Ludwig van Beethoven

String Quartet in A Minor, Op. 132

The Griller String Quartet

London
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BEETHOVEN

STRING QUARTET IN A MINOR, OP. 132

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The A Minor quartet, Op. 132, is one of that group of six written toward the end of Beethoven's life in which the composer has transcended this earthly sphere for a higher realm of celestial glory. New and unusual—even strange—in form, style and expression, these quartets are the pure expression of a lofty spirit chastened and made wise by its sojourn in this world. Years passed before they were evaluated at their true worth, but even their composer, often so quick to wrath, was undisturbed by the lack of comprehension shown by early audiences. He knew that this was music for a time later than his own.

Despite their sense of infinite vision, the creation of these quartets is surrounded by the usual clutter of gossip and small fact. One could wish it otherwise—could wish that their coming into the world had been something in the nature of a virgin birth—but perhaps the miracle lies in the very fact that though there was nothing mysterious in the circumstances which produced them, still the works themselves do exhale an atmosphere of mystical ecstasy that is of another world.

Late in 1822 the Russian Prince Nicholas Galitzin, an enthusiastic amateur musician who had met Beethoven in Vienna some years earlier, wrote the composer from St. Petersburg commissioning him to write three new quartets at his own price. The prince asked for a manuscript copy of each work and the dedication to him of the set, specifying that Beethoven should be free to sell the works to any publisher he chose. Beethoven asked fifty ducats for each quartet, and set about immortalizing his patron in three of his greatest compositions, the quartets opp. 127, 130 and 132. He was, however, in no hurry, and two and a half years elapsed before the first of the three—that in E flat, Op. 127, appeared. This was followed eight months later by the A Minor, Op. 132, and in March of 1826 the last of the three, in B flat, Op. 130, was completed.

The prince, for his part, paid the first fifty ducats promptly and the second fifty, plus four ducats representing the loss on exchange, somewhat later. War and insurrections breaking out in Russia in 1826 "occupied" him, as one chronicler has put it, until late in 1829, two years after Beethoven's death, and it was 1832 before the prince made a third payment of fifty ducats to Karl van Beethoven, nephew and heir of the composer.

However, this did not close the matter, as Karl claimed that half of the money received was in payment for manuscript copies of an overture (Op. 115) and the Mass in D, possessed by the prince, and that 75 ducats was still owing on the account of the quartets. The question was still being argued publicly in 1852, and was laid to rest only on the death of the Russian 14 years later.

The A Minor quartet is in five movements, a short "alla marcia" having been inserted between the slow third movement and the finale. In the first movement, an eight-bar introduction Assai sostenuto prepares the way for the allegro, sharply rhythmical throughout, with numerous changes of tempo and key. The theme is handed about impartially among the instruments, for Beethoven's quartet is a group of four equally strong-minded individuals, each with ideas to express on the subject in hand.

The second movement, Allegro ma non tanto, has been described as "a sort of scherzo chastened by a strong strain of minuet blood on the mother's side." The thematic material is meager in the extreme. Four bars in octaves lead to a two-bar phrase in the violins, echoed sequentially by the two lower voices, and out of this the whole movement is built. The trio section employs a dance tune that Beethoven had composed at the age of 20, and prudently saved for later use. Smooth-flowing and bland, it is given an unexpected twist by a harmonic syncopation that introduces the change of chord one beat before the ear expects it.

With the third movement, molto adagio, we reach the heart of the quartet. In the score Beethoven has called it "Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart," and in his notebook of May-June, 1825, we find his notation "Thank-you hymn to God by a sick man on his recovery. Feeling of new strength and re-awakened sensation." From the middle of April into early May of 1825 Beethoven suffered from an abdominal ailment and his diary of that period is filled with prescriptions of the attending physician. The "Dankgesang," conceived after his recovery, replaced in the quartet the Adagio which he had sketched for it before his illness. Set in the Lydian mode, it is steeped in reverential exaltation. Like the slow movement of the Ninth symphony, it is the form of variation in which a slow theme alternates with one less slow. The sequence of the variations is a gradual exaltation, achieving, in the final molto adagio the mystical ecstasy of the visionary.

The short Alla marcia, assai vivace which follows the slow movement was also sketched after Beethoven's illness. Two brief march-like sections, each repeated, lead into a piu allegro which is in fact a poignant recitative for the first violin, a psychological preparation for the passionate melancholy of the last movement.

In rondo form, this final movement is found among the first sketches for the quartet, written prior to Beethoven's illness. Actually, it belongs to a much earlier date, having been intended first for the close of the Ninth symphony, before the composer had conceived the idea of turning that work into a hymn to joy. Profoundly intense, imbued with a sense of tragedy, yet in the closing presto coda it rises suddenly into the glorious sphere of the earlier adagio, as once again Beethoven proclaims his faith in the ultimate triumph of man over fate.

E. C. STONE

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BEETHOVEN: STRING QUARTET No. 15 in A MINOR, Op. 132
1st Mov.: Assai sostenuto—Allegro
2nd Mov.: Allegro ma non tanto

THE GRILLER STRING QUARTET
Sidney Griller—Violin; Jack O'Brien—Violin;
Philip Burton—Viola; Colin Hampton—Cello

MADE IN ENGLAND
BEETHOVEN: STRING QUARTET No. 15 IN A MINOR, Op. 132

3rd Mov.: Molto, adagio—Andante
("Heiliger Dankesange"—"in the Latin mode")
4th Mov.: Alla marcia, assai vivace
5th Mov.: Allegro appassionato—Presto

THE GRILLER STRING QUARTET
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