



Playing to the twentieth-century concert audience: the Lark String Quartet in a 1993 performance in Weill Recital Hall, the 268-seat chamber music and recital space in Carnegie Hall. (Photo © 1993 Steve J. Sherman.)

Beethoven Quartet Audiences: Actual, Potential, Ideal

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Most of us have known about Beethoven's "three periods" for about as long as we have known *Für Elise* and the Minuet in G. Deep disparities in style and feeling exist across the extent of Beethoven's works, disparities that seem to need explanation, and we cannot read much about Beethoven without learning what critics, biographers, and historians have come up with to answer this need. A main explanatory construct that has served them is the idea of the three style periods, matched to the life-phases of youth, maturity, and age. We cannot read much about Beethoven's string quartets, in particular, without soon meeting up with this idea in a notably tidy version.

Thus Beethoven's earliest essays in the genre, the set of six Quartets Op. 18, can be seen (or can be said) to strain restlessly but not very effectively against the classic norms established by Mozart and Haydn. Composed between 1798 and 1800, their very dates straddle the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as though to symbolize Beethoven's so-called "formative" first period. His next quartets, the three dedicated to Count Razumovsky, were composed only five years later. Yet they seem to inhabit a different world, the world of the *Eroica* Symphony and *Leonore*, compositions that most famously define the second period. Archetypically "third period" is the celebrated group of five late quartets, including the *Grosse Fuge*—the great compositional project that occupied Beethoven for two years just prior to his death in 1827. Two works

hover somewhat less tidily between the last two periods: the "Harp" Quartet in E Flat, Op. 74, and especially the F-minor work that Beethoven called *Quartetto serioso*, Op. 95.

In his recent collection *Beethoven Essays*, Beethoven's biographer Maynard Solomon subjects the doctrine of the three periods to close and skeptical scrutiny.¹ A threefold categorization of an artist's life-work was a cliché among nineteenth-century artistic biographers, who applied it just as readily to Michelangelo and Raphael as to Beethoven; and many works by Beethoven resist such triadic categorization—the F-minor quartet is not the only one. Yet the basic framework of the three style periods survives skepticism, Solomon concludes. For in fact many historical factors apart from musical style converge to reinforce it. Among these factors are the significant changes in Beethoven's inner life, in his fundamental modes of patronage, and indeed in the Viennese zeitgeist at large.

To these can be added, for the purposes of this chapter, developments in the history of the string quartet. The kind of history I have in mind is a sort of reception history, loosely defined: an account of the different audiences to which string quartets were principally directed over the course of Beethoven's activity.

The first audience, which I call the collegial audience, can be introduced appropriately by Karl Amenda, a name remembered today solely but fondly by aficionados of the Beethoven string quartets.

An enthusiastic violinist about Beethoven's age, Amenda became a close friend and confidant of the young composer during the few years he spent in Vienna as a fashionable music teacher. He left for good in 1799. In a letter written two years later, Beethoven mentioned a string quartet that he had given to Amenda and asked him not to circulate it. "I have made some drastic alterations. For only now have I learnt how to write quartets; and this you will notice, I fancy, when you receive them."²

The composition in Amenda's copy has, providentially, survived. The set of players' parts, in the hand of a professional copyist, bears Beethoven's affectionate inscription to his friend. The music is appre-

ciably different from the piece that Beethoven had by now (1801) published—and had evidently sent to Amenda—and that we know as the Quartet in F Major, Op. 18 no. 1. Comparing Amenda's early copy with the published score, the musicologist Janet Levy has been able to trace an illuminating account of Beethoven's self-criticism and self-improvement.³ There has even been a recording made of the "Amenda version" of Op. 18 no. 1, by the Pro Arte Quartet (Laurel 116, 1987).

It is not necessary, however, to follow the details of the comparison between the two versions in order to grasp their symbolic importance. The very existence of this music in two forms tells us something about the ambience of the string quartet at that period. It tells us that pieces circulated in what might be called "trial versions," works in progress that would evidently be touched up or recast after being played and discussed by friends and patrons. The "finalization" represented by publication could be left for later. Nothing similar is known with Beethoven's music in other genres, such as sonata or song (it would be inconceivable, of course, with symphony or opera). Nor was this the only Beethoven quartet that circulated in a trial version. Another musicologist, Sieghard Brandenburg, has argued that Op. 18 no. 2 and probably others must also have existed in earlier forms, forms that can be reconstructed to some extent from the composer's sketches.⁴

The players themselves, then, formed the hard core of the string quartet's audience in Beethoven's early years. The ambience in which the genre flourished was essentially collegial, its milieu in the best sense of the word amateur. Quartets were played and discussed in salons of the aristocracy and the upper middle class. Vienna, music's capital city in the late eighteenth century—Amendas as well as Beethovens flocked there—was a veritable hotbed of the string quartet.

By "amateur" we do not mean, of course, anyone who had had a few years of lessons on the violin. The picture given in Peter Shaffer's *Ama-deus* of Emperor Joseph II as a keyboard klutz is, as so often, just the wrong picture. These were devoted amateurs of considerable cultivation who played chamber music with the same passion with which we until recently played bridge. In Berlin, King Friedrich Wilhelm II of Prussia was a cellist; in Vienna, Prince Lobkowitz and Count Razumovsky were

1. Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven Essays* (Cambridge, Mass., 1988), 116–25.

2. Ludwig van Beethoven to Karl Amenda, in Emily Anderson, ed., *The Letters of Beethoven*, 3 vols. (London, 1961), letter 53.

3. Janet M. Levy, *Beethoven's Compositional Choices: The Two Versions of Op. 18, No. 1, First Movement* (Philadelphia, 1982).

4. Sieghard Brandenburg, "The First Version of Beethoven's G-Major String Quartet, Op. 18 No. 2," *Music & Letters* 58 (1977): 127–52.

violinists, Prince Moritz Lichnowsky another cellist. His violinist brother Karl, Beethoven's special patron, held quartet parties weekly. Amateur quartet playing on another level is memorialized in a stellar Viennese pick-up group that met at least occasionally in the 1780s, consisting of Haydn, Mozart, and two other leading composers of the time, Dittersdorf and Vanhal.

In the 1790s Beethoven attended quartet parties that took place twice a week at the home of an older composer named Emanuel Aloys Förster. Though Beethoven had played viola in the Bonn court orchestra, he seems to have been too rusty now to sit down with professionals like his friends Amenda and Schuppanzigh (of whom more presently). When Prince Karl Lichnowsky gave Beethoven a gift of four quartet instruments in 1800, he did not expect Beethoven to play them. The gesture was less practical than symbolic: once again, a token of musical collegiality. It was exactly for such a gesture that the string quartet provided so seemingly a channel (and, in this case, so princely a one: the violins were by Amati and Giuseppe Guarneri, the cello by Andrea Guarneri).⁵

Corresponding to the collegial, amateur ambience of the early string quartet was its aesthetic ideal as the art of musical conversation. By the time the genre emerged—not, one might add parenthetically, without a good deal of anxious legislation from musicologists—this ideal was already clearly established. The eighteenth century itself delighted in comparing the players of a quartet to conversationalists. Thus the first published quartets by Joseph Haydn, in 1764, were already described as *quatuors dialogues* (if somewhat prematurely, according to Paul Griffiths, in his recent history of the string quartet).⁶ Haydn perfected this art of conversation in the famous set of six Quartets, Op. 33, of 1781. Sometimes called the “Scherzi,” this set was the principal model for Mozart in the even more famous six quartets that he dedicated to Haydn. The imprint of Haydn's Op. 33 can still be traced in Beethoven's Op. 18.

As Griffiths emphasizes, string quartet “conversation” is not to be equated with traditional counterpoint. “Fugue, in its ordained responses, its direct imitation and its lack of characterization in the voices, is the

5. But see n. 4 in Winter's chapter, p. 33.

6. Griffiths has not been able to satisfy himself that a passage that counts as truly “conversational” exists in a Haydn opus before 1769; Paul Griffiths, *The String Quartet* (New York, 1983), 22.

very antithesis of dialogue.” Even other baroque contrapuntal textures—textures that are less formal than fugue—are more comfortably compared to debates, logical arguments, or question-and-answer sessions rather than to the elegant, witty conversations so prized by the Enlightenment. The classical obbligato style developed by Haydn is a kind of counterpoint, to be sure, but it is counterpoint of a new kind: informal, lightly etched, individualized, mercurial, and above all infinitely interactive.

In “abstract” musical terms, furthermore, if one may employ such an expression, the conversational style of the string quartet allowed composers to develop subtleties of technique that could not easily be achieved in genres such as the sonata or the symphony. This was especially true in the area of textural detail. For the pianoforte lacked the capability and the sensitivity of the four instruments of the quartet, while the orchestra lacked their flexibility and intimacy.

Förster's quartet sessions must surely have featured all Haydn's newest works in the genre. Though Beethoven's student days with Haydn, never too cordial, were now over, he was of course paying the greatest attention to Haydn's seemingly endless flow of new music in all genres: symphonies, quartets, Masses, oratorios. (Later, when the master congratulated the student on his ballet *Prometheus*, the subtext to Beethoven's quip that it was “no *Creation*” was not lost on the older composer.) As compared to orchestral and choral music, quartets were easier to hear, easier to get a hold of, easier to study. In the five-year period from 1795 to 1799, Haydn published annually—missing, astonishingly, just one year—Op. 71 (three numbers), Op. 74 (three, including “The Horseman,” in G minor), Op. 76 (six, including the “Emperor,” the “Sunrise,” and the “Quinten”), and Op. 77 (two).

As far as immediate musical influence is concerned, however, Beethoven was less open to Haydn than to Mozart. That is not so strange in human terms, considering the human we are discussing. For it seems clear that, to Beethoven, Haydn was an annoyingly concrete father figure whereas Mozart, whom his real father had tried to make him emulate, and whom he had met briefly as a boy, was a dead legend. And Mozart, by publishing his first Viennese string quartets with a conspicuous dedication to Haydn, had publicly proclaimed a debt that Beethoven seems to have preferred to incur at second hand. There survive two copies of Mozart quartets made by Beethoven at the time of his Op. 18 project. They are the G major and the A major, K. 376 and K. 464;