

According to Edward O. Wilson there are two types of original thinkers, “those who upon viewing disorder try to create order, and those who upon encountering order try to create disorder.” Perhaps there is yet a third category, the deeply potent artist who delights in both at once, in wielding his magic wand to re-form both order and disorder toward his own purposes. He manifests a godlike ability to situate us in an alternate reality in order to lend us a sense of power and certainty in having some control over molding the world to our needs. This seems a primary attribute of Beethoven in the middle of his creative life, never more so than in the first of the middle period quartets, the Quartet in F Major, Op. 59 No. 1.

Many have remarked, appropriately, on the grandeur and scope of the piece, the longest of his quartets thus far. What seems to me particularly compelling is that Beethoven so often here creates the space for the piece as he goes. The listener has a sense that the musical material wends its way and unfurls in real time, stretching out the shape of its own canvas before us, rather than filling up a container preordained to be capacious.

The opening of the piece presents itself in all innocence, yet is anything but. The texture of pulsating repeated notes references two earlier works, Beethoven’s own *Waldstein* Sonata and Mozart’s *Dissonance* Quartet. In comparison with the *Waldstein*, the motion here is gentler, alert but poised in contrast with the propulsion of the earlier opening. Thus it seems at first blush to be more settled, but in truth is no less volatile, its changeability more subtly indicated. In the Mozart work, a nearly identical texture (with the theme being above the pulsating parts rather than below) comes at the moment when an introduction of brooding uncertainty is cast aside in favor of light and possibility. The tonality in the Mozart introduction is threatened, and at the arrival of this pulsating texture all is set aright. In Beethoven’s version, the theme in the ‘cello begins on that selfsame pitch, but here, in this key, is doesn’t represent the rooted tonic of the piece but is rather lifted off of it, refusing the expected tonal stability. The parsing of the theme is straightforward on the surface, like the simplest Hallmark card poem, stable and non- confrontational. And yet Beethoven plays here, as he will continue to do throughout the movement, with the time-honored poetic device of enjambment, whereby there is a counterpoint between the grammatical units and the line breaks. He uses indications of breath that overlap the holds in the rhythm, uses others that steal away the expected sense of landing on final

words, and interjects sudden unexpected hushes, all to undermine the regularity of the scanning. By the time the first violin answers the 'cello tune, the instability of the very opening has already intensified, slipped farther astray. Incredibly, it is only after 18 measures, nearly half a minute into the work, that we hear for the first time an assertion of the tonic in its expected, confirmatory position. Even there, the music is immediately launched into uncertainty again, both rhythmically and harmonically, pulling us away from the rugged affirmation toward its temperamental antipodes. Beethoven alights upon a passage in "horn fifths," the evocation of the out-of-doors with the natural overtone pitches of hunting horns, traditionally a representation of the pastoral. But Beethoven gives us here a sort of Platonic ideal of the horn call, one that goes beyond the limit of human breath, signifying his power to extend and draw an idea toward infinity at will. (Early editors of the piece here break Beethoven's breath marks into shorter ones, correcting Beethoven's superhuman imagination.) And again when he arrives at the contrasting second theme area, in the key suggested by the first, unstable, pitch of the 'cello at the opening, he overlaps every possible landing, again temporally manipulating us so that we can have no idea of where we're being led, or when, if ever, we will arrive. And indeed, there is no moment of stability provided for the remainder of the exposition. In fact, its antithesis is offered by hollow, unmoored single breaths traded by pairs of instruments: Beethoven can keep us adrift at sea for any length of time he chooses.

Traditionally, coming out of this we would have a repeat of the opening, and all that has transpired up to this point. And the music obliges. Or seems to. After a few measures it is revealed to us that in fact we are being led by the same material in a different direction; Beethoven is the master of misdirection here. Throughout the development as well he dilates time to open up spaces to explore, and we are aware not only of where he leads us but, more elementally, of the power he holds to bend the music's landscape to his will. Amongst many brilliant features of the rest of the movement are a clandestine *fugato*, more characteristic of a last movement than a first movement, the arrival of the recapitulation as if stumbled upon unawares, and a climax majestically declaimed yet still wildly unstable, with the conjunctions in the sentence emphasized more than the words they connect. In doing this, Beethoven reminds us again that he is the master of space and of time and he has the option to inflate either at any moment.

In the second movement, *sempre scherzando* (always joking), Beethoven gives us the joke of stubborn rootedness where there should be motion, a tune made of one ornery note, a sort of Morse code theme. (In fact the 'cellist of the Schuppanzigh Quartet that first played the piece at this point threw his music on the ground and stomped on it!) There is a constant rivalry between insistence and scampering that plays out delightfully throughout, even to the point of childish temper tantrums overtaking the movement at times. In the scholarly community there is much debate over how the overall form of this movement is organized (is it sonata form, or scherzo - trio alternation?). In fact, Beethoven can hold together elements of both so that we sense we know where we are even when we can't see the map. The ambiguity enhances the feeling that there is a plan put in place by the powers that be that we can take on faith as having an internal logic and necessity.

Magically ushered into existence by a lonely "c," that same pitch that started the piece adrift from the tether of stability, the slow movement of the quartet is a sort of lament, melancholic and noble. Poet Christian Wiman has written "Poetry is not written out of despair, which in its pure form is absolutely mute. The poetry that seems to come out of despair ... is actually a means of staving it off. A negative charge, simply by virtue of realizing itself, of coming into existence, becomes a positive charge." And so it is here, no Hamlet unwinding under the force of doubt but rather a chance for Beethoven unflinchingly to show the darkness and light a candle. There is a moment where the music comes to a standstill, having landed heavily, drained of hope. Then with one feather-light chord Beethoven offers an alchemical transmutation, a vision in the relative major, a consolation. But it rankles a bit. How are we to believe this unearned sudden shift, without preparation or explanation? After all, Beethoven at this point is no Buddhist, holding contradictions lightly and filling the space between them with acceptance. He is the architect of the world and we would expect from him an argument leading to this revelation. But then, later in the movement, come a few explanatory notes that I find the most touching in the whole work. Again he brings us to a luminescent harmonic world, this time using the relative major to drop further inward to D-flat major, its subdominant into which it can relax (also a half step above that magical "c," and thus in a quivering, mirage-like relationship to that), and, in the middle of the melodic unspooling in the first violin he inserts five notes that are the traditional close of *recitative* passages.

In just these few notes Beethoven is able to let us know that he is narrating, explaining, telling us intimately what he knows to be true. He says *trust me*.

The same magic carpet “c” that floats into the third movement also floats out. Now diaphanous, gossamer filigree in the first violin cascades gently down into a final trill on that note. The

atmosphere energized, the ‘cello enters with the *thème russe*, a Russian theme that is included to fulfill a request from Count Razumovsky, the Russian ambassador to Vienna who commissioned the work. Beethoven was given a catalogue of Russian themes, selected this one, and then transformed it. Although the listener most likely would be unaware of this, the original tune is a mournful, slow tune in minor, now appropriated into this work instead as a jaunty, rollicking, joyful one. So here, again, Beethoven has the power to make of the world what he wants. And doubly so, since he has cleverly included the turn around in the theme (that comes twice) as the opening notes of his lament in the slow movement. Toward the very end of the piece Beethoven gives us a kind of wink to let us know he has intentionally manipulated what was given him: he states the tune in a slow and reflective version for the only time. Still in major, but in the original tempo. And then he tosses it aside and closes the piece with a confident flourish, all swagger and panache.

Alexander Calder said “The universe is real but you can’t see it. You have to imagine it. Then you can be realistic about reproducing it.” Beethoven imagines his own universe into existence and leaves us to admire the process as it transpires. In listening to the piece, we take a loan of the implied power of agency he models. Beethoven helps us to feel more potent, more fulfilled, and more part of a world to which we can bring order and sense with the light of our attention and our intelligence.

Note by Mark Steinberg