SEATTLE CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY

May 5, 2024

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

The Razumovsky Quartets

String Quartet in F Major, Opus 59, No. 1
Allegro
Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando
Adagio molto e mesto
Thème russe: Allegro

INTERMISSION

String Quartet in E Minor, Opus 59, No. 2
Allegro
Molto adagio
Allegretto
Presto

String Quartet in C Major, Opus 59, No. 3
Introduzione; Andante con moto: Allegro vivace
Andante con moto quasi Allegretto
Menuetto: Grazioso
Allegro molto

BEETHOVEN: THE RAZUMOVSKY QUARTETS

Count Andreas Kyrillovich Razumovsky, the Russian ambassador to Vienna, was an amateur violinist and string quartet enthusiast who had studied with Haydn. When he commissioned a set of three string quartets from Beethoven in 1805, he could not possibly have known what he would receive in return. Beethoven had at that time written one set of six quartets (published in 1801 as his Opus 18), cast very much in the high classical mold as set out by Haydn and Mozart. Doubtless Razumovsky expected something on this order, and he provided Beethoven with some Russian themes and asked that he include one in each of the three quartets. The count further assisted the composer by putting at his disposal the count's own string quartet, led by Beethoven's friend Ignaz Schuppanzigh. Beethoven worked two years on these quartets, completing them in 1806 and publishing them two years later.

The three quartets Beethoven published as his Opus 59, known today as the "Razumovsky Quartets," were so completely original that in one stroke they redefined the entire paradigm of the string quartet. These are massive works–in duration, sonority, and dramatic scope–and it is no surprise that they alienated their early audiences. Only with time did Beethoven's achievement in this music become clear. Trying to take the measure of this new music, some early critics referred to the Razumovsky quartets as "symphony quartets," but this is misleading, for the quartets are genuine chamber music. But it is true that what the *Eroica* did for the symphony, these quartets–and the two that followed in 1809 and 1810–did for the string quartet: they opened new vistas, entirely new conceptions of what the string quartet might be and of the range of expression it might make possible.

Schuppanzigh's quartet is reported to have burst into laughter at their first reading of the *Quartet in F Major*, convinced that Beethoven had intended a joke on them. When Schuppanzigh complained about the difficulty of this music, Beethoven shot back: "Do you think I worry about your wretched fiddle when the spirit speaks to me?"

String Quartet in F Major, Opus 59, No. 1

The *Quartet in F Major, Opus 59, No. 1* is, at forty minutes, one of the longest of Beethoven's quartets, and its opening *Allegro* is conceived on a gigantic scale. The movement springs to life with its main theme rising powerfully in the cello under steady accompaniment and then taken up by the first violin. This is an extremely fertile subject, appearing in many

guises and giving the movement much of its rhythmic and melodic shape. It is entirely characteristic of Beethoven that this theme, which will unleash so much strength and variety across the span of the movement, should be marked *dolce* on its first appearance. There is no exposition repeat–the music *seems* to repeat, but Beethoven is already pressing forward–and the development centers on an unusual fugal passage introduced by the second violin. At the conclusion of the movement, the opening subject returns to drive to a massive climax marked by huge chords and slashing power. While this music is clearly conceived for string quartet, both in sonority and technique, it is exactly this sort of powerful climax that earned these quartets the nickname "symphony quartets."

A curious feature of this quartet is that all four movements are (more or less) in sonata form. The second, *Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando*, has an unusual shape, alternating scherzando sections with trios. The opening rhythm–announced by the cello and consisting of only one note, a recurring B-flat–underlies the entire movement; this figure–one repeated note–particularly infuriated many early performers and listeners. The main theme itself, an oddly asymmetrical figure, appears in the fourth measure and takes up some of this rhythm.

The heartfelt third movement is built on two ideas: a grieving opening theme announced by the first violin (Beethoven marks it *mesto*: "sad") and a steadily-rising melody first played by the cello. The movement comes to a close as a quasi-cadenza for violin leads without pause to the finale, marked *Thème russe*. Here is the Count's "Russian theme," a folk melody played by the cello under a sustained violin trill. The blazing final movement is based primarily on this theme, and its energy level matches the power of the first two movements. Beethoven offers a final recall of this theme–at a very slow tempo–just before the *Presto* rush to the close.

String Quartet in E Minor, Opus 59, No. 2

If the first Razumovsky quartet is broad and heroic and the third extroverted and virtuosic, the second has defied easy characterization. Part of the problem is that in this quartet Beethoven seems to be experimenting with new ideas about themes and harmony. The thematic material of the first movement in particular has baffled many, for it seems almost consciously non-thematic, while harmonically this quartet can seem just as elusive. All four movements are cast initially in the tonality of E, but Beethoven refuses to settle anywhere for very long, one key melting into another key in just a matter of measures.

Such a description would seem to make the *Quartet in E Minor* a nervous work, unsettled in its procedures and unsettling to audiences. But the wonder is that–despite these many original strokes–this music is so unified, so convincing, and at times so beautiful. Simple verbal description cannot begin to provide a measure of this music, but a general description can at least aid listeners along the way to discovering this music for themselves. The two chords that open the *Allegro* will recur throughout, at extremely variant dynamic levels and used in quite different ways. The "theme" that follows seems almost a fragment, and Beethoven reduces it further, isolating rhythmic motives or developing intervals from this opening statement. This is a big movement, and Beethoven asks for repeats of both the exposition and development before the movement closes on a massive restatement of its opening theme, which suddenly fades into silence.

Beethoven's friend Carl Czerny said that the composer had been inspired to write the *Molto Adagio* "when contemplating the starry sky and thinking of the music of the spheres." Beethoven specifies in the score that "This piece must be played with great feeling," and after the somewhat nervous first movement the *Adagio* brings a world of expressive intensity. This massive movement, in sonata form, opens with a prayer-like main theme, but all is not peace–along the way Beethoven punctuates the generally hushed mood with powerful massed chords before the movement comes to a quiet close in E major.

The *Allegretto*, with its skittering main theme (the pulses are off the beat), feels somewhat playful. In its trio section, Beethoven introduces Razumovsky's "Russian theme" and then proceeds to subject it to such strait-jacketed contrapuntal treatment that some critics have felt that Beethoven is trying annihilate the theme; Joseph Kerman speaks of the trio as Beethoven's "revenge" on Razumovsky. The finale begins in the wrong key (C major) and then wobbles uncertainly between C major and E minor throughout. Despite the air of high-spirited dancing in the main theme, this movement too brings stuttering phrases and the treatment of bits of theme, which are sometimes tossed rapidly between the four voices. A *Più Presto* coda brings this most original quartet to a sudden close.

String Quartet in C Major, Opus 59, No. 3

Completed in December 1806, the *Quartet in C Major* proved from the beginning the least problematic of the Razumovsky Quartets. In an early review, the *Allgemeine Musikalische*

Zeitung said of the three quartets of Opus 59: "They are profoundly conceived and finely worked out, but are not intelligible to the general public–perhaps with the exception of the 3rd, in C major, whose individuality, melodiousness and harmonic strength must surely win over every educated music lover." Yet the *Quartet in C Major* presents listener and performer with problems all its own. It was composed at exactly the same time as Beethoven's *Fourth Symphony*, and both quartet and symphony open in an aural fog. The two works begin with a slow introduction that purposely obscures both harmony and rhythm–Beethoven cuts listeners adrift and leaves them struggling for some sense of direction. And then the *Allegro* of both works establishes a definite tonality and tempo. The spiritual father of both symphony and quartet was almost certainly Mozart's *"Dissonant" Quartet* of 1785.

In Beethoven's quartet the first violin leaps out brightly with the opening theme of the *Allegro vivace* and proclaims the clear tonality of C major. The violin's first two notes announce an important pattern: that rise of a half-step will unify the entire first movement. The first violin has so concertante a part that this movement (in fact, the entire quartet) has something of the feel of a violin concerto. That virtuoso part, often in a very high register, dominates this sonata-form movement, while the other three voices are frequently relegated to the role of accompanists. The music arrives at a moment of stasis before one of Beethoven's shortest codas: the cello's half-step rises launch a rapid chromatic stringendo to the final cadence.

The *Andante* opens with a *forte* cello pizzicato, and the first violin outlines the brooding A-minor theme that will dominate the movement. A surprising feature of this movement is that its steady tread of six eighth-notes per measure continues almost throughout, but rather than becoming monotonous, this measured pace takes on a force of its own, particularly as it is reinforced by Beethoven's imaginative and expressive use of cello pizzicato. A second theme–in C major–lightens the mood somewhat, but the tone of the *Andante* remains dark and restless. Once again, the first violin rises high above the other instruments, often in passages of an almost aching beauty.

In contrast to the intense *Andante*, the *Menuetto* can seem lightweight. Vincent d'Indy felt that it represented "a return to the style of 1796," and it is true that the movement lacks the originality of the movements that surround it (it is also the final minuet movement in any Beethoven quartet). But if the music can seem lightweight, it agreeably lessens the tension between the powerful movements on either side of it, and Beethoven makes piquant contrast

between the flowing legato of the minuet and the sharply-articulated staccato of its trio. Rather than conclude with a simple *da capo*, Beethoven writes out a coda that leads without pause to the final movement.

That finale leaps to life with a brilliant fugue introduced by the viola. This movement has been called a fugue, but that is inaccurate: only its beginning is fugal–the remainder is in sonata form. The most impressive aspect of this movement is its relentless energy–it is virtually a perpetual motion for four virtuoso players. One of its most memorable sequences occurs in the development, where each of the instruments is in turn given a brilliant eight-measure passage (based on the final measure of the fugue theme) that simply goes up and comes down the scale. But Beethoven specifies that each instrument must remain on one string, and the result is a brief but dazzling cadenza for each instrument as the others accompany. It is gloriously apt quartet writing, and the effect in performance is breathtaking. There are few finales in Beethoven–or anywhere else–full of such headlong energy, and the music finally hurtles to a cadence. But it is a false cadence, as if Beethoven is unwilling to quit too soon. The music tentatively resumes, then speeds ahead and–set off by a lovely countertheme in the second violin–races to the end of one of Beethoven's most exciting finales.

Program notes by Eric Bromberger