

EXAMPLE I

a. Op. 18 no. 5, fourth movement, mm. 217–23

b. Piano Sonata in C Minor, Op. 13, third movement, mm. 99–102

copying was one way that Beethoven “learned how to write string quartets,” as he put it in the letter to Amenda. Indeed Mozart’s Quartet in A Major, K. 464, furnished the compositional model for Beethoven’s own A-major Quartet, Op. 18 no. 5. It was an extraordinarily close model, as such things go.

Only one thing about the modeling process need be mentioned here. Thanks to Mozart, Beethoven appears now to have mastered more fully than ever before the art of musical conversation that is at the heart of the classical quartet aesthetic. Listen, for example, to the passage from the finale shown in Example 1a; Beethoven had not written many earlier passages with quite the relaxed, conversational give and take of this one. Beethoven’s airy dialogue manipulates three distinct musical ideas, if we count the quiet ricocheting syncopations (which emerge as a new development, in diminution, from the phrase antecedent to the one illustrated). To place this passage against a similar passage from the *Pathétique*

Sonata, written a year or two earlier, is to illustrate the richness of texture available to the string quartet, as compared to the piano (Ex. 1b).

But if Beethoven may have fine-tuned his art of musical conversation under the inspiration of Mozart, he was also impressed by a very different aspect of Mozart’s work. It was an aspect that was to have special resonance in Beethoven’s later activity as a quartet composer.

Among the Mozart quartets there are a few movements that from early times acquired the reputation as arcana. One is the chromatic and dissonant slow introduction in the last number of the set dedicated to Haydn, the Quartet in C Major, K. 465. This music was still regarded as opaque (and ugly) by major critics such as François-Joseph Fétis in the nineteenth century and Ernest Newman in the twentieth. Beethoven, on the other hand, was fascinated by it. He imitated Mozart’s slow introduction in two introductory movements of his own, located within the last numbers of his Op. 18 and Op. 59 sets. (These two movements are specially marked by titles—one of them surprisingly evocative: *La Malinconia* in the Quartet in B Flat, Op. 18 no. 6—and “Introduzione” in the Quartet in C, Op. 59 no. 3.) To be sure, what he imitated in both cases was more the notion of chromatic mystery than any specific musical details; *La Malinconia*, in particular, develops a highly Beethovenian concept in its utter self-absorption. At other points in the C-major “Razumovsky” quartet, however, Beethoven acknowledged his inspiration by citing other fragments of Mozart’s K. 465 almost verbatim. *noted in: same*

Beethoven’s interest in Mozart’s Quartet in A Major, K. 464, has already been mentioned. Coming upon the score some years later, Beethoven remarked to his student Carl Czerny that with it Mozart was telling the world, “Look what I could do if you were ready for it!” The presumption here is that the world was *not* ready. Then as now, this particular work was regarded as somewhat esoteric, mainly on account of its dense and disturbed—and, again, highly chromatic—first movement. In 1800 Beethoven’s modeling of his own A-major quartet upon Mozart’s extended only to the later movements; his first movement is much lighter than Mozart’s opening *Allegro* and borrows nothing from it.⁷ Twenty-five years later, however, Beethoven cited this very *Allegro* in his A-minor Quartet, Op. 132: a gesture that we may be inclined to

7. Jeremy Yudkin to the contrary notwithstanding: see his “Beethoven’s ‘Mozart’ Quartet,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 45 (1992): 30–74.

see as an acknowledgment of unfinished business. Beethoven had done less than full justice to K. 464 in 1800, we may feel—less, in any case, than in his transaction with K. 465 in the C-major Razumovsky quartet.

Did Beethoven recognize, during the two years when he was composing Op. 18, that he was in a way reliving Mozart's own experience? It is not impossible. About a year and a half after arriving in Vienna, Mozart, beginning at the age of 26, had written his six quartets in a period of just over two years, from 1782 to 1785. More than any other works, these quartets warranted his claim to share space with Haydn. (That is what Mozart's dedication is about, among other things.) Beethoven, beginning at the age of 28, six years after coming to Vienna, spent an intense period writing quartets from 1798 to 1800. They too mark a decisive step forward in the young composer's career. And as he was writing them, Haydn at last fell silent as a quartet composer.

Another parallel with Mozart could not have escaped Beethoven's notice. In 1796, Lichnowsky took him on a concert tour to Berlin to see the same cellist king to whom he had taken Mozart half a dozen years earlier. Two similar fishing expeditions—with significantly different outcomes. Mozart eventually came up with three string quartets featuring prominent cello parts for the king's own use and delectation. Beethoven wrote a pair of sonatas for the king's virtuoso cellist, Jean-Pierre Dupont. And the Op. 5 Cello Sonatas of 1796 are perhaps the first Viennese virtuoso sonatas. Concerto-like, and sprouting cadenzas, they are true precursors of the formidable "Kreutzer" Sonata, dedicated to another virtuoso (and composed for still another) a few years later.

We can also regard them as heralds of a new kind of string quartet, one that will bear the ineluctable marks of concert performance. Indicative here is the career of Ignaz Schuppanzigh, the violinist who was closely associated with Beethoven—and with his quartets—throughout his life. Though in his day Schuppanzigh also made his mark as an orchestral violinist, conductor, and manager, he is remembered today as the first important musician to achieve fame primarily as a quartet player. Among the groups he led was one for Lichnowsky in 1795 and another for Count Razumovsky in 1808. His return to Vienna in 1823, after a stay in St. Petersburg, is traditionally seen as one of the stimuli that turned Beethoven to the composition of string quartets again during his last years.

From the historical point of view, the most notable of Schuppanzigh's groups was the one he formed in 1804 for the express purpose of presenting public concerts in Vienna. This was an obvious harbinger of the professional world of the string quartet as we know it. The genre today addresses principally not its own players but a concert audience; its aural field is no longer a closed circle but an open-ended cone. As the ambience of the genre changed from amateur to professional, the virtuoso violinist was invited into the quartet's conversational circle. Rode and Baillot, Vieuxtemps, Ole Bull, Joseph Helmesberger, Adolf Busch, Mischa Elman, Gidon Kremer—these and other great virtuosos took their turns as quartet leaders.

Schuppanzigh's experiment did not catch on, it appears, yet it also appears that Beethoven's Op. 59 Quartets were conceived with the Schuppanzigh concerts in mind and premiered there. And to compare Beethoven's Op. 59 with his Op. 18 is to see in the music itself a leap in style and concept that bypasses the sociological move adumbrated by Schuppanzigh's public concerts. Think of the beginning of the first "Razumovsky" and the end of the last one; there's not much conversation in evidence on either page. A better term might be determined ensemble shouting. At one time happy to converse, the string quartet has now acquired a new ambition: to project. *hah!*

The feel of this music is symphonic—the characteristic feel of Beethoven's second-period music. For some years after the composition of the *Eroica* Symphony, in 1803, Beethoven was obsessed by the symphonic ideal. Piano sonatas like the "Waldstein" and the "Appassionata" are as symphonic in spirit as the "Razumovsky" quartets. One can trace actual technical parallels between the first movement of the *Eroica* Symphony and the first movement of the Quartet in F, Op. 59 no. 1, as I did in a chapter called "After the *Eroica*" in my study of the Beethoven quartets.⁸ Both movements derive their harmonic plan from an obtrusive "sore" note in the opening theme, a note destined to be reinterpreted later in dramatic ways—D flat in the symphony movement, G in the quartet. Both movements grow enormously expansive in their development section, which in each case develops a fugato that leads into a shattering passage of breakdown. The codas in both movements are momentous. These technical parallels between the two movements drama-

8. Joseph Kerman, *The Beethoven Quartets* (New York, 1967), 89–116.

EXAMPLE 2. Op. 59 no. 1, third movement, mm. 126–32

tize Beethoven's ambition in the Razumovsky series in a specially vivid way: the ambition to transform the smooth conversation of the string quartet into the heroic discourse of the symphony.

If the concept of Beethoven's second-period quartets is often symphonic, their technique is often virtuoso, as illustrated in Example 2. "Do you suppose I am thinking about your wretched fiddle when the spirit moves me?" Beethoven is supposed to have retorted when Schupanzigh remonstrated about some difficulty or other. (Like so many other deeply suspect anecdotes about Beethoven, on the deepest level this one feels only too authentic.) It is hardly surprising that Op. 18 achieved popularity at once and maintained its popularity, while Op. 59 was at first given a wide berth.

But that was just at first. In the nineteenth century, a concert-giving string quartet that shied away from Beethoven's grander contributions to the genre would have been no more viable than an orchestra that side-stepped Beethoven's later symphonies. It is probably not too much to

say that Op. 59 doomed the amateur string quartet. And in the next twenty years, Beethoven penned (among other such passages) the virtuosic first-violin cross-the-string passage in the coda of the "Harp" Quartet first movement, the greased-lightning finale in F major to the Quartet, Op. 95, and several hundred bone-crushing measures in Op. 133, the *Grosse Fuge*.

With Beethoven's last quartets, the project to which he turned at the end of his life, after the exhaustive public statements of the *Missa solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony, the quartet assumed a new aesthetic stance. Though the late scores were played in public as soon as they were composed—indeed, the composer took some trouble about this—directly afterwards they dropped ominously out of sight and sound. As Beethoven's musical imagination turned inward, the quartet turned away from its earlier audiences. At the risk of oversimplification, one can say that whereas in Beethoven's first period the essential audience for his quartets had been the quartet players, and in his second period the concert public, in the late period the audience was primarily the composer. Beethoven at the end of his life achieved the privatization of the string quartet.

Oversimplification, to be sure. This is only one-half of the story—and it is the half that was downplayed in my 1967 book. The particular kind of inwardness of Beethoven's last style period has impressed many listeners as complex, involuted, and esoteric; and this was an impression that the book questioned and tried to counter. I argued that Beethoven's late music was *not* arcane, that in it Beethoven had deliberately sought the simple, the direct, and the immediately communicable. Evidence for this can be found in the very many simple dance phrases that come up in the late quartets, also in Beethoven's repeated recourse to various kinds of vocal forms, styles, and genres. These works

are drenched in evocations of the human voice. These evocations mean to sing or to speak instantly to the heart, like the songs imagined by Beethoven's poet at the climax of *An die ferne Geliebte*:

was mir aus der vollen Brust
ohne Kunstgepräg' erklungen
nur der Sehnsucht sich bewusst . . .

what from my full breast
has sounded artlessly,
conscious only of its longing . . .

EXAMPLE 5. Op. 131, first movement, mm. 68–75

a. Early version

Early version musical score for measures 68–75. The top staff is for Violins (vlns) and the bottom staff is for Violas (vlas). The violin part begins with a dynamic marking *p* and a measure number 68. The viola part includes a *vc* marking.

b. Final version

Final version musical score for measures 68–75. The top staff is for Violins (vlns) and the bottom staff is for Violas (vlas). The violin part begins with a dynamic marking *p* and a measure number 68. The viola part includes a *vc dolce* marking.

Did Beethoven imagine that an actual performance of this trial version would give him an insight into nuances that he could not tell about in the abstract? He was stone deaf by this time. Was there some expectation that Schuppanzigh or his new second violinist Karl Holz—the composer's latest crony—would favor him with one or two suggestions after a rehearsal?

A small mystery remains to be cleared up here. What is clear already is that after the piece was copied (and presumably played in the Beethoven circle) in this provisional version, Beethoven returned to it, just as he had returned to Amenda's version of Op. 18 no. 1, in order to refine and touch up details. An archival document sheds an already oblique light on the older collegial period of the string quartet.

At the beginning of this essay, I suggested that the traditional association of Beethoven's three main groups of quartets with the three famous style periods was one that could be supported by information from the history of the string quartet. But to consider the history of the string quartet is to assess how Beethoven with his three periods was caught up in that history, as much as how he contributed to it. If we are to see three phases in the history of the quartet during Beethoven's lifetime—the amateur, the public, and the private—we must also see how Beethoven's relation to each was different. In the first his role was that of participant. To the second he served as a sort of prophet. The third was his own unique, private vision.

It would be better, in any case, to shift the metaphor from successive stages of an evolutionary process to different light-catching surfaces of a jewel. For each of the categories of our typology has, or had, a different ontological status; the word "audience" is being used here in different ways. Only what I have identified as the first audience of the string quartet was an actual flesh-and-blood audience. The collegial, amateur phase of the string quartet is a special moment that can be isolated in time and place. Beethoven arrived in Vienna at exactly the right time to accommodate himself to it.

On the other hand, the professionalization of the genre adumbrated in Vienna by Schuppanzigh in 1804 was not a moment but a process, a disorderly process that extended over many years. By 1804 the process had already been initiated in Paris and London, and the real sociological impact of the development lay in the future. Hence the string quartet's second audience, the public audience, was only a potential in Beetho-

ven's lifetime. While Beethoven responded magnificently to the virtuoso implications of this potential, there is a sense in which he can be said to have done so prematurely. To see this, one only has to compare the "Razumovsky" quartets with the contemporary (and earlier) *quatuors brillants* by virtuoso composers such as Rode, Kreutzer, and Baillot.

The final privatization of the string quartet was Beethoven's special contribution, one that—except for the overriding historical impact of his works—stands outside of history. As Beethoven turned the genre inward, it revealed an esoteric facet which was not entirely unprecedented, as we have seen, but which had never been exposed so fully. Once again: we catch this intense, inward-flickering light only during certain famous and memorable movements. Other movements ask for other auditors, more traditional and tangible. While a proleptic experiment such as *La Malinconia* of 1800 anticipates some of the most self-absorbed episodes of the late quartets, these works on their part assimilate many retrospective currents from the world of Haydn and Mozart.

The first audience of the string quartet was an actual audience; the second can only be thought of in terms of potential, and the third was an ideal audience that consisted, paradoxically, of no audience at all. Here I am reminded of the art historian Michael Fried's analysis of certain eighteenth-century paintings, whose aesthetic depends, he says, upon "the supreme fiction of the beholder's nonexistence."¹⁶ These paintings depict figures so intensely absorbed in either dramatic actions or contemplative states, says Fried, that they seem oblivious to any possible observer. Likewise with Beethoven's late quartets, the sense of audience superfluity is almost palpable. Engrossed, the composer is now writing without any listener in mind but himself. To put it this way involves some oversimplification, as has already been said; but there are times when the risk of oversimplification ought to be accepted. Beethoven's late music has often lost its audiences because it was composed so as to shut them out.

And because in his last period Beethoven often gives the impression of shutting out an audience, listeners ever since have had to get used to a situation in which they are suddenly made privy to a singular colloquy, now hushed, now strident, but always self-absorbed. The conversation of

16. Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1980), 103. See Joseph Kerman, "Remarks from the Chair," in *Atti del XIV Congresso della Società Internazionale di Musicologia, Bologna 1987* (Bologna, 1991), 1:677–84.

the classical string quartet is obviously designed to be heard and, within a discreet circle, overheard. The discourse of the professional quartet is meant to be broadcast. Listening to certain movements in the late Beethoven quartets, one feels sure that neither of these situations holds. The music is sounding only for the composer and for one other auditor, an awestruck eavesdropper: you.

interesting

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