



Quatuor Mosaïques

Quatuor Mosaïques (Erich Höbarth, violin; Andrea Bischof, violin;
Anita Mitterer, viola; Christophe Coin, cello)

Joseph Haydn
(1732-1809)

String Quartet in D Major, Op. 33, No. 6 (Hob. III/42) (1781)
Vivace assai
Andante
Scherzo: Allegro
Finale: Allegretto

Felix Mendelssohn
(1809-1847)

String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor, Op. 13 (1827)
Adagio - Allegro vivace
Adagio non lento
Intermezzo: Allegretto con moto
Presto

INTERMISSION

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

String Quartet No. 15 in A Minor, Op. 132 (1825)
Assai sostenuto - Allegro
Allegro ma non tanto
Molto adagio
Alla marcia, assai vivace - Più allegro
Allegro appassionato

Haydn: String Quartet in D Major, Op. 33, No. 6

In 1782, the Viennese publishing firm of Artaria issued a history-making set of six new quartets by Franz Joseph Haydn, to which it attached the opus number 33. Haydn had composed these works the preceding year and had contacted well-heeled music lovers he hoped would respond with honoraria as subscribers to the new publication. As part of that exploratory process, he provided copies to at least three potential patrons on December 3, 1781, with accompanying letters emphasizing that “they are written in a new and special way, for I have not composed any for 10 years.”

The Op. 33 Quartets were indeed distinct from those Haydn – or anyone else – had written before. His earliest quartets had emphasized polished gentility, and from there he had proceeded to explorations of textural power, *Sturm und Drang* hyper-drama, arcane counterpoint, and formal rigor. After his decade-long withdrawal from the genre, Haydn re-emerged in his Op. 33 set as the master of quartet-tish wit. Everybody admired Haydn’s Op. 33 Quartets, including a minor composer from Mainz who submitted them to Artaria as his own work that he wished to have published. He was unsuccessful, since Artaria was already quite familiar with them, obviously; but at least that composer scored high forchutzpah.

The set effectively jump-started what in the preceding decade had become a ho-hum genre. It gave rise to not only Haydn’s continuing quartet output but also the great quartets of Mozart’s maturity, and, at a gap of about 15 years, to the early quartets of Haydn’s pupil Beethoven. Indeed, the prancing opening of the D Major Quartet (Op. 33, No. 6) seems to prefigure the outset of Mozart’s famous *Hunt* Quartet (K.458), which would be written two years later and dedicated to none other than Haydn. Though based on a single theme, Haydn’s *Vivace assai* does not lack for variety.

He keeps the texture ever alive by distributing the music with equanimity through the ensemble, and he deceives listeners with a false recapitulation, bringing back the music of the opening as one would expect but then cutting it off with searching harmonies before picking up on the recapitulation in earnest.

In the *Andante*, the second violin and viola sometimes assume principal melodic importance as the first violin intones higher descant notes above. Is that the Ukrainian tune “Ikhav Kozak za Dunaj” we hear in their contours at the opening and often thereafter? (Beethoven wrote variations on it, for flute and piano, and in the 1940’s it achieved pop-song status as *Yes, My Darling Daughter*.) Quite likely: at least some of the Op. 33 Quartets were played for the Russian Grand Duchess Maria Feodorovna when she visited Vienna in late 1781, and an early 19th-century edition of the set carries the dedication “To the Grand Duke of Russia.” Offbeat accents in the ensuing Scherzo convey gruff humor. For his finale, Haydn turns to his beloved form of the double variations – interlaced variations on two contrasting themes, each variation displaying a distinct character before the piece’s scurrying conclusion.

Mendelssohn: String Quartet No. 2 in A Minor, Op. 13

During a family trip to the south of Germany in 1827, the 18-year-old Felix Mendelssohn became romantically smitten. The infatuation passed, but not before Mendelssohn, with adolescent hormones a-pumping, wrote a song to a poem by his friend Johann Gustav Droyson, *Frage* (*Questions*). The text has to do with young love – “Is it true that you’ll always be waiting for me beneath the arbor?” – hopeful, but requiring insistent reassurance as the singer repeats the three-syllable, three-note opening phrase “Ist es wahr?” (“Is it true?”). That motto would also serve as the central musical theme and emotional engine of

Mendelssohn’s A-minor String Quartet, which he composed shortly thereafter. The phrase is first heard following the slow introduction, and returns often, with great rhetorical effect.

The piece was begun in July 1827 and completed that October 26, two years before Mendelssohn’s String Quartet in E-flat Major; the latter was published first, however, which is why it bears the apparently earlier opus number of 12. A bit of complication also extends to the key of the piece. The work as a whole is quite clearly in A minor, but because the first movement begins with an introduction in A major one often sees this quartet identified as being in that key.

The Op. 13 Quartet tends toward the passionate (as befits the idea that generated it), and nowhere more than in the second movement, an intense *Adagio non lento* that even incorporates a serious fugato section, recalling the sort of musical procedure that Beethoven explored in his late quartets. The spirit of late Beethoven also infuses the larger conception of Mendelssohn’s piece, in which thematic material from earlier in the quartet is recalled repeatedly as the piece unrolls. This is certainly true of the “Ist es wahr?” motif in general, but it is played out with considerable imagination as the whole *raison d’être* of the finale. The movement opens with a powerful recitative proclamation, replete with dramatic tremolos; upon hearing it, it’s hard not to think of Beethoven’s Op. 132 Quartet – also in A Minor – and his Ninth Symphony. So, it seems, did at least one early listener, a certain clueless Abbé Bernardin, who, seated next to Mendelssohn during a performance of this quartet in Paris, in 1832, leaned over at that point of the piece to share an insight: “He has that in one of his symphonies.” “Who?” asked the puzzled Mendelssohn. “Why, Beethoven, the composer of this quartet,” the Abbé responded. (So reported Mendelssohn in a letter to his sister Fanny, noting that “this

was a very dubious compliment.”) Following the recitative, Mendelssohn introduces a wealth of themes, many of which are at least closely related to melodies we have heard before. Hints of the second-movement fugato return, and at the movement’s end we are plunged again into the music of the quartet’s first-movement introduction. This brings Mendelssohn’s musical narrative full circle—a trick he may have learned from Beethoven’s song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte* or (even more à propos) the Op. 131 String Quartet.

Beethoven: String Quartet No. 15 in A Minor, Op. 132

The A Minor String Quartet (Op. 132) occupied Ludwig van Beethoven from about February through July 1825. By that time, he had reached a sorry state, increasingly isolated by deafness. That April he was beset by a serious inflammation of the intestine. His physician, Dr. Anton Braunhofer, demanded that Beethoven give himself over to rest and follow a bland diet the composer did not like. Whether the physician’s treatment was responsible for the patient’s recovery we cannot know, but after about a month Beethoven returned to health and to his usual cantankerousness.

Work on the A Minor Quartet bracketed this health crisis. The cello launches the piece, perhaps an idea left over from Beethoven’s original conception of this as a quartet with a concertante cello part (at least so reported his cellist friend Joseph Linke). The angular motif of four notes begins on the leading tone (G-sharp), but it is nonetheless unambiguous about defining the key of A minor; and the four instruments enter sequentially, bottom to top, already exploring the motif’s contrapuntal possibilities while it is being first announced. An *allegro* effusion from the first violin is the jumping-off point to the principal theme. The movement progresses with a spirit of the fantastic, always

inhabited by an unsettling spirit of tragedy.

Strange, too, is the mood of the *Allegro ma non tanto*, a minuet in all but name. Beethoven focuses here on counterpoint, which shifts the simple theme into a variety of imitative contexts. The trio section has a rustic air, with a long drone in the violins – then joined by viola and cello – evoking a peasant musette.

Nearly half of the expanse of Op. 132 is given over to the slow movement. At its head the composer writes “Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart” (Holy Song of Thanksgiving from a Convalescent to the Divinity, in the Lydian Mode). The Lydian mode – we might call it a key that is neither major nor minor – yields an impression of austerity and purity; it is at least part of what lends this movement its character of private meditation. The chorale is intoned as if through three verses, much varied at its repetitions, separated by more spirited episodes of textural and contrapuntal complexity. A hush descends in the final bars, and listeners are left bathed in a silence that seems to prolong this most intimate of Beethoven’s pages.

After the eyes have been dabbed, Beethoven helps us get on with life by way of a boisterous little march. It’s a strange one, though, with its opening rhythm momentarily seeming to be in triple time, as if it were another minuet: oddly disorienting. Suddenly the flow is interrupted and, over tense

tremolos in the lower strings (they can sound surprisingly like a harmonium), the first violin lets loose a passionate, quasi-vocal recitative (*Più allegro*) that seems ripped from an opera of considerable grandeur. This leads without break to a simmering triple-time *Allegro appassionato* that builds in power and texture as it unrolls.

James M. Keller