

Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 130, *Liebquartett*
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Notes from *Guide to Chamber Music*, by Melvin Berger

The B-flat is the third and last of the quartets Beethoven composed for Prince Galitzin, but it was published second, between Op. 127 and Op. 132. In some ways, Op. 130 is the most appealing of the late quartets. It follows the classical order of movements, fast, scherzo, slow and finale, except that Beethoven adds an extra scherzo and slow movement just before the finale. The treatment also makes obeisance to classical concepts, even though the melodies, harmonies, rhythms and internal formal structures are handled quite freely.

Beethoven began the composition in March 1825 and was finished eight months later. The subtitle comes from the conversation books Beethoven used for daily communication in face of his total deafness, in which he affectionately referred to Op. 130 as *Liebquartett* (“Dear Quartet”). For some unknown reason Beethoven did not attend the premiere, given in Vienna by the Schuppanzigh Quartet on March 21, 1826, but waited in a nearby tavern. When Karl Holz, second violinist and Beethoven’s close companion, rushed over to tell him of the excellent reception, including the audience’s insistence on repeats of movements two and four, Beethoven reportedly replied: “Yes, these delicacies! Why not the Fugue [the original finale, which he later replaced]?” Then, after a moment’s thought, Beethoven contemptuously exclaimed, “Cattle! Asses!”

Despite the positive reaction, the final movement, an exceedingly long and elaborate fugue, confounded most listeners and invited much criticism from players and audiences alike. Beethoven’s publisher, Matthias Artaria, and many others felt it should be replaced with a finale more in keeping with the rest of the quartet. Well aware of Beethoven’s strong and principled nature, Artaria designed a roundabout way to get him to write a new last movement. Claiming that the public was demanding the fugue as a separate piece, Artaria first offered to pay Beethoven for a transcription for piano for four hands, and then convinced him to compose a substitute last movement — for an additional fee. Although the extra money probably played some part in Beethoven’s acquiescence, he most likely would have refused unless he agreed that the fugue was indeed too massive and powerful for the rest of the quartet. The published version of Op. 130, therefore, includes Beethoven’s new *Finale*, while the original, the *Grosse Fuge* (“Great Fugue”), appears separately as Op. 133.

The serene opening *Adagio* is not a prelude to what follows, but is an integral part of the thematic material; it reappears several times and binds the movements together. The high-spirited *Allegro* simultaneously flings out two striking phrases — a running sixteenth-note pattern in the first violin, and repeated notes followed by a jump up to a held note in the second. The third motif in the first group, a figure made up of cascading three-note turns introduced in the second *Allegro* by the first violin, is an outgrowth of the cello melody from the opening *Adagio*. At one point in this *Allegro*, the music quiets for two measures of cello alone that lead to the subsidiary theme, which proves to be a transformation of notes four through seven of the introduction. The short, relaxed development includes three brief fragments of the *Adagio*. The *Adagio* does not appear again in the recapitulation, but is heard between statements of the opening theme in the coda. In his novel, *Point Counter Point*, Aldous Huxley describes the slow and fast parts of this movement as “majesty alternating with a joke.”

The very short, engaging second movement presents the outgoing, jocular side of Beethoven's nature and offers a startling change from the complex first movement. With humor and charm, the simple opening sections merely repeats one melodic cell in symmetrical four-measure phrases. The contrasting middle part is similarly built on a single measure that is heard again and again until, suddenly, the four players join in an ominous ascending scale that ends with the first violin slithering down a chromatic scale. Twice more the violin goes sliding down in a devilish bit of fun, before leading a shortened reprise of the opening section.

The third movement projects a contrary air of mingled gaiety and melancholy. After two bars of introduction the viola states the somber principal theme in its darkest, lowest register, against which the other instruments contribute fresh, charming, countermelodies and accompaniment figures at the same time. The first contrasting melody is unabashedly sprightly and joyful; it is followed by a shortened, re-voiced statement of the opening theme. For the second interlude, the first violin plays a signing, dropping melody; the second violin's jaunty comments, however, prevent it from getting too sentimental or maudlin. The rest of the movement, essentially a freely varied repeat of what has come before, ends effectively with a loud, exclamatory chord.

Functioning as a second scherzo, the *Alla danza tedesca* (like a dance in the German style) is innocent and whimsical in mood. It is organized in ternary form. The first part captures the swaying rhythmic robustness of the Ländler, a threebeat German peasant dance. The middle section is also in a rustic dance style, with three repeated staccato notes serving as its most prominent melodic feature. The expanded and elaborated return of the opening includes a particularly intriguing passage near the end in which the melody is fragmented, measure for measure. The poetic and predominantly soft *Cavatina* (Italian for "short aria") exemplifies Beethoven's "interior music," spiritual and emotionally intense utterances of the utmost eloquence. His friend, violinist Karl Holz, wrote that Beethoven "composed the Cavatina of the quartet in B flat amid sorrow and tears; never did his music breathe so heartfelt and inspiration, and even the memory of this movement brought tears to his eyes." The passionately sad movement is essentially one continuous outpouring of melody loosely organized into a three-part form. The climax comes just before the return of the opening melodic gesture, in a brief seven-bar passage marked *beklemmt* ("oppressed"), when the first violin whispers its disconnected cries of pain and anguish over pulsing repeated notes in the other instruments.

The *Finale*, which Beethoven substituted for the original monumental fugue, was written at his brother's house in Gneixendorff, in November 1826, between bouts of serious abdominal illness that were to lead to his death four months later. Delightful and cheery on the surface, the new finale reflects several connections with earlier movements: the opening rhythm derives from the *Presto*; the subsequent active subject comes from the *Allegro* theme of the first movement; and the closing rhythm recalls the quartet introduction. The Schuppanzigh Quartet introduced the new *Finale* in December 1826 and gave the premier of the entire reconstituted quartet on April 22, 1827, nearly one month after the composer's death.