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Quandary for a quartet

Which finale for Beethoven's Op 130 should you pick— cheerful sonata-rondo or a fugue like no other?

The 2019-2020 concert season is to be the Endellion string quartet's last, after 41 years of music-making. As its cellist David Waterman announced, "We have decided to hang up our collective quartet bows."

There are many reasons to regret the departure from the stage of an ensemble which has always exhibited such integrity and intelligence. Not the least of these is its attitude to one of its "favourite" works, Beethoven's Op 130 quartet in B flat, which it is playing at some of its farewell concerts. This is sometimes said to be the hardest to decipher of any of the five late string quartets. More particularly, and as music-lovers know, it contains a conundrum, because it provides performers with a choice of alternative finales. Beethoven wrote two, and the contrast between them could scarcely be greater. The music world is divided in its preferences as to which should be performed.

The quartet is made up of six movements. It is an extreme example of Beethoven's late style, of which Adorno said that he "no longer draws together the landscape, now deserted and alienated, into an image. He illuminates it with fire ignited by subjectivity", making no attempt to achieve a harmonious synthesis. Even more than the other late quartets, this one is marbled with dissociation and contrast. Part recognisably classical, part wilfully anarchic, it is scored with fissures which break apart the essential connectedness of early 19th-century music. It simultaneously observes and subverts the assumed conventions which are the context of the listener's experience.

Deciding which is the more fitting last movement requires an especial focus on two of the preceding five. It is sometimes said, in relation to the present debate, that the movements of this quartet echo the form of an 18th century *divertimento*. This is certainly not true of the first: with the exposition repeat (correctly observed in its recording by the Endellion), it lasts for over 13 minutes. Such a substantial opening bookend calls for something of corresponding heft by way of conclusion. It also gives prominence at the outset to a four-note cell

played in unison followed by a rising sixth, of which—it is immediately evident—we will be hearing more. In addition, the main business of the movement concerns the conflict (and partial resolution) of two widely dissimilar ideas. All these features are relevant to the choice of finale.

One may for present purposes pass over the ensuing quicksilver *scherzo*, which has the character of an absurd joke told with almost inaudible rapidity, a genial *poco scherzoso andante*, and the naïve and palindromic *alla danza tedesca*. However, we must pause at the fifth movement, the deeply felt, operatic *cavatina*. A friend of Beethoven said that the mere thought of this movement could bring him to the verge of tears. Most extraordinary here is the short central section, uniquely marked *beklemmt*, meaning choked or oppressed. (Grove points out that the grammatically correct word is *beklommen*, as in the text of Schubert's charming song *Alinde*, but that "in words as in music Beethoven is always original and always right".)

Here, the first violin, having imitated the voice of a singer for 39 bars, becomes so overcome by an awareness of its own emotion as to be lost for words. Nothing else in the whole of the composer's output is as raw: the listener is grasped by the lapel and forced directly to witness a grief ordinarily kept hidden. The only possible comparison is with the *arioso dolente* of the Op 110 piano sonata, but the collapse here is even more extreme. The question then is how to follow such a profound, if short-lived confession. In Op 110, as in the case of the tragic adagio of the Hammerklavier sonata, Op 106, the composer purged his deepest despair through the transfiguring effect of a fugal finale.

In the string quartet too, the composer's original finale was a fugue; but it is a fugue like no other composed before or since. Described by Beethoven as "*tantôt libre, tantôt recherchée*" ["in part free, in part studied"], it does not even obey its own rules; someone has gone to the trouble of estimating that only 45 per cent of its 741 bars are strictly fugal. As the German musicologist Klaus Kropfinger says, it "arches over the entirety of the work, from beginning to end". Like a black hole in its density, it seems to draw the musical material in the remainder of the quartet irresistibly into itself. Extraordinary to listen to even now—Stravinsky described it as "contemporary forever"—this 15-minute piece baffled the original audience in 1826. The *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* condemned it as "incomprehensible, like Chinese".

To hear it for the first time even now is to be overwhelmed by its energy and complexity. Can the composer really have intended such ungracious sounds? Is it not likely that he would have repented of inflicting such an ordeal on listeners? He did not attend the first performance, but one answer to these questions lies in the fact that when he heard of the enthusiastic response to the second and fourth movements, he growled "What, those trifles? Why not the fugue?" This story, told on good authority, suggests that if the audience had been capable of "rising to the heights of" Beethoven's spirit and appreciating the movement's "mysterious beauties" (to quote the French composer Vincent d'Indy) and had not been "cattle and asses" (to quote Beethoven), there would have been no question of an alternative finale ever being written.

What happened after the first performance is controversial. Following the bewildered reception of the fugue in March 1826, Beethoven decided (in September) to write a new finale. His early biographers suggest that this was a case of his friends and publisher prevailing upon him to do so, with the added inducement of an offer to remunerate him for both the quartet and for the discarded fugue, to be printed independently (as the self-standing *Grosse Fuge* Op 133).

The alternative view is that Beethoven himself had second thoughts, and realised that the original finale was, as Hans Keller believes, a mistake in its original place, and would be better appreciated as a single movement work. Indeed, Beethoven later made a four-handed piano arrangement of the fugue alone. Obviously, the decision to write a new finale was ultimately his; he set to it with enthusiasm (it was the last substantial piece he ever wrote), and produced another masterpiece, albeit in a less ambitious and very different vein. Mark Steinberg of the Brentano quartet calls Beethoven's decision "one of the great mysteries of musical history". The fact

Beethoven, sketched in 1818 by August von Kloeber

that he made it does not prove that he ever changed his original preference.

There were many pressures on the composer at this stage of his life, and it seems less useful to try to discern his true intentions, which may anyway not have been consistent, than to approach on aesthetic principles the choice of which finale to perform. Moreover, even where recorded, Beethoven's opinions on his own late works were pragmatic and occasionally fallible. We should remember that he contemplated in a letter to Fernand Ries the unthinkable possibility of performing his Hammerklavier sonata without the closing fugue and, in the more celebrated case of the ninth symphony, he had not only originally envisaged a quite different, purely instrumental finale, but even afterwards (according to his former pupil Carl Czerny) expressed the view that the choral last movement may have been a "blunder".

The view, put forward by musicologists such as Barry Cooper, that the fugue is too massive and unwieldy a movement to sit at the end of the preceding five may be countered on several grounds. First, the opening movement is itself a huge piece, not much less long than the fugue. Secondly, the four-note cell plus the sixth already mentioned are transformed into one of the two main ideas developed in the fugue. This link, together with certain correspondences of tonal architecture between the two movements, and the fact that they share the notion of conflicting ideas opposed and resolved, suggests that Beethoven conceived them as in some strong sense paired. The composer Robert Simpson sees them as "clearly part of a grand design". Thirdly, although the sound-world of the original finale surpasses the first movement in its scale and strangeness, we again need look no further than the ninth symphony for a model of a "disproportionately" huge, formally unprecedented finale, whose novelties, coming at the conclusion of an already lengthy work, strain the endurance and credulity of the unfamiliar listener. Fourthly, the fact that, in each of the works under discussion, Beethoven plumbed new depths to produce such unimagined novelties should in itself make us hesitate before rejecting any of them, in the absence of firm evidence that he had recanted of his creation.

This is all the more so because we are concerned with a finale. The notorious "last movement problem"—how a composer creates a finale that is a true climax, as first realised in Mozart's "Jupiter" symphony—was regularly and definitively solved by Beethoven alone. Works by subsequent 19th-century composers rarely managed a solution that Beethoven pulled off time and again.

The second finale to the Op 130 quartet, composed in November 1826, is by contrast with the first a cheerful and witty sonata-rondo. Edward Dusinberre, first violinist of the Takács quartet, has written candidly that he is more drawn to this finale not least because it is "less taxing to muscles and psyche", but he acknowledges that audiences can feel "cheated of the heightened emotional drama" of the original by an alternative which "brushes off past conflicts and anguish". Simpson says of this movement that "vast issues may be hinted at, or dismissed, by a joke, but they cannot be exhausted." The second finale is an example of the exalted and rough humour which one finds strewn through the last quartets. One could never wish it out of existence. Maybe it is a piece more in proportion to at least some of the preceding movements. But it indeed does not exhaust or satisfyingly resolve the central paradox posed by the quartet: how is the irreconcilable to be reconciled?

Only the *Grosse Fuge* provides the complete musical answer. As the audience applauds at the end of the complete quartet in disbelief at both the composer's and the players' achievement, it is hard to imagine a listener wishing that the later-composed finale had been played instead. (A solution sometimes adopted in concert performance is for the quartet to be played as initially conceived, followed by the alternative finale as an encore. In this way, Beethoven's last work becomes the concert's last word, while the integrity of his original conception remains undisturbed.)

The Endellion quartet is therefore right to prefer playing Op 130 with the original finale. This is all the more so given that we can nowadays familiarise ourselves through repeated listening with the themes which make up the fugue's initially intractable material, and which are then worked out with the abstract resources of pure genius. The better one knows this music, the more it fits in with all that precedes it, and the shorter the movement seems to become. While its first main section tests the powers of players and the attention of listeners almost to destruction in its depiction of a seemingly imminent chaos, the texture thereafter lightens, and the intellectual rigour, while never relaxed, is gradually tempered with a sense of reconciliation which finally resolves itself into a pure lightness of being. The experience of this resolution after 45 minutes of music-making is a rare thing. Whereas listening to the *Grosse Fuge* on its own can make the piece seem merely a noble eccentricity, understanding it as responding to and surpassing the challenge laid down in the opening movement, and as exorcising through sheer contrapuntal energy the intimate desolation of the *cavatina*, unlocks the key to Beethoven's supposedly most enigmatic quartet once and for all. S

Integrity and intelligence: The Endellion Quartet prefers Beethoven's original ending