



MT. DESERT FESTIVAL of CHAMBER MUSIC

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PROGRAM NOTES

String Quartet in F major, Op. 135

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

Beethoven's Op. 135, his last quartet, was written in 1826 when the composer's life was in complete disarray. Illness, financial problems, inability to deal with domestic affairs, the attempted suicide of his nephew Karl, and, according to the late music historian Joseph Kerman, "paranoic tendencies [that] really passed the bounds that can be ascribed, conventionally, to deafness"--all of which contributed to Beethoven's wretched circumstances. Compositionally, however, 1826 was the year of three of his greatest quartets--the C# minor, Op. 131 and A minor, Op. 132, and the F major, written primarily during August and September.

The enormous emotional range of the late Beethoven quartets is not to be found in the Op. 135. Instead, we find a formal concision and textural spareness that sets this work apart from the other quartets of this period, and makes one wonder if this work might have presaged a new stylistic deviation for Beethoven. On the surface, it would seem to display a return to simplicity, albeit without being derivative or simple-minded. In remarks about the last movement of Beethoven's final piano sonata (1822), the pianist Alfred Brendel, in his book *Music Sounded Out*, uses words that are equally apt for the last quartet: "simplicity as a result of complexity--distilled experience."

The "distilled experience" of this quartet makes it perhaps the most elusive and enigmatic of all of his quartets. What are we to make of the unexpected outburst at the end of the trio section of the scherzo, or of the outburst of tremolo in the finale? What is the larger significance of the title (as found in a sketch) of the slow movement: "Song of Repose or Peace"? We still don't know what Beethoven meant by the mysterious phrases written above the beginning of the finale: "Der schwer gefasste Entschluss" ("The Decision Taken with Difficulty") and "Muss es sein?" ("Must It Be?") over the theme of the introduction, and "Es muss sein!" ("It Must Be!") over the first theme of the main body of the movement. If nothing else, Beethoven's last quartet is constantly surprising and unpredictable, and perhaps reveals him at his most cryptic.

String Quartet in B-flat major, Op. 130

Ludwig van Beethoven

Beethoven's late B-flat quartet, Op. 130, was the third in a group of three quartets commissioned by Prince Galitzin of St. Petersburg. Written between August and November 1825, it was first performed on March 21st of the following year. The relatively short period of composition is remarkable given that there are six movements, the last of them being the incomparable *Grosse Fuge*, or Great Fugue. There will always be some unanswered questions surrounding this quartet: why did Beethoven, after the music had already been engraved by the publisher, decide to reject the massive fugal finale (with its unmistakable motivic and key relationships to the other movements) and substitute another movement of an altogether different character? Was he hoping to make some extra money by composing a new movement and publishing the fugue

separately, both in its original form (now given a separate opus number, 133) and in a four-hand piano duet (Op. 134)? In fact, the alternative, new finale for Op. 130, written between September and November 1826, became Beethoven's last completed work; he became ill in December and died the following March.

The quartet, one of the composer's personal favorites, is a study in contrasts, yet the movements are closely integrated motivically and thematically. In the first movement, several motives in the *adagio* introduction become the basis for themes in the following *allegro*. The stark contrast of *adagio* and *allegro* elements are the essential feature of this movement where the frequent alternation of the two provide an unpredictable and dramatic narrative.

In contrast to this complex and learned opening movement, the humorous second movement is over before we know it, a wisp of a scherzo in B-flat minor with a trio section in the major, a sort of perpetual motion that demands a very loose bow arm from the first violinist.

The third movement, the first and longer of the two slow movements, has been described by Joseph Kerman as "such a spontaneous flow of musical notions, so perfectly disposed and so brilliantly scored, such an enchantment of intelligence and warmth and airy poise...[a] beautiful cascade of melody, dance, and sheer sonority..."

The structure of the fourth movement, marked *alla danza tedesca*, would appear to be relatively simple, but the cross rhythms and unusually detailed dynamic markings as well as the remote key (in this case, G major, totally unrelated to the D-flat major of the previous movement) indicate that this is no ordinary dance movement.

The somber fifth movement, with the title *Cavatina* (an operatic term signifying a short, simple song), is one of Beethoven's most personal statements. Here the first violin takes the role of the singer. Beethoven left copious sketches for this movement and told his violinist friend Karl Holz that "the *Cavatina* was composed in the very tears of misery, and that never had one of his own pieces moved him so deeply, and that merely to relive it in his feelings always cost him a tear."

In this performance we hear the *Grosse Fuge*, Beethoven's original finale for the Op. 130 quartet. Depending on which finale is played, one's perception of the quartet takes on a different cast. With the Great Fugue, the quartet's center of gravity naturally falls at the end. There is also a symmetry created between the two outer movements that are now more equal in length. With the alternative finale of 1826 and its Haydnesque mood of gaiety and wit, the center of gravity is shifted elsewhere.

Beethoven's preoccupation with Baroque fugue in his later years reached its culmination in two powerful works in B-flat major: the fugal finale of the *Hammerklavier* piano sonata, Op. 106, and the *Grosse Fuge*. Even after almost two hundred years, the *Grosse Fuge* never ceases to astonish--it is still a piece of "modern" music. It is one of those works that will always remain somewhat out of the mainstream because of its startling compulsiveness, musical complexity and intellectual rigor that causes it to transcend the accepted notions of music of its time. An anonymous Viennese critic in 1826 wrote in all seriousness that the fugue was "as incomprehensible as Chinese. Monstrous difficulties...music to please the inhabitants of Morocco." Suffice it to say that the Great Fugue will always be a formidable challenge to both performers and listeners.