

Teal Brown

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Dr. Charles McKnight

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Beethoven's Opus 131 in C# Minor

Ludwig van Beethoven was born in 1770 to Johann Beethoven and Maria Magdalena. There was a certain inevitability that Ludwig's life would be related to music in one way or another because his father had made a career as Bonn's court musician. At four years of age the child started to receive musical training from his father, which he took to well. With the passing of another four years the young Beethoven played his first public performance, consisting of various concertos and trios. By the pre-pubescent age of 12, Beethoven's first work, the Dressler Variations, was published (Cooper, 12). While his career continued to blossom at a fast pace, there was no doubt that Johann's initial aspirations of his son becoming the next Mozart were becoming, by the very least, realized. Beethoven went on to become one of the biggest composers in history—some would argue the best in history. When it was all said and done, Beethoven had composed "9 symphonies, 11 overtures, incidental music to plays, a violin concerto, 5 piano concertos, 16 string quartets, 9 piano trios, 10 violin sonatas, 5 cello sonatas, 32 piano sonatas, many sets of piano variations, an oratorio, an opera, and 2 Masses, as well as arias, songs, and numerous lesser compositions" (Grout, Palisca, 514).

Beethoven's list of musical feats is astounding when one considers the poor conditions from which they came. Both his family life and personal life experienced unfortunate turbulence: On July 17, 1787 Beethoven's mother

dies of consumption; November 25 of the same year his one-year-old sister dies; December 18, 1792 his father dies; summer of 1797--an undocumented

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period--possibly a serious illness occurred that led to his eventual hearing loss; 29 June, 1801 Beethoven writes a lengthy letter to a friend revealing a hearing deficiency; and on October 6, 1802 he writes the Heiligenstadt Testament, in which he reveals to his brothers his suicidal urges due to his hearing loss and sense of separation from the world (Cooper, 12-16). From this point onward, health became an increasingly large obstacle in his life. During the last few years of his life Beethoven continued working on his art despite numerous ailments, attempted treatments, and deafness. Some of the most notable of which were his last five quartets: Opus 127, 130, 131, 132, 133 (otherwise known as the *Grosse Fugue*), and 135. Op. 131 has received arguably more attention because of its unique qualities. Beethoven considered it his favorite of the collection probably for the same reasons that critics of his time described it as "distasteful", ". . . not very interesting" (Winter and Martin, 21), and composed "without any listeners in mind but himself" (Winter and Martin, 4). An indicator of the level to which he might have cared about these critiques could be summed up in a response he had to one of his violinists, Schuppanzigh, when he complained about the difficulty of a particular part of Beethoven's music. Beethoven remarked "Do you think I worry about your lousy fiddle when the spirit moves me?" (Blum, 230).

Beethoven composed Opus 131 in C# minor between November 1825 and July 1826. He died three months prior to its June of 1827 publication date (Winter and Martin, 245). During the later years of Beethoven's life, a certain form for quartet writing had been established. Op. 131 became famous

because it broke the rules of this form. Normally, a string quartet would consist of four movements. In this case, Beethoven decided he needed seven in order to complete his vision. This length of piece requires an approximate 40-minute period of focus by the players and the audience. The piece starts

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with a slow fugue, an unusual introductory movement. Additionally, he visits a total of six keys in this piece, as opposed to the standard two or three. Also, the manner by which the moods and forms evolve in the piece contradicted the typical technique (Lam, 236). This piece is about conflict and its ultimate resolution-not an uncommon theme in itself. However, instead of conflict being created within the movements, it is created by the juxtaposition of the movements themselves. They are, as Joseph Kerman describes, contrasting, yet mutually dependent parts. Another unprecedented aspect of this piece is its overall continuity. There are no double bars between movement numbers 2 and 3, 3 and 4, and 6 and 7, and only fermata notes or rests between 1 and 2, 4 and 5, and 5 and 6. According to Kerman, there must be no breaking of attention, no catching of breath, no tuning of instruments, and no uncrossing of legs (326).

The first movement has received much attention because of its unique placement within the composition. A good place to begin understanding this movement, as well as others later in the essay, is from the players' perspectives. David Blum did exactly this in his book of interviews with the Guarneri Quartet entitled The Art of Quartet Playing. Blum, as well as the four who were interviewed, agreed that making the section about Opus 131 in C# minor the last chapter would be a good way to pay homage to the master. When asked to make general comments about the first movement here is what they said: The fugue has a "rich yet inward quality"; another

says that it is tragic and foreboding--"a prelude to all that is to come"; "the fugal subjects are developed skillfully but not with flashy technique just for technique's sake"; one described the opening movement as "mystical meditation and yet deeply human." Basil Lam, an author on Beethoven's works, says that "In the opening movement of Op. 131 Beethoven goes back

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to an earlier polyphony than Bach's. The canonic episode beginning in bar 65 has the remote beauty of masters even before Palestrina, Josquin, Ockeghem or Dufay." Technically, it was wise to start a piece that contained six main keys with a fugue because it grants the composer the ability to map out with impartial authority a complete aural terrain. In this case, Beethoven could outline the entire tonal palette of C# minor all within the first movement (Kerman, 328).

This fugue in C# minor has been compared to the fugal section in the slow movement of Op. 95. Steinberg suggests that "in light of the *Grosse Fugue*, it was as if he were rendering a peace offering to the gods" (Winter and Martin, 236). It has also been noted that the theme of the C# minor fugue is suggested in the trio of the second movement of Op. 132 (Lam, 53). Evidently there were quite a few common characteristics and traits among Beethoven's quartets. The beginning to Op. 131 is a bleak one, yet the cello conveys strength, not grief. One can sense a potential for vital energy and ethereal vision because of the cello's authoritative voice. Relentless chromaticism slowly reveals a clearer tonal palette. The reoccurring D-natural becomes an idea that Beethoven returns to in the last movement. Also, the Neapolitan chord in the first movement makes a nice segue into the second movement which is in D-major. Beethoven achieves this shift with C# octaves that ascend gently to D.

In the second movement, we see that same octave leap become a motive. The Guarneri members describe this movement as having elements of sad as well as bittersweet qualities. It has a dance-like character that might have been derived from some sort of folk music. A musician playing this movement should convey effortless fluency, and continuity (Blum, 189). It eventually takes shape as a fugue-style piece. It visits E major (V/V) as well

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as the dominant which marks the beginning of the second subject. The energy dies down a bit with the second movement, thus creating the first contrast within the piece. However, it does not take long to rouse the beast again. The third movement is a transitional section and succeeds in carrying the listener forward once again.

According to the Guarneri players, the two opening notes of the third movement in b minor should have "a feeling of grandeur." Number 3 has an almost march like quality. The listener can sense that the machine is oiled up and functioning like it should. Wagner said "'tis as if the master, grown conscious of his art, were settling to work at his magic" (Winter and Martin, 251). The whole movement takes a single theme and creates six variations on it. The first variation maintains its original meter, tempo, and motivic content. The second variation evokes a dance-like quality. The third variation recalls the two-part canonic episode from the opening fugue. Beethoven describes this material as to be played seductively or coaxingly. Variation 4 is quite ornamented with the help of the 6/8 meter. The fifth variation outlines a bare skeleton of the tune via syncopated rhythms in 2/4. The last variation, in Kerman's words, "treats the repetitions of the strains most dramatically--which is quite paradox, in view of the fact that this is the

hymn-variation and undoubtedly the spiritual center of the entire quartet" (Kerman, 336). This type of extreme variation of a subject was very typical of Beethoven's third period style. Kerman believed that this transitional movement's purpose was to delay the dominant relationship between numbers 2 and 4, which are in the keys of D major and A major, respectively. The movement ends with a coda that would otherwise seem like the seventh variation.

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The fourth movement in A major is started with pizzicato in the cello. It explodes as a confrontation by using a climactic detail from the fourth movement (Kerman, 327). This sets the tempo for the movement, at least for the time being. The Guarneri players remind us that all of the movements, except for the first, contain a shift in time signature and tempo. The variations in relation to the theme are dealt with more freely than they were in Opus 127. According to Soyer, one of the members of the Guarneri Quartet, "each variation has a melodic and expressive character quite its own, sometimes seemingly remote from the original material." Another player says that "Elements of a decidedly rustic character are unexpectedly placed side by side with the sublime, yet everything sounds inevitable in its context." Steinhardt, another player, notes that starting at bar 70 a startling dance-like quality emerges. It reminded him almost of a tango. This movement ends with a clean break, preparing everyone for the next confrontation.

The first two measures of the fifth movement, a duple-time scherzo in E major, are like the curtain raiser, according to Blum's interview. The cello's burly exclamation is like a giant, and the violins take a few moments before

they respond to it. The two sets of octaves have an operatic feel, similar to an orchestral accompaniment in recitative (Kerman, 327). It is this duple-time scherzo that is possibly the most childlike of all of Beethoven's scherzos (Kerman, 338). Standing as a piece on its own, this movement would seem "flat". However, taken in context it functions beautifully. Beethoven wanted to create a resting place before getting back to the worries that exist in the sixth movement that were foreshadowed in the opening fugue (Kerman, 338).

The sixth movement in G# minor arrives with anticipation by the listener. The fourth movement, being in A major, is actually what leads the

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listener to No. 6. Throughout the entire piece, Beethoven plays with the notion of half step modulation. In the first movement it was C#/D, B#/C#; in the second it was D/C#, A#/B; and in the third it was A/G#, D/C# (Winter and Martin, 249). By the time the sixth movement comes around the listener's ears are attuned to that half step shift. Therefore, the G#/A transition from No. 4 to No. 6 comes quite naturally, and it enforces this theme. However, this is not to say that it does not contrast the scherzo that precedes it. This adagio has a manic depressive, mournful quality to it (Blum, 220). It serves as the dominant preparation to lead the listener, finally, back into C# minor.

One word was used by one of the Guarneri players to describe the finale--"turbulence." Soyer, from that set of interviews exclaims that "after half an hour of playing, this wood-tearing, flesh-tearing movement has quite an effect." One of the most unique aspects about Opus 131 in C# minor is that it finds its center of balance in the last movement, as opposed to the middle, like most compositions (Kerman, 335). Rests are used throughout the movement in order to create heightened impact. An important cut-time-

rhythmic motive of eighth, quarter, eighth rest, eighth, bar line, quarter, etc., is used as well. Remarkably, the appearance of a full-blown sonata form appears for the first time in the whole piece. The ending in C# major comes rather abruptly--a fierce affirmation by Beethoven. Blum writes: "maybe there's hope."

Blum included statements of the musicians he interviewed from directly after a performance of this piece--before they had time to put their instruments down. This is what he heard: Soyer: "It's savage, utterly savage--the culmination of the entire work."; Dalley: "Grotesque and wild! It has invincible energy."; Tree: "A relentless dance, a demonic dance--and yet, what

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wonderfully tender moments, what an enormous emotional range."; Steinhardt: "He's shaking his fist at destiny. It's terrifying--but suddenly everything is released and it overflows with joy, with ecstasy."; and Dalley again: "You want to bark like a dog" (Blum, 230).

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