the piece). It eventually builds to clangorous cacophony, reminiscent of the tintinnabulation of Poe's bells: "how it tells / Of the rapture that impels / To the swinging and the ringing / Of the bells, bells, bells, / Of the bells, bells, bells, bells, / Bells, bells, bells -- / To the rhyming and the chiming of the bells!"

The last movement announces itself abruptly and in the wrong key. Because we have never left E as a tonic it is clearly felt that the catapult of the C Major chord that propels us forward is at some distance from our destination. The main theme is introduced with a three-note motif rocketing upward. These three notes are found in the Russian tune we have just heard, just following the two that mirror the opening of the piece, suggesting

inevitability in the narrative progression. The key is lifted above the dominant and thus unstable. The underlying rhythm of the movement may be recognized as the trochaic clock-maker rhythm from the slow movement, now energized and elevated to a gallop. The four players of the quartet are unleashed as the four horsemen of the apocalypse. The music is driven forward with fiery intensity and the possibility of transformation. At times only the three-note launching idea remains, thrown from part to part in opposition to the downward tug of the tonic. When the movement races forward into its coda the three-note rocket is abandoned, the reckoning reached. The music brutally plunges back into the singularity from which it was born. Beethoven stands defiant on the earth looking toward the sky. There is enormous strength in the return to minor, great dignity in the refusal to escape into contemplation of the beyond. Beethoven's world is our human world, replete with both majesty and misery. He faces it all with unvarnished candor, and in narrating the story of this world he is emancipated, like the ancient mariner: "Forthwith this frame of mine was wrenched / With a woeful agony, / Which forced me to begin my tale; / And then it left me free."

Note by Mark Steinberg