

AVIV STRING QUARTET

March 15, 2009

Haydn, String Quartet in G, Op. 77, No. 2 (Hob. II:82)

The subtitle to the two quartets of Op. 77 by Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) could have been “Who’s Afraid of the Big Bad Beethoven?” By 1799, when Haydn wrote these works, a genuine rivalry had developed between the two composers. Up to that point, Beethoven - younger by about 38 years - had avoided public comparison with Haydn by pointedly avoiding the genres that had made the senior composer famous: chiefly, quartets and symphonies. Beethoven had concentrated instead on other chamber combinations, such as his piano trios and the famous Septet, Op. 20. Now, however, he stepped boldly into the string quartet arena with his six Quartets, Op. 18. The Viennese intelligentsia was astonished. One listener even described them as “the greatest of their kind.”

The year before Beethoven’s Op. 18 appeared in print in 1800, Haydn had completed the two quartets later published as Opus 77. Originally, he was commissioned to write six quartets. Why then, did he stop at two, never to bring another to completion? Was the celebrated composer of The Creation now shy to be compared with Beethoven, the upstart darling of Vienna? Apparently, that was the case, as had happened after Mozart had made a splash in Vienna with his piano concertos and operas. Haydn then avoided those genres. Now a string quartet rival loomed, and Haydn simply backed off. Biographer H.C. Robbins Landon puts it this way:

Perhaps we must judge the non-composition of the intended Op. 77, Nos. 3-6, in this light; that is, of Haydn quietly withdrawing from the stage, leaving it to Beethoven and his Op. 18.

In Haydn’s late works, we can hear a glimmer of the coming age of emotional Romanticism. The first movement of this quartet is such a work, providing us with a subtle variety of moods in its first theme group ranging from the melancholy to the dramatic. The second theme is consistently song-like, with a cheerfully Classical ending before the Exposition’s rumbling finish. The intensity of the Development section shows Haydn’s debt to Beethoven at this time—point counterpoint, we might call it. However, a politely strict yet truncated Recapitulation rounds out the movement.

The usual order of middle movements is reversed here, as Haydn next gives us a minuet. However, it is one of his witty, quick, scherzo-like creations. Playful and comical, the music’s shifting rhythms and the cello’s imitation of timpani are vintage Haydn humor. The trio section jumps into a distant key for a more traditionally styled minuet.

Although the theme announced at the outset of the Andante is not striking, the variations on it that follow more than make up for this plainness. Rich in feeling, these explore a restrained expressiveness among the strings. The variations are punctuated by short transitions designed to clear the musical palate.

The finale's main theme is more discovered than stated. It has all the dash of a peasant dance. Although Haydn gives us a sustained second theme, he allows the movement to be dominated by the first. Near the end, the music becomes gradually hushed. This proves to be an anti-climax, which only serves to heighten the force of the work's final moments.

Beethoven, String Quartet in F Minor, Op. 95 "Quartett Serioso"

Between 1806, when Ludwig van Beethoven (1770- 1827) finished his three "Razumovsky" Quartets, Op. 59, and 1810, when he dashed off the "Serioso" Quartet in one month, the composer wrote little chamber music. A cello sonata (Op. 69), two piano trios (Op. 70), and the Op. 74 string quartet are the tally. During this time, he was deeply occupied with such matters as the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies and the last two piano concertos, to name only a few of the projects. Personal problems involving, finances, health, deafness, love, and family life also beset the composer at the time. We are not surprised, then, that he was at turns despondent and angry, and that he should express these feelings in his most intimate medium, the string quartet. Of the "Serioso" quartet, analyst/philosopher Joseph Kerman writes:

. . . This is first and foremost a problematic work which thrusts in the direction of eccentricity and self-absorption. But Beethoven at his most quirky is Beethoven possessed. In this quartet and in none of the others so far, he evokes that almost tangible sense of the artist assaulting a daemon of his own fancying. . . .

The F-minor Quartet is not a pretty piece, but it is terribly strong—and perhaps rather terrible. . . . The piece stands aloof, preoccupied with its radical private war on every fiber of rhetoric and feeling that Beethoven knew or could invent. Everything unessential falls victim, leaving a residue of extreme concentration, in dangerously high tension.

Kerman uses the word "concentration," and we might paraphrase that with the word "compression." For the individual movements of this quartet are among the shortest Beethoven ever wrote in this medium. And just as air heats up when compressed, so does Beethoven's music. The first movement, for example is dominated by the opening five-note motive. Though he does introduce other ideas, this brusque idea recurs often, virtually etching itself on our ears. The form of the movement, too, is compressed. Ignoring the usually

obligatory repeat of the exposition, Beethoven plunges into a compressed development after just one hearing. Then, the recapitulation is a compressed version of the already terse exposition. Finally, the coda concentrates on the five-note motive, gradually grinding it down dynamically from a pounding fortissimo to a whispering pianissimo.

Beethoven named this quartet “Serioso” himself, and nowhere in it is the description more apt than the second movement. With melancholy concentration, the composer introduces a fully harmonic opening paragraph. We find no prettiness here, nor in the middle section, which starts as a fugato on a new idea. This dissolves into a wispy episode. Then another fugue begins on a new theme, but now the first fugato theme joins in: a double fugue! (The careful listener will also hear the original theme occasionally turned upside down.) After a reprise of the opening paragraph, the music becomes quiet, only to be shaken by the forcible opening of the third movement. The movement would be the “scherzo” (scherzo = joke), but this music is no laughing matter. In Beethoven, anger and determination are often indistinguishable, and this is one of those times. The recurring Trio section offers some emotional relief, but the persistent main idea always hammers away afterward.

The brief Larghetto introduction to the finale bespeaks tragic introspection, but it leads to music that comes off like a quick waltz. This is not a merry waltz, however, but a passionate and driving one, much like the breathless finale to the “Appassionata” piano sonata (also in F minor, incidentally). By contrast, the major mode coda at the very end could be taken as some kind of joke on Beethoven’s part. Having been dubbed a “comic-opera” ending, it is almost as if Beethoven thought, “Whoops, we’d better give them a happy ending.” Whether we take the music this way or, more nobly, as proof of the composer’s belief in an indomitable human spirit, we come out with positive feelings.

Shostakovich, String Quartet No. 2 in A, Op. 68

The years of World War II were significant in the musical development of Dmitry Shostakovich (1906-1975). In symphonic music, his Wartime Trilogy (Symphonies Nos. 7, 8, and 9) set new standards for the composer, and in the chamber music domain, he explored new depths of expression. Shostakovich’s famous Piano Trio No. 2, completed in August 1944 (just before the Second String Quartet), was in many ways about the war. The immense scope of the war’s tragedies and atrocities were just then becoming known, and they moved the composer deeply. In addition, he lost two of his closest musical friends

during 1943-1944: first Veniamin Fleischmann, his pupil, killed fighting in the Siege of Leningrad; then, music critic Ivan Sollertinsky, to whose memory the Piano Trio was dedicated.

The Second Quartet was written in less than three weeks during September 1944 at the Composers' Retreat of Ivanovo. At the time, a Russian victory in the war seemed assured. The work is on a large scale. Shostakovich labels the first movement "Overture." Its relatively lightweight opening theme soon yields to far more serious stuff in the second theme. Instead of diving into a conventional development, a new theme is introduced. Skillfully, this is mixed with the others and developed masterfully. A review of themes then unfolds, and the tension, which has been building steadily, begins to relax. The lyrical return of the first theme brings us back to the emotional baseline of the opening.

"Recitativo and Romance" focuses on the first violin, which functions something like a story teller. A full introduction is achieved in the improvisatory-style Recitativo. Then, against a nocturnal accompaniment, the violin gives its lyrical narrative, becoming at moments a Gipsy instrument. Occasional comments from the other strings add depth to the narration. Elements from the Recitativo return near the end, rounding out this remarkable movement.

Shostakovich is famous for his waltzes, which usually carry a sardonic mood, and this one is no exception. Impish and, at times, surreal, the melodies etch out a musical picture that is slightly off-kilter, in some moments going in and out of focus. Possibly, this movement is intended as a Dance of Death reflecting the horrors of war. The surreal mood is carried into the Adagio introduction to the last movements. It arrives at a statement of a hymn-like theme, which Shostakovich uses as the basis for the 15 variations that follow. These gradually increase in agitation until the tension is relieved by the last three variations and a return to the Adagio. A restatement of the simple main theme is now richly harmonized as an apotheosis that aptly concludes the quartet.

Program Notes by Dr. Michael Fink
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