

Miró Quartet

Beethoven: Opus 131 (MQM 2909-2)



By 1826, Beethoven's miserable personal life, which had been degrading for a decade, had reached a desperate and painful climax: the situation with his nephew Karl, whom Beethoven had forcibly wrested from his sister-in-law after the untimely death of his brother, had reached rock bottom. As his foster father he had brought up this teenage boy to have the strongest antipathy to his mother, but at the same time the boy rebelled against the harsh strictness and even cruelty of his uncle, clearly feeling estranged from both. Now, at age eighteen, this young man was a simmering stew of resentment and anger, and his sanity had reached a breaking point. On August 5, Karl snapped: he pawned his watch, bought a pistol, and having written a suicide note, climbed a hill and shot himself in the head. Unbelievably, he failed to kill himself, and wounded with a bullet in his skull, he was taken by a stranger to his mother's house in Vienna, where his uncle found him.

This is perhaps the most shocking incident of Beethoven's entire personal life, all the more so because he held himself emotionally responsible for this boy he thought of as his son. His last dream of family happiness lay in bloody ruins at his feet, and at long last Beethoven was forced to see himself and his family in a harsh, but mercilessly truthful light. It was time for Beethoven to let go of Karl.

Amazingly, it's in the context of this terrible personal tragedy that the Op. 131 quartet was born. Despite finishing the three quartets of the Galitzin commission the previous year, Beethoven miraculously found he had not yet exhausted his ideas for the string quartet, and by the beginning of 1826 he had already begun on yet another, in C-sharp minor, which was written from January to July of that year. Upon its completion, Beethoven considered the Opus 131 to be his greatest achievement in the quartet form; it is a work completely unified and uninterrupted, based on a single theme (the four notes it opens with might remind you of the opening of Opus 132). Its seven movements are played together without pause, and in fact, the movements are given only numbers and no true titles—each one is only a stage in the endless flow of the work.

Born out of immense personal suffering, yet infused with a masterly sense of joy and achievement, the Opus 131 is often considered the apex of the Beethoven string quartet cycle, and it is in fact my own personal favorite quartet of the sixteen. No single word can sum up this ineffable work for me better than the word “Revelation.” Like a mysterious vision of another universe, this work seems complete in and of itself, containing its own natural evolution, forces and laws, its own life and development. Like our own universe, its deepest meaning is hidden from us yet at the same time everywhere evident; the keys to understanding its own unique life lie completely within itself and itself alone. To verbalize what Beethoven meant by this work is impossible, as the music itself says so much that is utterly beyond words. As a listener you must give yourself completely to this piece and allow it to reveal its mysteries in its own time and in its own way. It makes no compromises and will not meet you halfway. Yet what it has to share with you about the very nature of existence is a priceless secret that cannot be apprehended this way in any other art form. It repays your investment of attention one hundred- fold, and as such is the very definition of “Art.”

Notes by John Largess

MIRÓ QUARTET
DANIEL CHING, violin
WILLIAM FEDKENHEUER, violin
JOHN LARGESS, viola
JOSHUA GINDELE, cello

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Quartet No. 14 in C-sharp Minor, Op. 131

1. Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo (6:34)
2. Allegro molto vivace (2:58)
3. Allegro moderato - Adagio (6:50)
4. Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile - Più mosso - Andante moderato e lusinghiero - Adagio - Allegretto - Adagio, ma non troppo e semplice - Allegretto (14:03)
5. Presto (9:58)
6. Adagio quasi un poco andante (1:58)
7. Allegro (6:37)

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