

American String Quartet

Ludwig van Beethoven

Born December 16, 1770, in Bonn

Died March 26, 1827, in Vienna

Quartet in B-flat, Op. 130, “Liebquartett”

Adagio ma non troppo; Allegro ~ Presto ~ Andante con moto, ma non troppo
Alla danza tedesca: Allegro assai ~ Cavatina: Adagio molto espressivo ~ Große Fuge

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 to 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 4 through 7 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, revoiced 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 three-beat 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 intense and often frenzied *Große Fuge* baffles many listeners with its giant leaps, clashing dissonances, and overwhelming rhythmic drive. Harold Bauer, who often performed Beethoven’s four-hand piano transcription of the *Große Fuge*, believed that the work was misinterpreted. “The *Große Fuge* is more like a glorified polkascherzo,” he said. “People play it

as if it were profoundly mystical which it is not. They put philosophy into it instead of music.” Most other interpreters and analysts disagree. They are stirred by its rage and vehemence and are awestruck by its grand proportions and symphonic elements. It is a brilliant paradigm of various fugal techniques, some harking back to the polyphony of Bach, other looking ahead to the advanced musical thinking of Liszt and Wagner.

The brief opening section, marked *Overtura* by Beethoven, resembles the introduction to an opera, but instead of presenting tunes from the opera it sets out four different statements of the main fugal subject. It is first presented in broad, loud, accented tones: the next statement is much faster and rhythmically altered. The tempo then slows for a quiet, smooth, legato statement of the same theme. A final presentation, first violin alone, reveals the melody in note-by-note fragmentation.

The *Overtura* is followed by the *Fuga*, the fugue proper, which starts with the violin flinging out a subsidiary subject, an angular, leaping melody against which the viola pounds out the fragmented main subject. For over 125 measures of the fugue Beethoven does not drop below a relentless *fortissimo* (“very loud”) dynamic level, with accents to add even more power to the wild music. Then suddenly the music quiets, the key changes, and another fugal episode, based on the subsidiary theme and the main subject ensues, all *pianissimo* (“very soft”). The third episode, faster in tempo, is based on a rhythmic transformation of the main theme. Varied sections follow, all growing from the same material though reworked and refashioned into an amazing variety of shapes and forms. The coda offers fleeting glimpses of the different subjects in a similar manner to the *Overtura* and then builds to still another climax and an abrupt ending.

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Joan Tower

Quartet No. 1, “Night Fields”

Joan Tower is widely regarded as one of the most important American composers living today. During a career spanning more than fifty years, she has made lasting contributions to musical life in the United States as composer, performer, conductor, and educator. Her works have been commissioned by major ensembles, soloists, and orchestras, including the Emerson, Tokyo and Muir quartets, soloists Evelyn Glennie, Carol Wincenc, David Shifrin, John Browning, and the orchestras of Chicago, New York, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, and Washington DC among others. Tower was the first composer chosen for a Ford Made in America consortium commission of sixty-five orchestras. Leonard Slatkin and the Nashville Symphony recorded **Made in America** in 2008 (along with **Tambor** and **Concerto for Orchestra**). The album collected three Grammy awards: Best Classical Contemporary Composition, Best Classical Album, and Best Orchestral Performance. In 1990 she became the first woman to win the prestigious Grawemeyer Award for **Silver Ladders**, a piece she wrote for the St. Louis Symphony where she was Composer-in-

Residence from 1985-88. Other residencies with orchestras include a 10-year residency with the Orchestra of St. Luke's (1997-2007) and the Pittsburgh Symphony (2010-2011). Tower studied piano and composition at Bennington College and Columbia University. Her earliest works were serial in concept, but her music soon developed the lyricism, rhythmic drive, and colorful orchestration that characterize her subsequent works. She co-founded the Da Capo Chamber Players in 1969 as pianist — its accolades included the 1973 Naumburg Chamber Music Award — but also wrote several well-received pieces for the ensemble. She is currently Asher Edelman Professor of Music at Bard College, where she has taught since 1972. Her music is published by Associated Music Publishers.

About *Night Fields*, Ms. Tower wrote this: “The title came after the work was completed, and provides an image or setting for some of the moods of the piece: a cold windy night in a wheat field lit up by a bright full moon where waves of fast-moving colors ripple over the field, occasionally settling on a patch of gold.”