

The Three “Razumovsky” Quartets, Op. 59

During the tumultuous early years of the nineteenth century, Beethoven created a distinctive musical voice characterized by urgent exhortation, lofty artistic intent, and massiveness of scope – a voice appropriate to grand public statements. It was wartime, after all. In Beethoven’s Vienna, the public arena was a space of popular resistance, ceremonial grandstanding, and bellicose tub-thumping. ‘All ambitions waxed large, all undertakings took on a gigantic air’ observed Émile Zola of the Napoleon-fixated generation of artists that preceded him.

The first of the three String Quartets Op. 59 was completed in 1806, the year after Beethoven’s unprecedentedly gigantic *Eroica* Symphony received its public premiere – a work very nearly dedicated to Napoleon. At this time the genre of the string quartet was still by and large the preserve of private circles of music-lovers, connoting aristocratic connoisseurship and high-minded delectation. Indeed, by the early nineteenth century, it had come to epitomize historically conscious music for the purposes of edifying contemplation – a genre that, particularly in Vienna, could not be cultivated without arousing thoughts of the recently canonized masterpieces by Mozart and Haydn. How might an intensely private, inner-directed genre such as this reflect the elevated aspirations of Beethoven’s contemporaneous symphonic works? How might they share in the grand public register that Romain Rolland was to call the “heroic style”?

One answer is that, in Beethoven’s hands, the self-conscious seriousness of the string quartet was transformed into something closer to daring experimentation. The first reviewers of Op. 59 all agreed that these quartets were hard to perform, and even to understand; not exactly a boon to the droves of enthusiastic amateurs planning the repertoire for their next quartet party. Having successfully played the role of unrestrained genius in Vienna for more than a decade, Beethoven felt under rather less obligation than his forebears to take the expectations of this audience into account. It also helped that he was writing for one of the world’s first professional string quartets, led by the Falstaffian genius Ignaz Schuppanzigh – one of the leading musicians in Vienna. The Schuppanzigh Quartet was patronized by the Russian ambassador Count Andrey Razumovsky, dedicatee of Op. 59; “Razumovsky’s quartet became Beethoven’s quartet,” wrote Beethoven’s amanuensis Anton Schindler. Circumstances thus stimulated Beethoven to produce a

radically new kind of string quartet, which merged the thematic knottiness associated with the much-admired examples of Haydn and Mozart with a dramatic sweep hitherto unheard of in chamber music – an immensity of conception that unmistakably breathed the air of Beethoven’s heroic style.

The opening movement of **Op. 59 No. 1** is exemplary in this respect. The cello takes the lead in the *Allegro*, presenting an apparently uncomplicated theme: a squarely symmetrical tune with an urgently throbbing accompaniment. But it soon becomes clear that something isn’t quite settled about all this: local points of resolution are denied us, and conventional caesuras in the tune become unusually charged – a tension that only increases when the melodic line is taken up by the first violin, soaring ever higher. The explosive arrival that eventually results – the first unequivocal cadence of the piece – retrospectively confirms that the opening was no simple tune at all, but a launch pad: an astonishing ratcheting up of local tension, which simultaneously stated the terse motivic elements that pervade the movement – and all in the guise of a lyrical utterance. The movement accordingly unfolds according to a principle central to Beethoven in his heroic vein: a problem must be solved, a challenge surmounted. As in the equivalent part of the *Eroica*, only in the coda does the unsettled opening theme rapturously discover its stable form. But the way there is circuitous indeed, and often startlingly digressive: mid-way through the piece, a strictly elaborated double fugue accompanies a swerve deep into distantly flat-side keys – only one episode in a development ultimately so extended that any return to familiar territory is arduously hard won, and worthy of triumphant celebration.

This vastness of conception spills over into the following two movements. The *Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando* begins with an almost absurdly skeletal theme: a throbbing rhythmic gesture in the cello and a series of elliptical answers from the viola and violins. The movement proceeds – “always scherzo-like,” as Beethoven tells us – by bodying out and elaborating upon this elemental material in myriad intricate ways, frequently lurching into dense thickets of counterpoint as ostentatious as those in the previous movement. There follows a tragic slow movement of immense breadth (*Adagio molto e mesto*), permeated by dark minor-mode sonorities from which a second thematic area provides no respite. Such expansive minor-mode Adagios are relatively unusual in

Beethoven's oeuvre; the only other example from this period is, notably, the similarly grief-stricken funeral march of the *Eroica*.

The conclusion of this decidedly front-loaded quartet is suddenly light hearted, however. Bearing the explicit designation *thème russe*, the finale is the first appearance of a Russian folk tune in the "Razumovsky" Quartets (in this case, "Ah, Whether It's My Luck, Such Luck!") – a nod to the Russian dedicatee of Op. 59. Beethoven derived his material from the Lvov-Pratsch Collection, a widely circulated compendium of Westernized folk melodies aimed at cosmopolitan Russian noblemen such as Count Razumovsky himself. The good-natured roistering of this finale is evidently in the spirit of the numerous folk-like contredanse finales by Haydn, though some have detected a note of satire in the austerity of the counterpoint that is lavished on such humble material: even early on, the principal theme is treated with a series of overlapping canonic entries. It is just as likely, however, that the learned techniques exhibited in this finale show Beethoven taking his folk tune to town: a composer giving his Russian guest the ambassadorial treatment.

Self-conscious grandness of design, contrapuntal complexity, and Russian folk elements: these features remain constant through all of the "Razumovsky" Quartets, though they are manifested in contrasting ways. The opening movement of **Op. 59 No. 2** announces its compositional ambition with an overtly symphonic call to attention and a charged silence, before launching into a dense and nervous exposition of remarkably terse musical materials – an alliance of extreme thematic economy and dramatic expansiveness of form comparable to the Fifth Symphony, which Beethoven was sketching at this time. Especially arresting in this movement, and all the more noticeable in the absence of any sustained melodic impulse, are the arresting purple patches of chromatic harmony: Neapolitan swerves by the half step and chains of third-related sonorities – effects that came to distinguish the mature harmonic language of Schubert. Still more massive in conception is the following *Adagio*. A spacious, slow-moving sonata form is prefaced by an austere expressive hymn tune, whose simple rhythmic and melodic shape is distantly echoed, sometimes buried deep in the musical texture, throughout the movement. The dissolving coda of the movement demonstrates as well as any passage in these quartets how the lofty aesthetic aspirations of Beethoven's public music of the period had by this

time conclusively shaped his private music: this is a kind of “chamber sublime” – an intimation of heavenly immensity, but sketched with the delicate strokes of the string quartet. The idea of the movement occurred to Beethoven “while contemplating the starry sky and thinking of the music of the spheres,” reported his loyal student Carl Czerny – a story as ingenuously romanticizing as it is believable.

The ensuing movements are decidedly – and perhaps intentionally – concise by comparison with the opening pair. A lightly tripping, rhythmically homogeneous *Allegretto* alternates with a Trio that witnesses the return of the Russian folk element in op. 59 – another tune, as in Op. 59 No. 1, that announces itself as a *thème russe*. As in the earlier “Razumovsky” Quartet, however, folk song collides with strict counterpoint, taking the form of a succession of formal entries, in the manner of a four-voice fugue exposition. A subsequent tilt at an answering fugal exposition almost descends into chaos, however: contrapuntal technique unravels, and is eventually reduced to a crunching series of elementary canons, ultimately noodling away obsessively on a single cadential gesture from the main theme. Beethoven’s contrapuntal treatment of his Russian tune is here closer to slapstick than any more deferential use of the learned style. The concluding *Presto* returns to the symphonic ambience of the opening *Allegro*. As in many symphonic culminations, a sense of large-scale closure is achieved by reconceiving the thematic and emotional nuances of the opening movement in more direct and imposing terms. Beethoven paints his sonata rondo in broad strokes: an ebullient, long-limbed main tune and a second theme colored prominently with the Neapolitan half steps of the opening movement – all against the background of a near-ubiquitous iambic pulse.

The earliest reviews of the “Razumovsky” Quartets regarded **Op. 59 No. 3** as the least obscure and challenging of the three – and with good reason. It is the one that most obviously recalls the string quartet in its eighteenth-century incarnation, especially the famous examples by Mozart: the outer movements seem to aim for greater formal balance than is generally found in the other “Razumovsky” Quartets, and even the sequence of movements themselves – including an almost studiously traditional Minuet and Trio – is redolent of an older type of quartet. That said, the unusually grand, public atmosphere of the op. 59 set is by no means relinquished in the third quartet. Here, however, it takes the form of a certain theatricality – an emphasis on arresting dramatic

gestures and evocative tableaux, which is less symphonic than operatic. This tendency should come as no surprise: Beethoven began work on the “Razumovsky” Quartets after two years deeply immersed in the production and revision of his only opera, the heroic rescue story *Leonore*.

The opening is a good example. In the early nineteenth century, a string quartet in C major with a slow introduction would instantly have brought to mind the so-called “Dissonance” Quartet, K. 465, by Mozart. But Beethoven’s harmonically elusive introduction, based around a dramatic series of diminished sevenths, also powerfully evokes the atmospheric curtain-raisers characteristic of operatic overtures in this period, including his own series of *Leonore* Overtures. When the *Allegro vivace* emerges from the opening obscurity, the first violin steps onstage as the protagonist, with an improvisatory series of descending flourishes; a trace of Schuppanzigh the virtuoso, perhaps. These flourishes congeal into a principal thematic group, saturated, as is much of the material in the movement, by a terse upward-moving motif. In the course of the *Allegro* the instruments frequently take turns in soloistic, even concerto-like roles. The interaction of these instrumental characters is responsible for the musical drama at least as much as the intensification of pivotal formal junctures: here, the return to the main theme after the development and a concise coda are finessed rather than magnified – and thus become places of joyful release rather than high drama.

Ever since Czerny wondered aloud about the origin of the remarkable *Andante con moto quasi allegretto* that follows, musicians have debated whether the movement is a third appearance of Russian folk song in the op. 59 quartets. Beethoven does not announce a *thème russe* in this case, yet the *Andante*, opening with its rustic *pizzicato* cello, is evidently an example of folk-like musical exoticism. As it is, new research suggests that Beethoven freely adapted the main tune from a sample of traditional Russian music transcribed in an 1804 article on folk song, published in a music journal that he is known to have read. Beethoven’s elaboration of the tune plays to its strangeness: the basic 6/8 pulse is nearly unremitting, while the tune itself unfolds as several cycles within cycles – short melodic recursions building larger phrases, which also tend to repeat themselves. The result is a near-motionless tableau of subtly varied musical chiaroscuro. Harmonically, the *Andante* is characterized by striking transitions

between distant key areas – almost all of these in the minor mode. The three appearances of a secondary melody in the relative major provide the only relief from the prevailing mood of lamentation.

The Minuet that comes next is as simple as could be: an eighteenth-century dance in tidy four-bar phrases, presented in a delicate filigree of instrumental exchanges, with a diminutive contrasting Trio. It carries the instruction *grazioso* – a term with particular resonance in Beethoven’s oeuvre, uniting compositions such as the first of the Bagatelles Op. 33 and the sublime minuet that concludes the “Diabelli” Variations. *Grazioso* typically signals a musical register oriented towards decorative surfaces rather than structural depths – an aesthetic of the deliberately insubstantial, delicate, or even fragile. A transition loosely resembling the slow introduction of the quartet links the minuet to the last movement, a rousing operatic finale, which also revives the contrapuntal experimentations of Op. 59. The prominence of contrapuntal writing in this movement is yet another Mozartian touch: the fusion of a sonata-type formal layout with strict fugal expositions is the driving principle of the peerless finale of Mozart’s String Quartet K. 387, which Beethoven knew and studied. All the same, Beethoven’s chattering and, indeed, rather loquacious fugue subject also lends itself well to the energetic repeating formulas so typical of concluding operatic strettas: it is already a collection of urgent rhythmic mottos, melodic sequences, and feverish internal repetitions. On several occasions, the repeating patterns of the main theme wind themselves up through lengthy “Rossini crescendos” – not least in the mighty coda, which brings the three “Razumovsky” Quartets to a distinctly operatic close.

The String Quartets Op. 74 (“The Harp”) and Op. 95 (*Quartetto serioso*)

Did something happen to Beethoven’s compositional outlook after the second French occupation of Vienna in 1809? There are some who think so. The consequences of the occupation took a severe personal and financial toll on him, and his early political enthusiasms appear to have gradually waned. Between 1809 and 1816, Beethoven developed, alongside his rousing Napoleonic musical style, an altogether different tone of voice, which appears to eschew the grand public gestures and hard-won musical victories of the heroic style in favor of renewed lyricism, inwardness, and a spirit of melancholic

fragmentation. One could do worse than describe this cluster of tendencies as Romanticism. And to those of us who know what is around the corner, this style clearly points the way to the runic and fractured beauty of Beethoven's late string quartets.

The pair of quartets dating from 1809 and 1810 represent contrasting aspects of Beethoven's new romantic spirit. The **E-flat Quartet, Op. 74**, is the lyrical one – a work of largely untroubled melodic poise. The networks of motivic connections that Beethoven painstakingly created in his earlier quartets are still present, but now seem to be submerged below an unruffled, song-like musical surface – and are thus part of no self-evident story of thematic development. The diminutive fanfare that starts the opening *Allegro*; the *pizzicato* “harp” effects that punctuate the movement; the triadic flourish that begins the tune of the finale: on examination, these are all clearly spun from the same basic material – yet this is one of those facts beloved of music theorists that have few consequences for the actual musical argument. The quartet begins with a whimsical, almost improvisatory slow introduction, which leads to one of the calmest sonata-allegro movements in Beethoven's oeuvre. Dramatic contrasts are attenuated here, replaced by delightful variation, picturesque effects, and contrapuntal combination – as in the poignant opening melody, which overlays a sighing lyrical phrase with a trickling countersubject. Even the development section, though unusually long, is essentially an extended contemplative tableau, dwelling almost exclusively on the key of C major, rather than an area of transformation or turbulence. The following *Adagio ma non troppo* is less dynamic still: it is in essence a lovely melody with two contrasting episodes, the tune returning each time with graceful variations, rounded off by a halting coda.

Only the third movement, a *Presto* scherzo, evokes Beethoven in his assertive, heroic mode. The result is practically parody – not least of the equivalent movement in the Fifth Symphony, completed the previous year. The *Presto* shares the key of the earlier symphony – C minor – and is permeated with the symphony's now famous four-note motif. And like the Scherzo of the Fifth, this movement also turns to madcap major-mode fugal writing by way of a Trio (which alternates with the Scherzo twice, as in the symphony) – and ultimately even forges a suspenseful transition directly to the finale. The finale itself wholly undermines the urgency of the foregoing movement, however,

diffusing its energies not in the *éclat triomphale* of the Fifth or the sheer massiveness of the *Eroica* finale, but with a set of variations on a delicate *Allegretto* tune. The pleasures of pure lyricism win the day.

The **Quartet in F Minor Op. 95**, which Beethoven completed the year after “The Harp,” makes for a drastic contrast – a musical opposite, even. It was not published for several years after it was composed, reportedly because Beethoven doubted that it would be appropriate for anyone other than circles of musical cognoscenti. Certainly, its stark and angular language is extremely resistant to easy or instant understanding. The wild *Allegro con brio* with which it opens aims for such compression that jagged shards of thematic material frequently do little more than jostle with one another, leaving the surface of the music scarred with expressive fissures and ellipses: the violent opening counterpoises a unison gesture with a fierce dotted-rhythm answer – and, without any niceties of modulation, repeats the theme up a half step. The result is, paradoxically, at once intensely passionate and obstinately abstract: the prominence of the Neapolitan half-step in this movement (similar in this respect to the sound world of Op. 59 No. 2) is a striking expressive effect, which nonetheless establishes the kind of complex technical relationships whose various elaborations only connoisseurs might fully discern. The motion to a terse second theme is accomplished with comparable brusqueness – a couple of bars that merely insist on the new D-flat direction, rather than carefully legitimizing it – and the new theme itself is no more than a repeated lilting figure and a stunning cadence, which emerges from an excruciating pile-up of dissonance. Such a fractured musical context tends to undermine the more usual functions of a long Beethovenian development, which is brief and stormy.

As “difficult” as the opening movement is the ensuing *Allegretto ma non troppo*, which, rather than seek to integrate or reconcile lyricism with challenging fugal writing, sets the two side by side. A gnomic descending scale in the cello ushers in an unusually varied D major melody, which feints unsettlingly towards G minor at its start. Once this has run its course, an austere, chromatic fugue begins in formal fashion, and, through several entries of increasing harmonic and contrapuntal complexity, winds itself up into ever more extreme emotional contortions. The curious descending cello scale, at first worked into the contrapuntal texture, now announces a repeat of the melody. Only in the

coda is there a hint that counterpoint might combine productively with the opening lyrical outpouring – the fugue subject entering gently with the dying strains of the melody.

The third movement repeats the *serioso* marking with which Beethoven also headed the whole quartet: *Allegro assai vivace ma serio*). For all its eccentricity, this movement is no “mere” scherzo, Beethoven’s *serioso* qualification seems to say. It is an irascible, four-square, rhythmically uniform outburst that alternates with an odd little trio – an ethereal chorale-like tune with a murmuring violin obligato. The finale begins with a terse, evocative fragment of a slow *Larghetto espressivo*, which wipes the expressive slate clean of the driving rhythms of the *Allegro assai*, before it swerves into the concluding *Allegretto agitato* – a sonata-rondo dominated by a sentimental F minor melody. Not nearly as fractured in its musical surface as the earlier movements, the finale signals that a satisfyingly tragic, pathetic close is in the offing. But the quartet has a last expressive surprise in store: a coda that slowly unwinds to a hushed, warm cadence in the major mode – and then a wild *opera buffa stretta*, touched by delightful contrapuntal details, that races headlong to a high-comic conclusion. *Serioso*? It seems appropriate that one ends up wondering whether Beethoven was entirely serious.

-Nicholas Mathew (c)2014