

String Quartet in B-flat major, Op. 130

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Born December 16, 1770, Bonn

Died March 26, 1827, Vienna

Beethoven composed the *Quartet in B-flat major* between July and December of 1825, and the music had its premiere in Vienna on March 21, 1826, almost exactly a year to the day before the composer's death. This massive quartet, consisting of six movements that span a total of nearly 50 minutes, concluded with a complex and extremely difficult fugue that left the first audience stunned. Beethoven, by this time totally deaf, did not attend the premiere, but when told that the fourth and fifth movements had been so enthusiastically applauded that they had to be repeated, he erupted with anger at the audience: "Yes, these delicacies! Why not the Fugue? Cattle! Asses!"

But it was not just the audience at the premiere that found the concluding fugue difficult. With some trepidation, Beethoven's publisher asked the crusty old composer to write a substitute finale and to publish the fugue separately. To everyone's astonishment, Beethoven agreed to that request and wrote a new finale – a good-natured rondo – in the fall of 1826. Since that time, critics have debated which ending makes better sense artistically, and this is one of those debates that will probably continue forever. For generations, the *Quartet in B-flat Major* was performed with the substitute rondo as the finale, but recently that practice appears to have evolved, and quartets today are increasingly following Beethoven's original intention and concluding the *Quartet in B-flat major* with the *Grosse Fuge*. The present performance offers the quartet in its original form.

In either version, this music presents problems of unity, for its six movements are quite different from each other. The issue is intensified when the *Grosse Fuge* is used as the finale, for this movement is so individual, so fierce, that it does seem an independent statement. In its original form, the quartet consists of two huge outer movements that frame four shorter movements (two scherzos and two slow movements). The music encompasses a huge range of emotion, from the frankly playful to some of the most deeply-felt music Beethoven ever wrote. The unifying principle of this quartet may simply be its disunity, its amazing range of expression and mood.

The first movement, cast in the highly-modified sonata form Beethoven used in his final years, is built on two contrasting tempos: a reverent *Adagio* and a quick *Allegro* that flies along

on a steady rush of sixteenth-notes. These tempos alternate, sometimes in sections only one measure long – there is some extraordinarily beautiful music here, full of soaring themes and unexpected shifts of key. By contrast, the *Presto* – flickering and shadowy – flits past in less than two minutes; in ABA form, it offers a long center section and a sudden close on the return of the opening material. The solemn opening of the *Andante* is a false direction, for it quickly gives way to a rather elegant movement in sonata form, full of poised, flowing, and calm music. Beethoven titled the fourth movement *Alla danza tedesca*, which means “Dance in the German Style.” In 3/8 meter, it is based on the rocking, haunting little tune that opens the movement.

The *Cavatina* has become one of the most famous movements in all Beethoven’s quartets. Everyone is struck by the intensity of its feeling, though few agree as to what it expresses – some feel it tragic, others view it as serene; Beethoven himself confessed that even thinking about this movement moved him to tears. Near the end comes an extraordinary passage that Beethoven marks *Beklemmt* (“Oppressive”): the music seems to stumble and then makes its way to the close over halting and uncertain rhythms.

This performance concludes with the *Grosse Fuge* Beethoven had intended as the original finale. Let it be said right from the start: the *Grosse Fuge* is a brilliant piece of music and a very tough one, and it should come as no surprise that it has excited quite different responses. Though he was no particular admirer of Beethoven, Stravinsky near the end of his long life came to know and respect the late quartets, and his admiration for the *Grosse Fuge* led him to call it an “absolutely contemporary piece of music that will be contemporary forever.” At the other extreme, the iconoclastic American critic B.H. Haggin was adamant that the *Grosse Fuge* should be considered “inaccessible – except for a quiet and lovely episode – by some music lovers who have listened to it repeatedly.”

The *Grosse Fuge* is in fact not one fugue, but three different fugal sections, each in a contrasting tempo – Beethoven described it as a “Grand Fugue, freely treated in some places, fugally elaborated in others.” The brief *Overtura* suggests the shape of the fugue subject in three different permutations (all of which will reappear and be treated differently) and then proceeds directly into the first fugue, an extremely abrasive *Allegro* in B-flat major that demands a great deal from both performers and audiences. Much of the complexity here is rhythmic: not only does the fugue subject leap across a span of several octaves, but its progress is often obscured by its overlapping triple, duple, and dotted rhythms. The lyric, flowing central section, a *Meno*

mosso e moderato in G-flat major, is fugal in character rather than taking the form of a strict fugue. It gives way to the *Allegro molto e con brio*, which is derived from the second appearance of the fugue subject in the *Overtura*; here it bristles with trills and sudden pauses. Near the close, Beethoven recalls fragments of the different sections, then offers a full-throated restatement of the fugue theme before the rush to the cadence.

Individual listeners may draw their own conclusions about the use of the *Grosse Fuge* as a fitting close to this quartet, but there can be no doubt that the *Quartet in B-flat major* – by turns beautiful, aggressive, charming, and violent – remains as astonishing a piece of music for us today as it was to that first audience in 1826.