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## ***Beethoven's String Quartet in C# minor, Op. 131.***

“The compositional abyss reached by Beethoven in the creation of the C-sharp-minor Quartet was so grave a threat to the composer’s fundamental musical principals that a return to less radical presuppositions was mandatory if his style was to survive at all.”

Within the works of Ludwig Van Beethoven he has been categorized as post classical and pre-romantic, fitting into neither of the two genres completely, but rather somewhere in between. In his career Beethoven produced 9 symphonies, 11 overtures, 5 piano concertos, 16 string quartets, 9 piano trios, 10 violin sonatas, 5 cello sonatas, 32 piano sonatas, 2 Masses, a violin concerto, an opera, and an oratorio. The span in which Beethoven composed these pieces has been divided into three different periods, which are contingent upon style and creative output. They are dimly noted as the first period, the second period and the late period. Beethoven’s works were so often direct reflections of his experiences and of the world that lived around him. In his late period especially, Beethoven’s compositions were so inherently personal that they could hardly be imitated or understood, even by his contemporaries.

Beethoven's chamber music for strings, which include three string trios, six string Quartets, and two string Quintets exemplify and sets the stage for the gradual loosening of his reliance on the piano as the catalyst of his compositional style. (Solomon, p.132-133) Beethoven's last works were a set of string quartets, which were pushed along in part by a commission from Prince Nicholas Galitsin, and so while very sick and very deaf, Beethoven concentrated his creativity onto composition for strings, only a few years after completing his Ninth Symphony. (Cooper, p.35) Of these works included the Op. 131 Quartet in C# minor, which was the last large-scale piece written by Beethoven. The sketches for this work in fact consume three times as many pages as the final and finished product. The C# minor Quartet is referred to by many as the quintessential epitome of Beethoven's style during his late period. Composed between 1825 and 1826, the Quartet in C# minor, Op. 131, is considered to be Beethoven's defining quartet. Dedicated to Baron Joseph von Stutterheim, the C# minor Quartet is said to be the last of the experimental quartets. (Sadie, v2 p.396) Beethoven's final quartet, the F major Quartet returns to the more conventional four-movement format. (Wallace, p.64) The piece reveals his interest in various elements such as thematic variations, continuity, intentionally making the divisions between phrases unclear, qualities of improvisation and the inner layering of the fugue presented in the first movement throughout the span of the piece. The independent voices in the string quartet allow room for the use of counterpoint as well as contrapuntal composing. The piece starts out with a slow heart wrenching fugue which presents musical ideas that can heard and detected throughout the entire work. Contrapuntal writing seems to be present within some of the variations of

them within the fourth movement. The C# minor quartet was rehearsed several times at Mathias Artaria's at the beginning of August, 1826 though it was never performed within Beethoven's lifetime. It was in fact performed for Schubert in November 1828, just five days before Schubert's death. (Solomon, p.416-417)

The Op.131 Quartet in its entirety consists of seven movements which are played through without pause which gives the whole work a sense of fluidity and unity. The first movement, *Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo*, consists of a fugue in the tonic key of C# minor. This part of the piece in my opinion is what evokes raw emotion and sadness. On its way to the key of D major, this first movement plays a heavy emphasis on the Neapolitan chord structure, primarily toward the end of the movement leading into the next movement in the new key of D major, which is the root of a Neapolitan chord in the key of C# minor. "The second movement, *Allegretto molto vivace*, in D major is in a compacted sonata form. It is based on a single theme which is a folk like tune first presented against a triple drone that shifts between the tonic and the subdominant." (Grout, p.536) "The famous Neapolitan position of the second movement contributes a great deal to its strange ephemeral quality and is still sufficiently vivid in the listener's memory to validate the Neapolitan echo at the end of the finale." (Tyson, p.156) "Movement three, *Allegro moderato*, in B minor is in fact only eleven measures long, functioning as a set up into the following movement and modulating from B minor to E major, the dominant of the next movement." (Grout, p.536) "The fourth movement, *Andante*, in A major consists of a theme made up of two double periods, with six variations and a coda that encloses an incomplete seventh variation." (Grout, p.536) The

theme in this movement is in a binary form with a simple harmonic structure going from the tonic to the dominant in the A section and from dominant back to tonic in the B section. This basic form is recycled in all of the following six variations. These variations occur through deviations in rhythm, time signature, tempo, character and registers in which the instruments play in. “This variation movement was so extensively altered that one or more complete leaves had to be removed from the score in every variation except for one, while what began as the final score in the finale gradually degenerated into the status of a sketch.” (Cooper, p.164) “Movement five, *Presto*, in E major is essentially a scherzo, though in duple time rather than triple time, with a trio that returns twice in rondo fashion after the return of the scherzo.” (Grout, p.536) “The sixth movement, *Adagio*, in the key of G# minor consists of twenty-eight measures in the form ABB with a coda, introducing the next movement.” (Grout, p.536) The seventh and final movement, *Allegro*, returns back home to the tonic key of C# minor and follows the traditional sonata form. If you listen to the piece you will notice that Beethoven is extremely subtle in his transitions from movement to movement. They are so subtle in fact that they can be practically undetectable to the untrained ear.

The seven movements in Op. 131 Quartet have the effect of one sliding into the next. “The fugue in the first movement acts as an exposition, presenting the basic tonal and thematic material that is worked out in the rest of the piece.” (Sadie, v2 p.386) First Beethoven moves up a half step from the home key of C# minor to D major in the second movement. After that, the third of D major (F#) becomes the dominant of the third movement in B minor which acts as a recitative introduction to the fourth movement in

the key of A major. The fifth movement is in E major which act as the dominant of the fourth movement in A, and is also the relative major of the home key of C# minor. Then, another third to dominant relationship is attained by going from the third of the E major fifth movement to the G# minor sixth movement which is a dominant introduction to the seventh movement going back to the home key of C# minor. "This final theme was originally sketched in F# minor as the scherzo. One of the reasons for its transposition to C# minor for the finale, with a scherzo in E major substituted in its place, must have been that the Quartet had several movements in relatively flat key areas already, and in particular it also had a heavy emphasis on F# minor in the first movement." (Cooper, p.124)

So besides movements three and six, which are essentially considered to be introductions into the movements that follow them, the other movements are rather conventional forms which are pieced together effortlessly in the order; fugue, compacted sonata form, introduction including the theme and variations, scherzo with the trio, and introduction including a sonata for in the allegro. Beethoven's String Quartet in C# minor, Op. 131 is said to be the most closely integrated of all his large compositions. "This piece may be seen to be the culmination of his significant effort as a composer ever since going to Vienna. The seven movements run continuously into one another, and for the first time in Beethoven's music there is as emphatic and unmistakable thematic connection between the first movement and the last, not a reminiscence, but a functional parallel which helps bind the whole work together. A work of the deepest subtlety and beauty, at the end this quartet still seems to hinge on a stroke of the most elemental

nature, as rushing D major scales in the finale recall the Neapolitan relationship set up between the opening fugue in C# minor and the following Allegro in D.” (Sadie, v2 p.389)

When a friend asked Beethoven which of his quartets did he consider to be the best, Beethoven answered, “Each in its own way, Art demands of us that we should not stand still.” However, the composer later eluded that Op. 131 was his greatest work in this genre.

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