7

VOICE

A book on the Beethoven quartets is three books, we have said, through which certain kinds of continuity are bound to be tenuous at best. From the Op. 18 Quartets of 1798–1800 to the second-period quartets, and then to the late quartets written fourteen and more years afterwards, it stands to reason that there can be no real effort at historical draughtsmanship, in spite of signposts, retrospective gestures, and all the apparatus of historical formulation. With ten *opera* out of more than a hundred and thirty—of course they are not all equally important—there can be no idea of covering the evolution of style and concept. Simply in their own terms, the three groups of compositions embody different sorts of emotional penetration on the part of the composer; they demand correspondingly different commitments on the part of the listener. The critic who is sensitive to these differences will find himself reacting by automatic reflex in one way to the quartets of Op. 18, in another way to Op. 59, and in another to Op. 131. So if the reflex is not resisted, as I certainly think it should not be, the three groups of quartets will in some respects elicit rather different approaches. This the reader will see reflected even in a mechanical aspect of organization in the present chapter, among others.

Furthermore, with each group of pieces there will oe a difference in the amount and quality of attention on which the critic may fairly expect to draw. This third book must be the longest and most intense for the rather simple reason that the music of Beethoven's third period is the most admired and the most thought about. For several generations, the late music has been gaining in interest, sympathy, prestige, and circulation what the earlier music has actually been losing to revisionist taste.

Critics have closed ranks about this music, performers now play it and program it without any special alarms, and the common listener (to adapt a term from Virginia Woolf) has found a special place for it in his essential musical experience.

The situation after Beethoven's death was very different, of course. That his last compositions were not accepted has always been known, but the extent and duration of the rejection has been made clear only recently in *Beethoven: Naissance et Renaissance des Derniers Quattuors* by Ivan Mahaim. After digging into concert records from all over Europe, Mahaim brings forward fascinating statistics about the circulation of the five late quartets and the Great Fugue. For example, in the twenty-five-year period after Beethoven's death, Vienna—that great musical center—can boast a grand total of no more than *seven* public performances of any of these works. In a fifty-year period, up to 1875, records of performances in nearly a hundred towns from St. Petersburg to Boston extend only slightly above the one thousand figure. Inexplicably enough, it was the Quartet in F, Op. 135, that was the most unpopular. As for Mahaim's favorite piece, the Great Fugue, that appears to have waited twenty-seven years for its second public airing, and only fourteen such hearings can be traced in all the time up to 1875. In view of this scarcity of performances, special interest and special respect attaches to Wagner's famous tribute to the Quartet in C♯ minor in 1870, and also to the analytical essays on the quartets by Theodor Helm, which were published as a book in 1885 after appearing serially as early as the 1870's. The Great Fugue was a tightly closed book to this author, as Mahaim does not fail to observe, but in the appreciation of the other late quartets Helm must count as a pioneer.

The history of musical taste affords few more striking phenomena than the subsequent change of attitude toward this body of music. To try to analyze all the causes for the change and gauge its larger significance would take us far afield. This much is clear, however: it has to do with the main line of musical evolution into the twentieth century, and new ways of comprehending new music have helped to illuminate the third style. Various trends of modern music can be seen to be prefigured by technical aspects of the third style; for Stravinsky, the Great Fugue is "this absolutely contemporary piece of music that will be contemporary forever. . . . It is pure interval music, this fugue, and I love it beyond any other." [1] At the same time, the twentieth-century consciousness has been able to respond very directly to something in the expressive content of the

[1] *Dialogues and a Diary*, p. 24.

late quartets—something overreaching and pure and characteristically indefinable. "In the last string quartets spiritual experiences are communicated of which it is very difficult to mention even the elements," wrote that aggressively common listener J. W. N. Sullivan. "And yet it is just this music that most moves us and impresses us as containing the profoundest and most valuable experiences that any artist has yet conveyed . . . experiences that we recognize both as fundamental and as in advance of anything we have hitherto known. With such art we make contact, for a moment, with

> The prophetic soul of the wide world
> Dreaming on things to come.

It is to this kind of art that Beethoven's greatest music belongs and it is, perhaps, the greatest in that kind." [2]

In spite of this new well of sympathy, it cannot be said that the really discerning, full-textured study has been written about Beethoven's third period. One cannot draw on a generally accepted account of the style and the rhetoric, as one can with the earlier music. Sympathy and prestige are all very well, but articulation is another matter; the challenge to technical analysis is very great, and the challenge to emotional confrontation appreciably greater. None of the writers on Beethoven has failed to recognize the centrality of the problem, however, and none has failed to say something about it. While the art required for their weaving may still be lacking, the main strands of the last style have probably been isolated. We can return to card them in the chapters to follow.

Motivic work, for example, grows more momentous, as Beethoven makes his thematic material ever more terse and pregnant. Walter Riezler speaks of "a refinement and sensitiveness in the part-writing, and a feeling for the depth and significance of the smallest detail, such as is to be found in none of his earlier works." [3] Like so much else—like the quality of intense introspection that goes along with it—this seems to have been forecast by the Quartet in F minor of 1810. Simultaneously, the power of the form grips the listener more acutely than ever before, both within the individual movements, and among movements linked together in the most imaginative ways. Concern for part-writing is reflected in a growing preoccupation with formal counterpoint, the main monuments of which —fugue, canon, chorale—abound in the last compositions. In the area of harmony, new ideas develop about modulation, cadence structure, and

[2] Pp. 227–8, 250–1.
[3] P. 219.

sometimes even tonality itself, when Beethoven experiments with the old church modes. There is an attendant sense of spiritualization, which has struck all commentators without eliciting from them very much in the way of verbal articulation. Principally, perhaps, it is the whole matter of musical contrast which is treated most radically, and which as a result opens up whole new unexpected areas of consciousness. Since formal principles such as that of sonata form depend first of all upon contrast, these principles too now yield patterns of unprecedented flexibility and expressive force.

Now, with some justice, the various features enumerated here might be considered to be inward, subtle, technical, and even esoteric. If every impulse of the last style tended in this one direction, there might be a basis for the formidable barrier that the late works used to be said to present—do they still present?—to the common listener. But an equally strong "public" impulse accompanies the "private" one: a striking new directness of emotional appeal, a determination to touch common mankind as nakedly as possible. Never in the past had Beethoven reached so urgently for immediacy. There is something very moving about the spectacle of this composer, having reached heights of subtlety in the pure manipulation of tonal materials, battering at the communications barrier with every weapon of his knowledge.

The great exemplar of this drive is the Ninth Symphony, of course, the major composition just prior to the last quartets and the one under whose shadow they were initially conceived. (The present chapter might have been christened prettily "After the Ninth.") As Wagner never tired of driving home, the Ninth Symphony brings to the orchestra words, poetry, and the human voice, in an effort to make instrumental music more articulate. The voices sing about man-to-man fellowship, and they are not delicate about exploiting the naïve *élan* of a military rally and the naïve awe of a churchly rite in order to force their point. At the heart of the undertaking stands that famous (or perhaps one should say, notorious) finale tune—half folklike, blinding in its demagogic innocence, torn from the womb of recitative without a shred of accompaniment clothing. Even before the Finale, a note of immediate popularity in the melody of earlier movements of the Ninth Symphony can hardly be mistaken. It is the very clasp of Beethoven's hand.

To many musicians and critics of a certain modern intellectual temper, this impulse of Beethoven's last period has proved more than a little embarrassing. We live in the valley of the Ninth Symphony—that we cannot help—but we would probably breathe easier if the mountain

were hidden by a perpetual cloud, by a critical smog of our own manufacture. Yet I am certain that the unique richness of the last period derives exactly from the duality of introspection and solicitation, the inward-outward, public-private aspect of the art. There is a range and an ambition here not matched in *Threni* or *The Art of Fugue*, in *Parsifal* or *Falstaff*—nor in Beethoven's Quartet in F minor, which by comparison can seem one-sided on account of its self-absorption.

Unique, of course, but not wholly unprecedented, even if the duality is rarely apparent in the last works of the other great masters. The clear precedent is Joseph Haydn, with his hymnlike slow movements and folklike rondo tunes, his mystic tone in the last church music, and his growing conviction about the "universal language" of music and a heritage of humanity to carry with it. A generation ahead of the Ninth Symphony, Haydn's last symphony, in the same key, the "London" Symphony, No. 104, has a finale theme of a just vaguely similar studied naïveté. Whether Beethoven felt any kinship in this matter with his old and little-appreciated master, is hard to say; his first recorded kind word about Haydn was muttered on his deathbed; but however this may be, the historical climate contributed to his own idea. So did Beethoven's personal situation. The deafness—after 1816, virtually complete—that drove him inward on his own resources drove him on the rebound to repeated outer assaults upon personal sympathy; a process with both pathetic aspects and also, in his dealings with friends and relatives, with nearly tragic ones.

A string quartet is not so exhibitionistic a creature as a choral symphony (though Beethoven did want to make his last quartet discuss its playful decisions in public). Nonetheless, the five quartets and the Great Fugue which occupied the end of Beethoven's composing life, after the Ninth Symphony, are drenched in evocations of the human voice. These evocations mean to sing or to speak instantly to the heart, like the songs imagined by Beethoven's poet at the climax of *An die ferne Geliebte:*

> *was mir aus der vollen Brust*
> *ohne Kunstgepräng' erklungen,*
> *nur der Sehnsucht sich bewusst . . .*

In the last period, the illusion of art concealing art, of communication "without the adornments of Art," is among Beethoven's very particular studies. One is carried away, astonished, and ravished by the sheer songfulness of the last quartets—by recitative and aria, lied, hymn, country dance, theme and variations, lyricism in all its manifestations. The first of

the series of late quartets, the Quartet in E♭, Op. 127, is of all Beethoven's works his crowning monument to lyricism.

· 2 ·

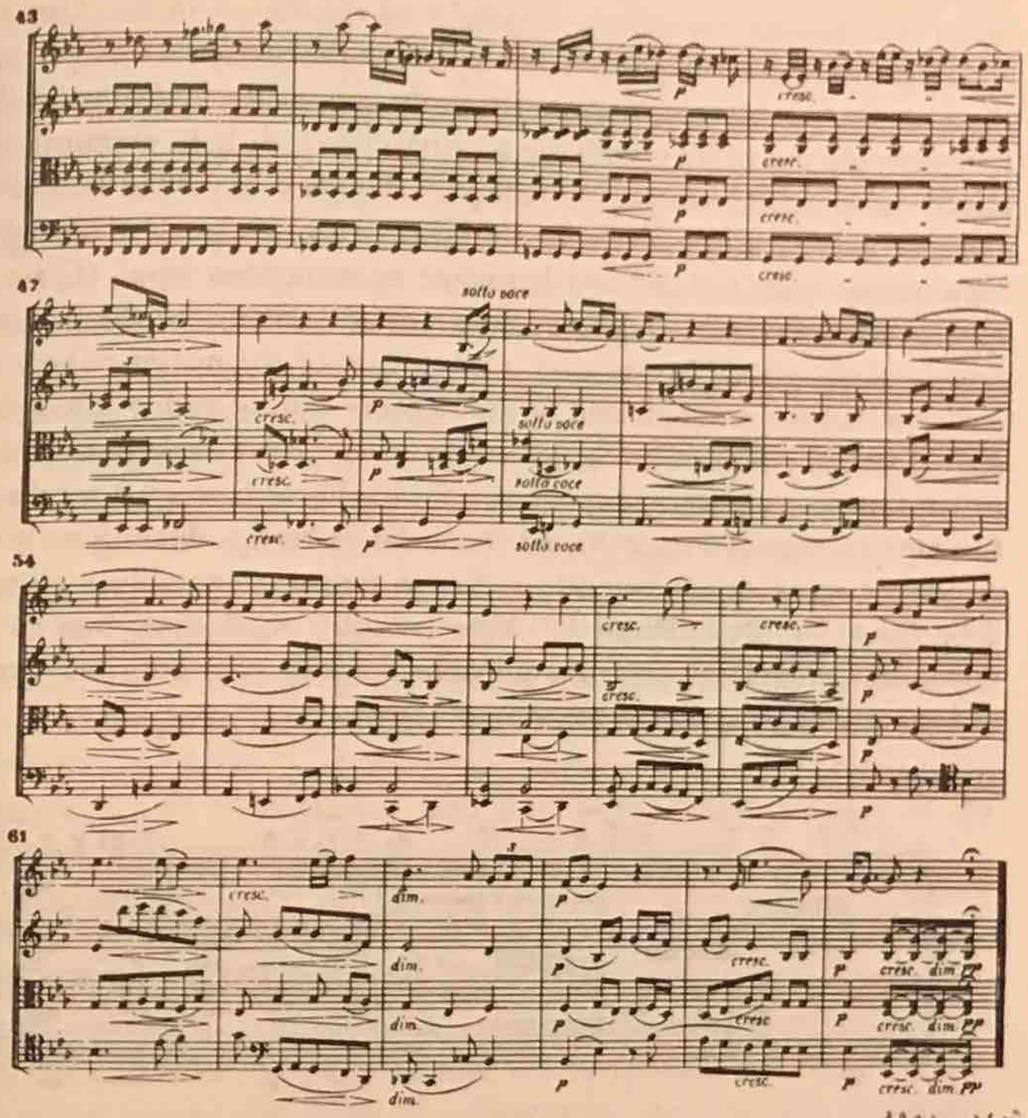
Let us preface an examination of this quartet with some other evidences of the new vocal impulse.

Probably the most eloquent witness is the famous *Adagio* movement inscribed "*Cavatina*" in the Quartet in B♭, Op. 130. This title means an opera song of modest scope and, over the years, of varying characteristics. The term is used freely by Rossini; Weber had used it for Agathe's smaller soliloquy in *Der Freischütz;* and Mozart might well have used it for Tamino's air *Dies Bildnis ist bezaubernd schön* in *The Magic Flute*. The first violin takes the role of the singer, while the other instruments play the orchestra—a division of forces so pat that a mezzo-soprano or a baritone with a good high G (and a good sob) could sing the violin part without a single grace-note's alteration. One would have to search the repertory hard to find another quartet, symphony, or sonata movement of which this could be literally maintained. The *Cavatina* assumes a thoroughly operatic stance. Vocality is more than evoked. It is practically transcribed.

Operatic, too, is the shape of the principal melody, a long, loose ternary song occasionally disturbed by declamatory pressures. Beethoven had not written many opera songs; one does not have to look far to find a direct structural model for the *Cavatina*. The *Andante* of Florestan's aria in *Fidelio* is built just like it, only out of shorter members. In both songs, Phrase A closes on the tonic, but its repetition deflects under declamatory pressure to a slightly remote cadence; an expressive Phrase B traces sequences of no great weight, and a repeated Phrase C begins and ends on the tonic and establishes an earnest climax. The elegant orchestral echoes and repetitions, as Florestan catches his breath at the end of his phrases, could likewise have served the *Cavatina* as model for the action of the lower instruments.

They also borrow something from the woodwind echoes in the *Adagio* of the Ninth Symphony, upon whose hymnlike tone the *Cavatina* enlarges in its own more intimate fashion. In principle, each phrase or phraselet of the hymn is echoed by the accompanying instruments, or else commented on by means of the important motif of bar 1. (On p. 197 Phrase A is illustrated in the form it assumes in the *da capo;* from bar 49 on, the melodic line corresponds exactly, the accompaniment very nearly so.) The repetition of Phrase A is disturbed by recitative urges—a model

Example 93

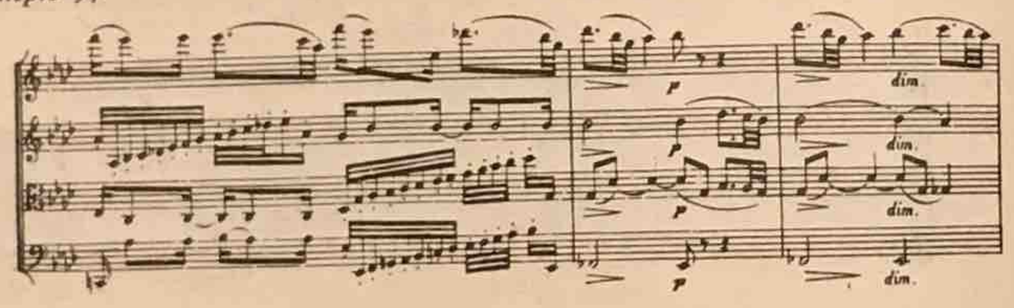


for them can be found in *Abscheulicher! wo eilst du hin?* or, if you prefer, in the instrumental recitatives of the Ninth—leading to a *cupo voce* cadence in C minor. Then in Phrase B sentiment and texture become more intimate. One almost hears a Mozartian clarinet and bassoon, in sorrowful dialogue upon the motif, leading the singer by the hand and then passionately breaking out of the circle-of-5ths sequence to provide a 5-bar phrase and a rhetorical climax. "*Was würde ich?*" Tamino, in *his* cavatina, asks rhetorically at this point. The climax, with its characteristic descending 6th, retraces that of bars 5–6 (or 53–4). The repeated Phrase C resumes the hymnlike tone and texture of Phrase A; the close of the long melody is heavy and prayerful.

The following *beklemmt* section (bars 41–9) makes a second serious contrast in texture, and modulates more seriously, to C♭ (♭VI). While the

accompaniment begins to throb in triplets—which reminded Riemann of the *Arioso dolente* ("*Ermattet, klagend*") of the Sonata in A♭, Op. 110, and might also have reminded him of a place in the Sonata in C, Op. 111—the melodic line becomes not merely broken, as in the two sonatas, but stammeringly out of joint with the accompaniment. It is an extraordinary effect, and one that hits straight in the guts, though to my mind Beethoven and his commentators too have been winded by it to the point of accepting some pretty crass melodic and harmonic constructions here. (Crass, in spite of the very interesting fact that a sort of variation of the principal tune is taking place.) In any case, a prime fact of the matter is how the *beklemmt* section is terminated. It shows every sign of easing into a full-scale *B* section—only to be cut off almost at once by a dark gesture resonating hugely with associations. The cello F♭–E♭ of bars 47–8 recalls the C-minor cadence of Phrase A, and the violin in bar 47, dilating on a 6th, recalls the many descending 6ths earlier in the song (notably a climatic drop from G to B♮ in Phrase C). Most radically of all, these bars all but duplicate a progression from the previous *Andante con moto* movement, and an extremely prominent progression at that:

Example 94



Closer confrontation of the various movements of a work is another crucial feature of the last quartets, to which we shall return. At the moment, the point of all the associations is to magnify the drama of the interruption.

Then the placement of the *da capo* of the principal melody in the key of E♭, in spite of the implication of A♭ in bars 47–8, acts to justify the drama. Phrase A returns quietly and yet with a remarkable fervor, an aura much helped by subtle action in the second violin—contradicting the previous C♭ tonality with C♮ and carrying the repeated step G–A♭ up to B♭–C.

The amplitude of Phrases A and C makes everything else in the piece sound taut. The emotions touched on in the *beklemmt* section, someone has said, are so intimate that it hardly seems right to be allowed to witness them; but we witness so briefly that all Beethoven needs to balance the form is an integral return of the 8-bar Phrase A plus a new conclusion lasting only 9 bars longer. Cascading echoes and repetitions, this conclusion carries the climactic surge from B♭ to F (bars 53–4) up to G (bars 57–9, echoed in the cello). All through the song the note G—the third degree—assumes cardinal importance. The opening motif flowers gracefully in 10ths and 6ths among the various instruments, through the various registers (bars 58, 59, 61, 62).

As for the violin's final exclamation, closing on G, that owes something to another vocal tradition, not the aria so much as the lied. Beethoven had a facile little habit of ending lieder with feminine cadences on motto words—"*nur dein!*" in *Andenken*, "*O Hoffnung!*" in *An die Hoffnung*, and "*Adelaide!*" in the song named for that lady. The effect is more of a tender, calculated confidence than of any sort of constructive pillar, more sentimental than epigrammatic. In the *Cavatina*, the sentiment recalled is apparently that of bars 45–6, ending the *beklemmt* section.

In one of the conversations with Robert Craft, Stravinsky judges the *Cavatina*, together with half a dozen other movements from the late quartets, to be "pedestrian." Even with the maximum exercise of charity and sophistry, it is hard to grasp the force of the adjective in reference to the play of technique in the *Cavatina*. The sentiment of the piece may not suit Stravinsky, or us, but "pedestrian" we cannot call it without discounting Beethoven's own conversation with Karl Holz, second violinist of the Schuppanzigh Quartet, when he said "that the *Cavatina* was composed in the very tears of misery, and that never had one of his own pieces moved him so deeply, and that merely to relive it in his feelings always cost him a tear." The sketches which record the compositional process are extremely copious. It is a reasonable guess that this quite extravagant comment stuck in Holz's memory because it corresponded with his own feelings in the matter, and those of audiences to whom he had played this particular movement. Beethoven's wish, in transcribing for quartet an unwritten opera song, must have been to make the most immediate kind of emotional overture. In the eyes of his essential public, then or now, I do not think it can be said that he failed.

· 3 ·

The urge for direct communication found an obvious outlet in the use of recitative, "a kind of Prose in Musick," as William Congreve defined it, "a more tuneable speaking." That is to say, the outlet was obvious in vocal compositions. In instrumental ones, the lengths to which Beethoven was prepared to go in adapting the vocal style testifies to the overpowering strength of his need for immediacy of address.

In the late years, the first instance comes in the Sonata in A♭ of 1821,

and the most celebrated in the passage beginning the Finale of the Ninth Symphony, where the cellos and basses reject a parade of themes and then finally elect one, all in wordless recitative. (We know that this is what they are doing from the words added by a baritone when he appropriates this music later: "O friends, not these sounds; let us rather strike up something more seemly, more joyful.") Also most remarkable in concept is the *Dona nobis pacem* of the *Missa solemnis*, which bends the liturgical words into a recitative for contralto (*ängstlich*), tenor, and soprano beseeching peace against stormy battle symphonies sounding in the orchestra.

The first of the late quartets, the highly lyrical Quartet in E♭, does not contain any wordless recitatives, unless one counts the strange interruption that shakes up the third movement, the *Scherzando vivace*. In the Quartet in C♯ minor, Op. 131, numerous touches of recitative—edging into a rhapsodic or cadenzalike style—help make the wonderful transitions in and out of the A-major *Allegretto* Theme and Variations, and also in and out of the G♯-minor *Adagio* (which sounds, by the way, as though in another context it might have grown into another *Cavatina*). Each of the three other quartets shows the influence of the Ninth Symphony at the beginning of its finale. The original finale of the Quartet in B♭, the Great Fugue, opens with an *Overtura* rattling through a parade of all the thematic shapes to be utilized in the piece. The Finale of the Quartet in A minor, Op. 132, is led into by an almost hysterical violin recitative, with tremolo and all the trimmings—the rawest that Beethoven ever conceived. The Quartet in F, Op. 135, precedes its Finale with a regular slow introduction adopting all the rhetorical tricks of a solemn *recitativo accompagnato*.

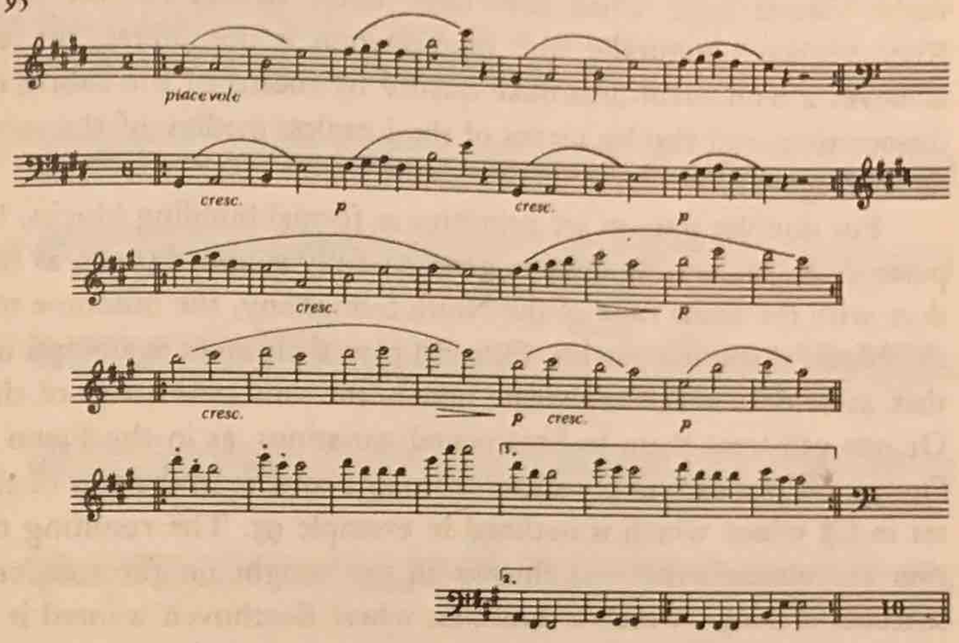
In this instance parody, or rather self-parody, is definitely to be suspected. As is very well known, Beethoven wrote words for the instrumental recitative here: "*Muss es sein?*" and later "*Es muss sein!*" The impulse to give his quartets voice was certainly carrying him to extremes. It must be admitted, though, that these rubrics have been more effective in starting silly metaphysical speculations than in clarifying just exactly what it was he wanted to communicate.

· 4 ·

A very distinct genre of popular lyricism sprouts insistently in the dance movements—none of them is an actual scherzo—of the last quartets. At once native and naïve, it takes its point of departure in quite another area from the operatic world of *cavatina* and accompanied recitative.

The neatest example is the *Presto* of the Quartet in C♯ minor, the "trio" section of which can be sketched in its entirety as a simple one-line

Example 95



paradigm. This amounts to little more than a string of tiny self-contained melodic strains, more or less songlike cells with an almost absurdly popular ring. Beethoven marks them *piacevole*—"agreeable, pleasant." None of the little phrases requires more than two different note-lengths; their harmony tends to collapse into drones or *unisoni;* their shape hews rigidly to the simplest of all 8-bar patterns, comprising two very similar 4-bar halves with a tonic cadence typically even after the first half. I shall refer to phrases of this sort as "doublets." What is evoked here is not the opera house, but the village green or else the nursery. We are to respond to these childlike strains as unguardedly as children to nursery rhymes, we are to be swept away by the *Volkston* of the half-dainty, half-clownish country dance. In the "Pastoral" Symphony, the *lustiges Zusammensein der Landleute* had provided a merry occasion for a medley of such dances.

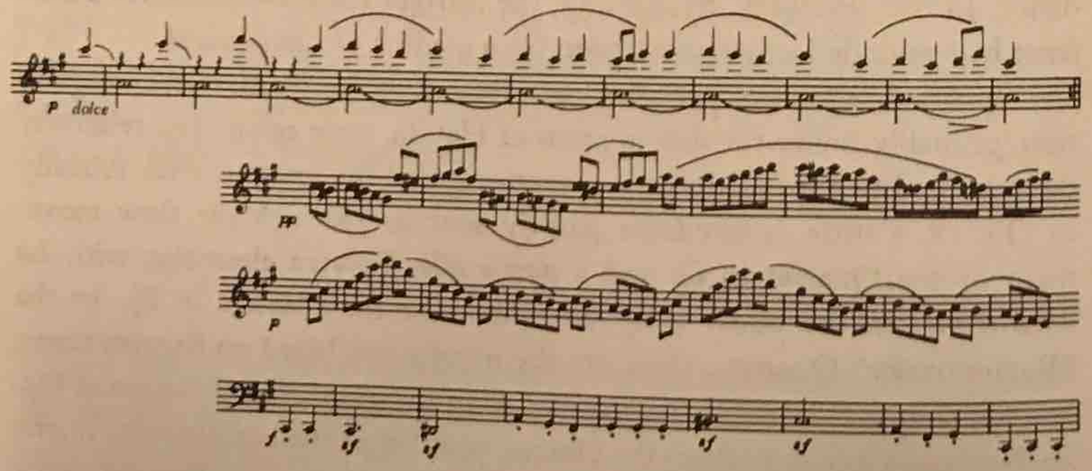
Spiritualized dance parodies had often occupied Beethoven's imagination, probably under the dim impetus of Haydn, once again. The relatively disembodied texture of the string quartet suited the impetus well. Already in Op. 18, a little *contredanse* parody scurries through the slow movement of the Quartet in G, and a *danza alla Tedesca* alternates with *La Malinconia* in the oddly prophetic Finale of the Quartet in B♭. In the "Razumovsky" Quartets, there are the movements based on Russian tunes, and the eloquent, ethereal transformation of the *Menuetto: Grazioso* of Op. 59, No. 3—in mood, perhaps the clearest prophet of the late quartets. In one instance Beethoven actually quotes from pre-existing, non-Russian dance

tunes. Two phrases in the trio of the Quartet in A minor (Nos. 2 and 3 in the example below) reproduce trivial *allemande* ideas tossed off in the early Vienna days, when Beethoven wrote dances for the balls at the Redoutensaal.[4] Naturally, the reproduction is not literal; the evocation achieves a wonderful dreamlike quality by means of the subtle rhythmic dissociations and also by means of the formless medley of the sequence of dance fragments.

For doublet phrases are primitive as formal building blocks. If a composer insists on coaxing them to generate fully rounded tunes, as Beethoven does with the finale tune of the Ninth Symphony, the outcome must have the effect of studied naïveté. One can play them over again and leave it at that, as he does with the *andante* tune in the slow movement of the Ninth. Or one can treat them to ornamental variations, as in the Piano Fantasy, Op. 77. Or one can simply string them in a row, as in the trio of the Quartet in C♯ minor which is outlined in example 95. The resulting construction (or nonconstruction) throws all the weight on the slender, flitting snatches of song—which is doubtless where Beethoven wanted it. The ear can hardly organize the random melodic array into larger periods, at least not without running an appreciable risk of pedantry. This construction I am referring to as "medley."

Nothing could be more inconceivable for Beethoven in the early years. It arose now, presumably, in response to his impatience with the rigid binary prototype for the structure of trios in minuets or scherzos. Writing the Quartet in A minor, he even tried "medleys" in other movements besides the trio of the second movement, as we shall see. The latter instance is the most whimsical of all. The jigsaw puzzle is too involved to allow it to be sketched in its entirety as a line-diagram, but here are its constituent cells:

Example 96

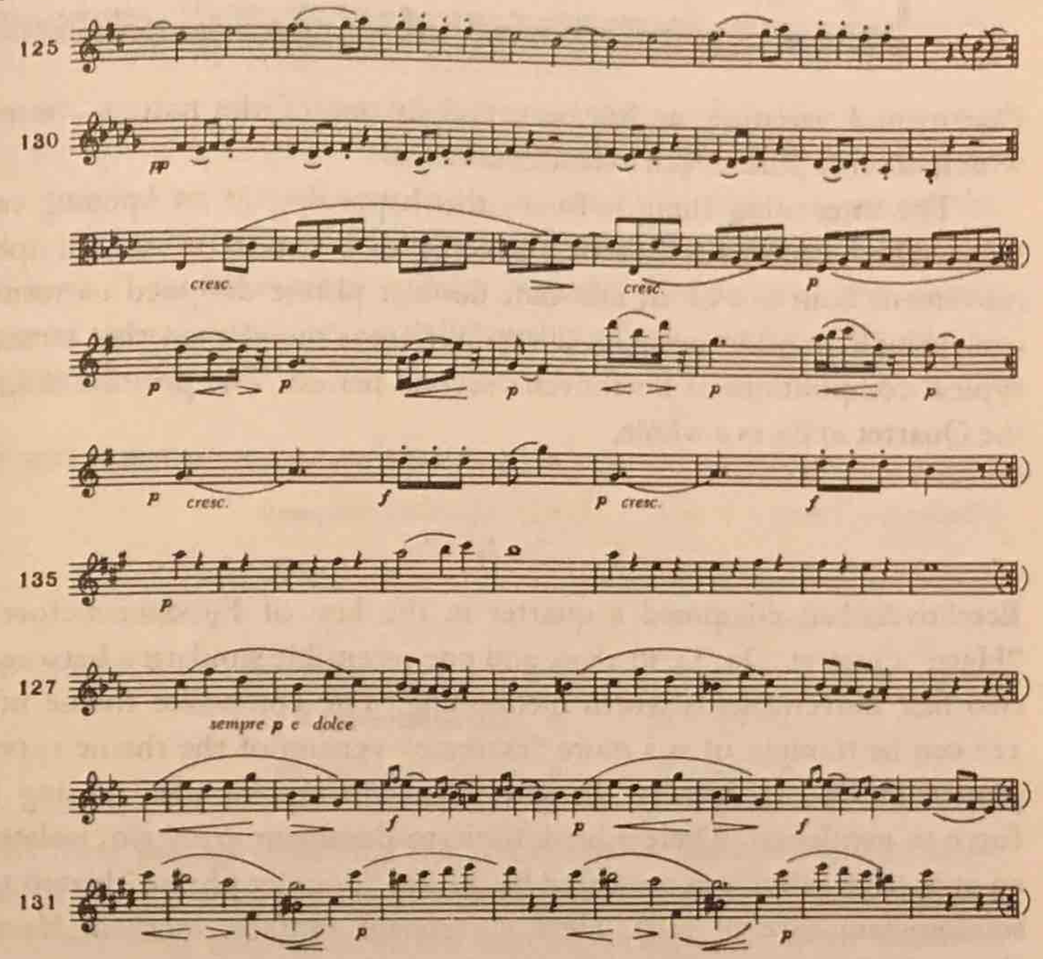


[4] *Werke*, Ser. 25, p. 368, and *Supplemente zur Gesamtausgabe*, VIII, 37 (also 18).

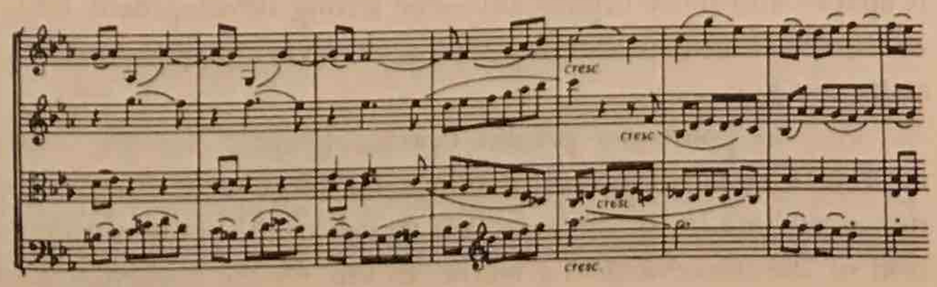
The extra bars at the beginning of No. 1, which seem to tune their peasant fiddle around the inevitable drone, scarcely disturb the doublet feeling.

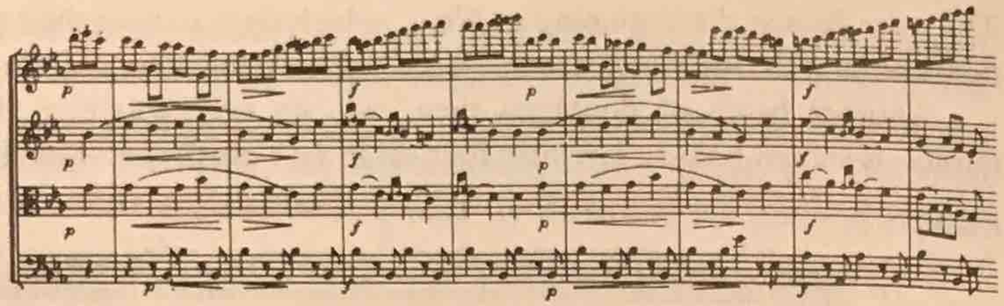
Another batch of doublets—they crop up everywhere in the late music—is shown below. The first four do in fact proceed to round themselves into naïve ternary tunes. Nos. 8 and 9 play parallel roles in their respective finales, as secondary themes in the tonic key, prior to the first modulation. (At first the C♯-minor tune may seem to jar emotionally in this company, but perhaps after all there is a drop of rustic in its bile.) Nos. 7 and 8 operate within the opening and closing movements of the Quartet in E♭, Op. 127. In recapitulation, both of them flower into ornamental variation:

Example 97



Example 98





Ornamental variation, as has been said, is one of the natural means by which doublet phrases can extend themselves.

The interesting thing is to see this happening in an opening movement, which necessarily sets the character for the entire work. An opening movement built out of an innocent doublet phrase designed to return in ornamental variation promises a very different mood than that struck by typical compositions of Beethoven's second period. The promise holds for the Quartet in E♭ as a whole.

· 5 ·

Beethoven had composed a quartet in the key of E♭ once before, the "Harp" Quartet, Op. 74, in 1809, and one ostensible similarity between the two first movements is worth mentioning. The composite theme of Op. 127 can be thought of as a more "extreme" version of the theme-type employed in Op. 74, namely, an antecedent-consequent idea passing from force to gentleness. There a brisk tonic-to-dominant *arpeggio*, isolated by an evocative pause, was answered by a lyric "doublet phrase" biased to the subdominant (see p. 159). Here a resonant fanfare, marked *Maestoso*, slowly builds up the E♭ tonic triad to the dominant B♭ and beyond to a rhetorical pause on C. This melts into a lyric doublet (*Allegro*) circling down four times from C harmonized as the subdominant or as the closely related chord ii_6.

Subsequently, in Op. 74, the brisk antecedent *arpeggio* serves to open the development, drifting from G around to C, which turns out to be the one important key of the section. Likewise in Op. 127, the antecedent *Maestoso* returns to start the development in G, drifting round to C, which is again—and more organically—the strong development key. The *Maestoso* even returns once more within the development in such a way as to stress this key.

At this point any parallel ceases, abruptly, for the *Maestoso* never appears again, neither to introduce its consequent in the recapitulation, nor anywhere in the coda. It falls victim to the single-minded lyric ambition of the movement as a whole. In Op. 74 the consequent phrase seems

to complement the antecedent, according to the best classic principles of checks and balances; together they form a neat symmetrical pair whose intrinsic contrast fructifies the movement up to its final gesture. In Op. 127 the consequent seems rather to escape out of, articulate, and supersede the antecedent, which therefore can and does wither away. The rhetoric is after all quite different. This movement lives not on contrast but on the inherent beauty of the consequent doublet phrase.

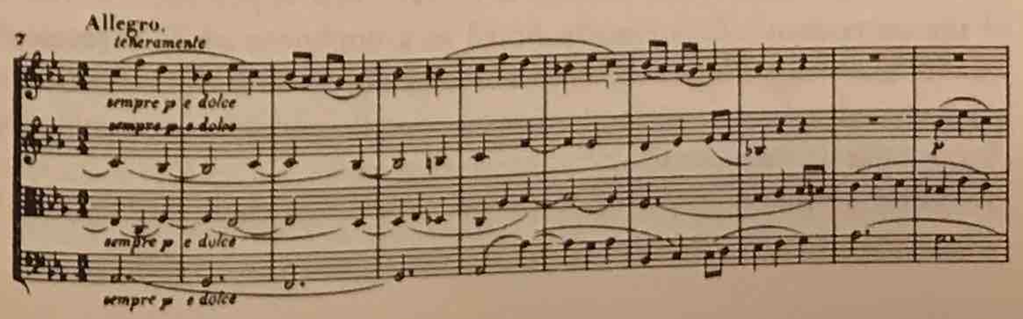
No quartet fast movement in Beethoven moves so lyrically as this one. Among the quartets its gentle utterance occupies a special place analogous to that occupied by the opening of the Sonata in A, Op. 101, among the sonatas. "*Mit innigster Empfindung*," he writes on the earlier composition, "*teneramente*," "*sempre piano e dolce*" on the present one. The phrase structure of the exposition seems unbelievably simple, hardly conducive to dramatic tensions:

FIRST GROUP:	antecedent (*Maestoso*)	6 bars	
	consequent (*Allegro*)	|: 8 :|	(|: 2 × 4 bars :|–"doublet")
	forte	10	
BRIDGE:		8	(4 + 4 in sequence)
SECOND GROUP (iii):	second theme	|: 8 :|	
	1st cadential phrase	8	(3 × 2 + 2)
	2nd cadential phrase	8	(2 × 4)

Only the *forte* passage following the first theme (it perhaps recalls a parallel place in Op. 74) involves any rhythmic sophistication on the level of the phrase; everything else tends to fall into repeating 4- or 8-bar patterns. We might almost be listening to a garland of folksongs.

Yet in spite of its almost voluptuous tenderness, the basic doublet phrase of the first theme is inherently contrapuntal, more so than any earlier quartet theme. It combines three important elements: the melody itself, a *cantus firmus* in unobtrusive parallel motion (cello), and a murmuring syncopated voice (viola):

Example 99



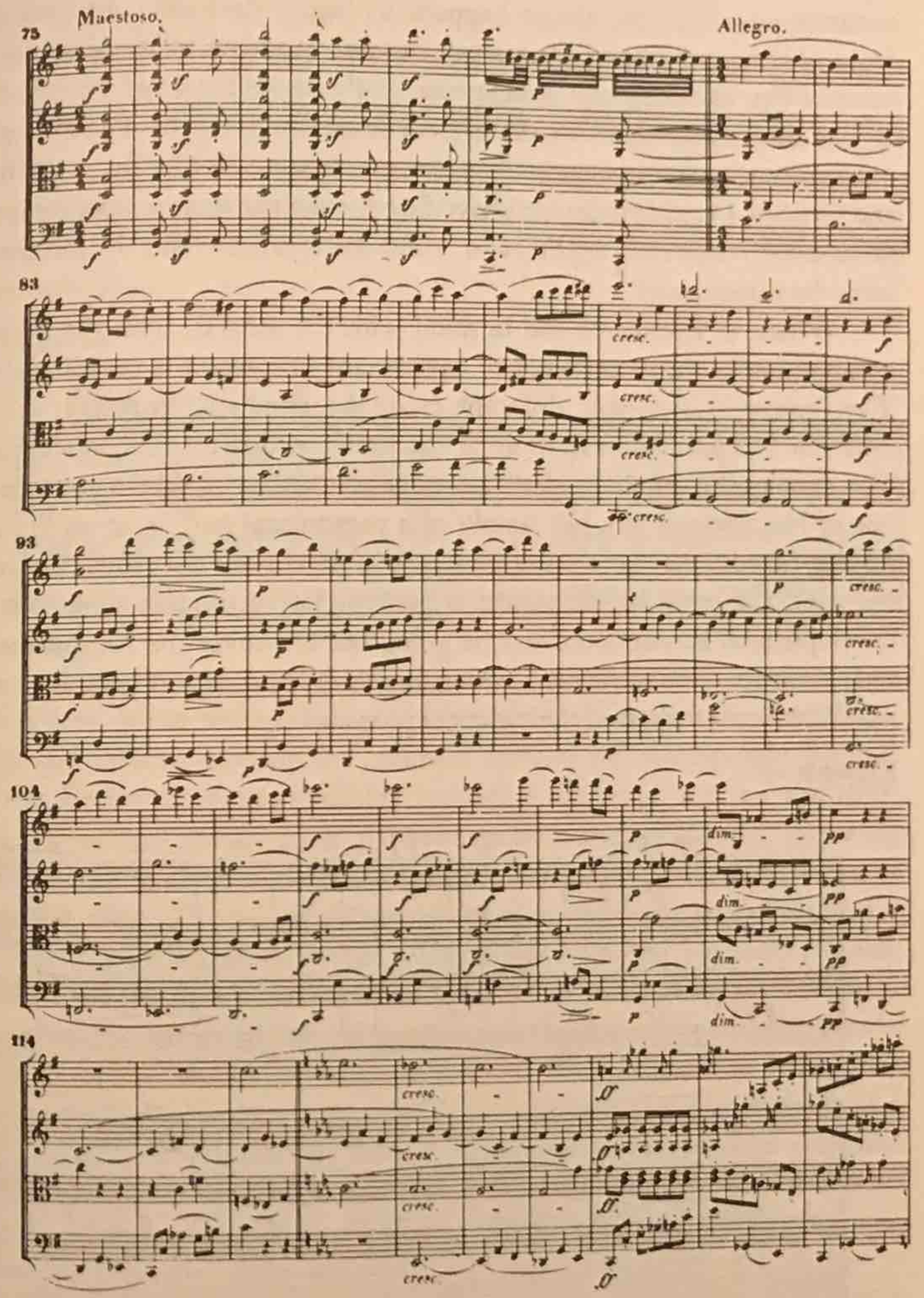
This skeletal species counterpoint will clarify itself as the work proceeds. At first the phrase is repeated in a loosely knit variation (bar 15 ff.) involving an aborted gesture at imitation, a fresh *appoggiatura*, and a sequential melisma in the cello. Action of this kind becomes very characteristic of the piece and contributes greatly to its particular loveliness, its unique sense of efflorescence. One of the spontaneous variations that are applied to the doublet in the recapitulation has already been illustrated (p. 203). New details, often of a light contrapuntal nature, decorate the first theme at every one of its repetitions, and the same is true for the second theme.

Indeed, a process of continuous free variation seems to supplant traditional developmental energy in this movement, in interest at least, even perhaps in function. Certainly the development section proper is undercut. It begins forcefully, with a return of the *Maestoso* spread out over four octaves of G, melting as before into the lyric consequent phrase. But instead of modulating or fragmenting, the latter molds itself into long lyric periods, more ample than before on account of an inversion stretching upward (bars 85–9, etc.), and much more emotional on account of a cadential detail reminiscent of the second theme (bars 96, 112). The new lyric periods are absolutely plain in harmony: 16 bars in G major followed with the least possible fuss by 16 or more in C. Here a thoroughly novel quality of flatness is achieved by the use of canons, and essentially strict ones, at the unison or octave (canons between violin 2, 1, and viola, bars 98, 102, 104; between viola and cello, 97, 99; between violin, viola, cello, 112, 113, 115; between cello and violin, 112, 114). Work of this sort probes the contrapuntal potential of the theme in a timeless aspect without touching on possibilities for dramatic movement. This very impressive passage —but it does not appear to have impressed many commentators—is one of Beethoven's most extraordinary conceptions for a development section, comparable only to the first-movement development in the Quartet in B♭, Op. 130.

And dramatic modulations do not really interest the composer in the 50 bars remaining for his development section, any more than in the first 42. C minor feints at the key of A♭ and shakes with some conventional modulatory bluster, but the *Maestoso* fanfare that emerges remains on C (in which direction it had pointed at its very first appearance, at the start of the movement). C is already heard as a dominant of F, forecasting a second lax swing around the circle of 5ths (G–C, C–F). Thereafter new blusters and a new nod to A♭ return simply enough to dominant-9th chords built on the same C.

What all this is preparing is not the anticipated tonic key E♭, but the

Example 100

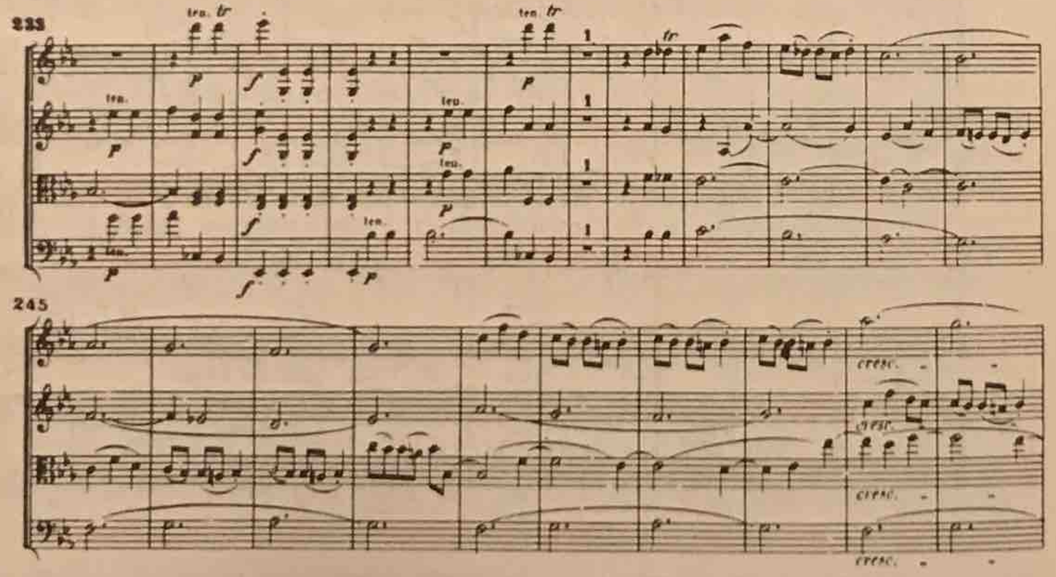


first note of the doublet, C, and its first harmony, the F-minor triad, ii_6 of E♭. The intention is to recapitulate the consequent phrase alone, without its antecedent; and almost absent-mindedly the *Maestoso* drops out of the quartet once and for all, never to be heard of again (though possibly it will be heard echoing behind certain phrases of later movements). The para-

doxical idea of preparing not the actual key of a theme but the off-tonic sonority on which the theme happens to begin, Beethoven had learned from Haydn and employed in several earlier quartets: in the first movement of Op. 18, No. 3, and most spectacularly in the Finale of Op. 59, No. 2. The direct precedent for the present situation, however, comes not in quartets but in piano sonatas. There are two Sonatas in E♭, Op. 31, No. 3, and Op. 81a, *Les Adieux*, which have first-movement themes starting on ii_6 or its close relatives ii^6_5 or IV_6 and which recapitulate them by means of secondary dominants.

Whatever Beethoven had in mind with the sonatas, with the present composition he seems certainly to have meant to soften the recapitulation. The feeling is altogether different from the emphatic, forceful, or triumphant recapitulations in most of the previous quartet first movements. The doublet slips in obscurely, with an effect neither of enhanced strength nor of Haydnesque wit, but simply of a paradoxical new lease on life and staying-power. As its phrases repeat themselves in gorgeous variation (p. 203), the sense of the return is perhaps left in doubt; some sort of developmental action could still be going on. However the recapitulation unfolds quite symmetrically—which is to say lyrically. There is a new modification to the last of the cadential phrases:

Example 101

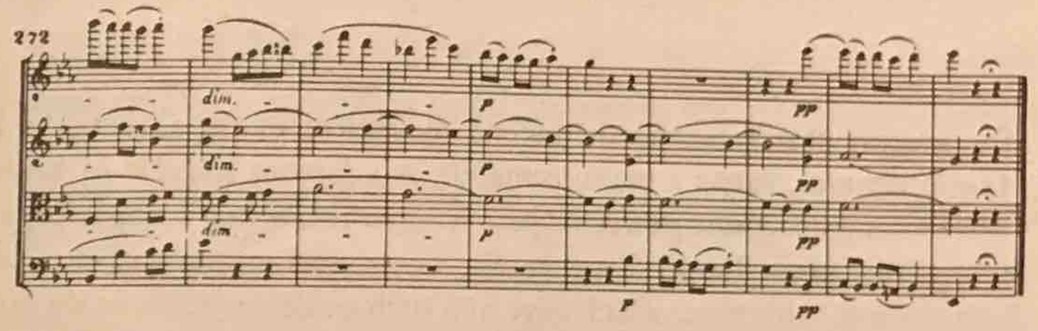


The expressive semitone inflection in bars 234 and 239, absent from the exposition, seems to trace back to a poignant detail of the second theme. In turn, the semitone allows Beethoven to move very beautifully toward the subdominant, again, in order to start the coda.

This coda consists of a sweetly obsessive series of repetitions of a

newly touching and newly repetitive version of the doublet (bars 249–56) together with recollections of the inverted version of the development and of the original form. Seven times the song circles its way down from ii or IV or ii_6 to the tonic, while the *cantus firmus* isolates itself and migrates now above, now below the melody. The whole effect approaches that of an inexact, ruminative, and inexpressibly tender round. The fourth-species syncopations, introduced at the very start, remain a quietly insistent but constantly varied feature. They allow a piercing detail near the very end (bars 278, 280):

Example 102



This movement is a burgeoning, not a dramatic statement. It soon shakes free of the strong, benign, inchoate *Maestoso* that launched it initially and concentrates on the intimate *aveu* of its contrapuntal doublet. Of this Beethoven never tires. He caresses it endlessly, melting and shuffling the melody itself, urging the syncopations back and forth, exploring fresh regions and registers with touches that are always familiar and never quite the same. The composite theme itself provides the single impressive element of contrast, but contrast is abandoned with the *Maestoso* halfway through the piece. The second theme, far from contrasting with the first, adopts its gait and mien and also a suspicious number of its melodic details. Even its key, G minor (iii)—a minor key!—seems chosen to contrast as little as possible. No less lyric than the first theme, the second sits over a static pedal G which scarcely budges all through the transparent cadential phrases; when the second theme recapitulates in the tonic major, certain original minor-mode inflections are preserved, so that the change of mode makes surprisingly little difference. Strong contrasting articulation is avoided at the point of recapitulation also, as has been mentioned. From the development, what remains in the memory is the section of canons, with its timeless, almost mystic quality.

Sensibility, not structure, is the heart of this piece. Obviously form as such is not the major expressive element. Yet the art required to mold unobtrusive form that will support the repetitive leisure of such a piece is very considerable, as many nineteenth-century composers (or their listen-

ers) learned to their sorrow. The expressive climax of the development comes with the lyric phrases at the beginning and the canonic meditation, for the blustering passages go nowhere and develop nothing significantly. Beethoven must have thought them necessary to set off the recapitulating theme in an unexpected fresh softness. As the fragile little recapitulation might hardly have sufficed to discharge all that curiously dissociated violence, the repetitions of the coda are required or justified. There is about the structure of the movement an ease and instinctive mastery that hides itself, yet frees the lyricism that the composer wished most to develop.

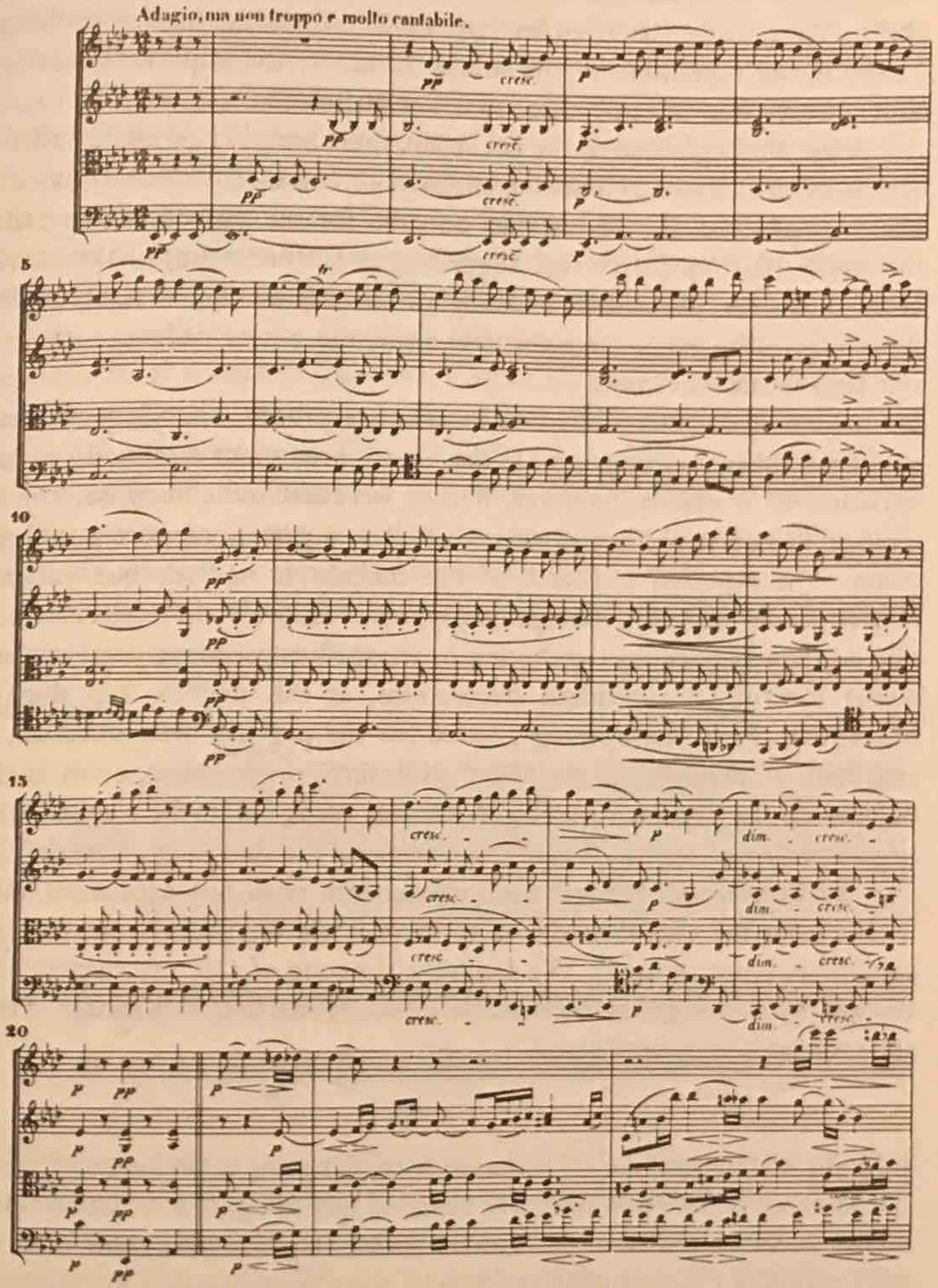
· 6 ·

The melody that generates the second movement of the Quartet in E♭, *Adagio ma non troppo e molto cantabile*, is a famous miracle of beauty. "Were some malignant power to permit us to retain but a single page of Beethoven," wrote Daniel Gregory Mason, as usual a little stiff-necked, a little moving, "this page, which gave him such endless trouble in the writing, might well be the one we should cherish for our solace and delight." [5] Mason was refering to the extensive sketches for the melody, which so struck Nottebohm that for once he printed a whole set rather than just a sample. (The suspicion is that Beethoven's best music was the most laboriously sketched, and the most laboriously sketched the most spontaneous-sounding.) In addition to sketches, a sort of early draft for the melody may perhaps be recognized in Leonore's aria *Komm, Hoffnung* in *Fidelio* (see p. 213). However this may be, its natural vocal quality has never been in doubt. Three months after Beethoven's death, it was sliced off the front of the *Adagio* and published as a song upon that occasion: *Beethoven's Heimgang*, with words beginning "*Es wand sein Geist sich von des Staubes Randen los.*"

What one cherishes is its calm directness, its sense of freedom, its simplicity and its economy. The form is spare, the harmony plain. Everything devolves upon the melodic line ranging through the great span of an octave and a half—the opening upbeat 4th capped by an entire 6th; the soaring octave leaps in the first strain; the new 6th in the second strain, flowing all the way up from the subdominant D♭ to a high B♭; and the beautiful gapped octave—like catching one's breath—down to the delicate cadence. Think of the impressive A♭ melody of the *Andante* in the earlier E♭ Quartet, Op. 74. By comparison with Op. 127, it is a lyric prisoner.

[5] P. 174.

Example 103



The quite unusual luxuriance of the movement as a whole is already forecast within the melody, simple as it is in outline. Half-improvisatory contrapuntal graces are accumulated by almost every segment of it, especially when the cello repeats the two strains originally played by the violin. The free variation technique of the opening movement of the quartet is recalled in such details as the disembodied descant of bars 7–10, the opulent fattening of the melody by the second violin in bars 15–16, and a

whole series of imitations or half-imitations of the opening upbeat 4th (cello, bar 3; viola, bar 7; violin, bars 15–16). Even the harmony changes a little in the repetitions of the strains. In bar 17 the important subdominant climax shines because in bar 13 it was shadowed.

After the repetition of the last strain, there are yet two and a half bars of highly articulated concluding material to come—this melody is in no hurry to proceed. Bar 18 provides an echo for the gapped-octave fall of the violin. Bar 19 (after first suggesting a further echo) makes a rich chromatic close. Bar 20 adds a halting 3-note cadence-figure. Each of these three ideas—the echo, the chromatic close, the 3-note cadence—plays its role later in the movement.

Listening to the melody, we have scarcely been worrying our heads about the likely continuations. When a very ornate but essentially regular variation of it ensues, however, it may occasion some surprise, for the melody had certainly not advertised itself as a peg to support a variation chain. The repeated structure of the melody is normal, but variation themes do not normally indulge themselves in leisurely threefold cadences, nor do they at once start gathering to themselves pregnant yet (it would seem) carefully unorganized decorations, as this melody has done so beautifully. Even the opening ground for the peg has been softened, by two bars of preliminary dominant. Not surprisingly, then, with such a beginning, the present variation movement turns out to be a much more organic conception than that of the traditional classic variation model.

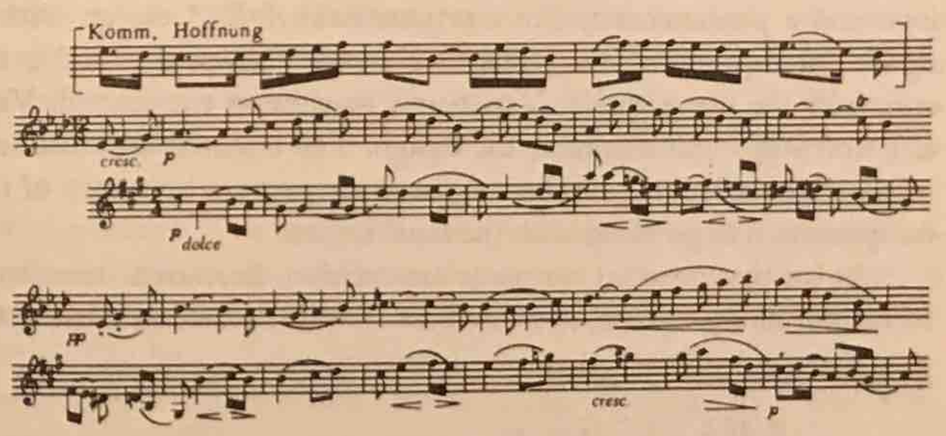
All Beethoven's late variation movements, with one exception, move so far from the classic model as to leave it almost unrecognizable (and sometimes unrecognized). We can leave the song of Op. 127 suspended in the air for a moment to consider *la grande variation*, as Vincent d'Indy aptly called it, in general terms.

In point of fact, the use of variation form for slow movements of sonata works is not common in the early years. (Light *allegretto* variation movements, as in the Finale of the Quartet in E♭, Op. 74, pose their own distinct problem.) The stumbling effort of the Quartet in A, Op. 18, No. 5, was ventured only under Mozart's banner. The second period affords few important examples: the *Appassionata* Sonata, the Violin Concerto, the Fifth Symphony, and the "Archduke" Trio. The first three of these rank (to my mind) among Beethoven's least satisfactory slow movements at a time when, indeed, he was not conspicuously happy with slow movements in general. The dramatic thrust of the sonata style kept getting in the way of lyricism, as the "Razumovsky" Quartets show.

But in the third period, Beethoven is even placing slow variation movements as finales; the new interest in song automatically awoke a new interest in variation. This became a technical preoccupation second only to fugue. His last great work for piano, the *Thirty-Three Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli*, and the *Lento assai* of his last quartet, F major, Op. 135, might be characterized as a compendium and as a microcosm, respectively, of the art of variation. In the C-minor Sonata, Op. 111, and in the slow movements of the Ninth Symphony and the A-minor Quartet, he proceeds on the traditional plan of gradually increasing embroidery of the theme. However, in each case he combines this simple variation principle with larger structural considerations—with other themes in other keys, or at least with important modulatory digressions. This happens also in the *Adagio* of the Quartet in E♭, Op. 127. Only the *Andante ma non troppo e molto cantabile* of the Quartet in C♯ minor, Op. 131, fails to make some such effect with its cluster of variations—for reasons that hopefully will appear later, when the composition is considered as a whole.

The contrast in method is instructive, especially in view of the close resemblance of the variation themes:

Example 104



Everything is a little more sharply etched—a little less purely lyric—in the theme of Op. 131: the dialogue between two instruments closer, the motivic work more obvious, the harmonic changes more frequent, the inflections more chromatic. What is so similar is the essential melodic outline and the harmonic scheme, and especially the treatment of the octave ambitus.

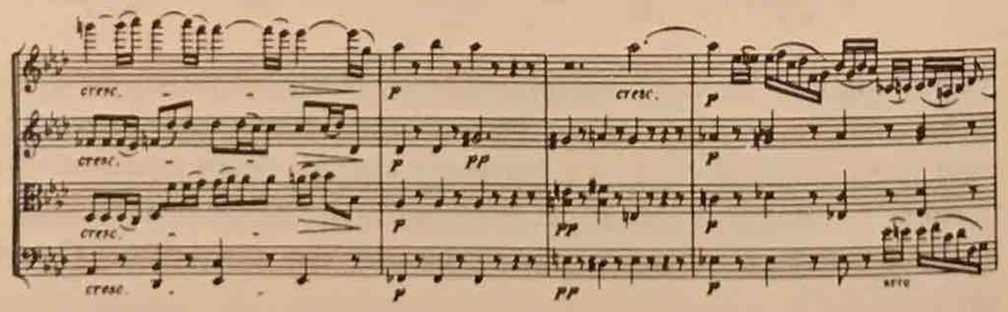
The *Andante* of Op. 131 does not depend on architecture but on the series of brilliant, astonishing revelations in the individual variations. Beethoven had practiced this sort of thing in the "Diabelli" set. Most of the variations change time-signature and tempo (what they do *not* change is the tonality), a sure sign that variety is of the essence. Variation 1 holds

motivically to the theme and keeps the original time and tempo, but ornaments it in a mood of endless free burgeoning characteristic also of several later variations. Variation 2 turns the theme into a country dance, and Variation 3 turns it into a highly abstract canon. Variation 4 slows and elaborates the theme, and then Variation 5 speeds it up and strips it down —each about as far as Beethoven felt was practical, no doubt. Variation 6, slowed to *Adagio ma non troppo e semplice*, makes a climax of weight in a sublime, hymnlike mood very characteristic of Beethoven's late slow movements. A fragmentary seventh variation initiates a ruminative yet strangely tense coda during which the first strain is tried repeatedly in its original unvaried form, in the keys of C, A, and F.

These harmonic digressions in the coda are not functional, and they do not disturb the sense of the variations as an iridescent chain, with the heaviest link at the hymn-variation, Variation 6. I do not see a very pressing necessity in the sequence of the links here, any more than in the classic Mozartian model, with its obligatory *Adagio* variation one from the end. The formal principle of Op. 131 is more purely lyric than that of Op. 127 —even though the theme itself in Op. 131 may be less purely lyric. For in Op. 127 the six variations and coda are formed, not like a chain with seven links and a plummet, but like a symmetrical *A B A* design with a very significant cap in the coda. The theme and Variations 1 and 2 together constitute the first element. Variation 3 constitutes the second. Variations 4, 5, and 6 as a unit complete the design. The essential articulation is harmonic, but Variation 4 emphasizes the three-part arc by means of thematic recapitulation to go along with the tonal return.

As for that essential harmonic articulation, Beethoven recaptures it in an extraordinary fashion, in a few bars of terse revelation within the coda.

Example 105



These harmonic digressions *are* functional; by relating the tonic key of A♭ to E major by way of C♯ (D♭) minor, they pull together the three key-areas of the movement as a whole. The theme and the first two variations stay in A♭. Variation 3, the *B* section, moves with a spasm to E major (F♭,

♭VI), a key which creates the highly charged sense of an enhanced dominant, as is usually the case with the minor sixth degree. Variation 4 returns just as abruptly to A♭, with Variation 5 balancing the digression to E by stressing the deep minor subdominant (iv, C♯ or D♭ minor), and Variation 6 resuming the tonic.

(One can hark back to the original melody for a scent of these harmonies. Possibly its most striking melodic progression, in bars 3–4, links the tonic to the sixth degree of the scale—albeit the major scale, not the minor. The climactic harmony, in bar 17, is the subdominant, albeit the major subdominant—but the minor subdominant gleams in the chromatic close of bar 19, which counts as the most colorful harmonic progression.

(The retrospective revelation of the coda was imitated directly by Schubert at the end of the *Adagio* of his String Quintet in C. It is nicely emblematic of the difference between the two composers that Schubert's gesture should be more colorful in detail but simpler in function, reflecting only one prior harmonic area, not two.)

The first variation in Op. 127, as has been said, is thoroughly complex in detail—the most complex Beethoven ever wrote—although it follows the phrase structure of the theme strictly enough. All the variations in this movement seem to cleave a little to their predecessors; here the opening texture resumes the opulent parallel 6ths which ornamented strain 2 of the original melody in its repetition. The 6ths melt into dense, flexible imitations on motifs derived a little energetically from each fragment of the melody in turn, and destined to expand each harmonic detail into a tiny moment of intensity. The invention is too spontaneous to allow close parallelism between the strains and their repetitions; everything burgeons as freely as do the ornamental doublet variations in the first movement of the quartet. The lush, vibrant texture dries up only at the very last bar, as the 3-note cadence-figure follows the echo and the chromatic close. This serves to prepare the more highly strung variation to follow.

Still in A♭, Variation 2 changes to duple time and slightly accelerates the tempo: *Neue Kraft fühlend*, as Beethoven expresses a not dissimilar transition on another occasion. Here he tries out a distinctive light *obbligato* style used a number of times in the late quartets—in the contrasting section of the *Heiliger Dankgesang* of Op. 132, in the *Andante con moto* of Op. 130, and in certain variations of Op. 131. What is typically involved is some kind of fast-dancing dialogue, with crisp syncopations and trills, lucid harmonies, a deceptively popular swing in the bass, and much air—small rests separating fugitive motifs making much play with *staccato*. Beethoven likes to write these passages very "black," that is, in sixteenth-,

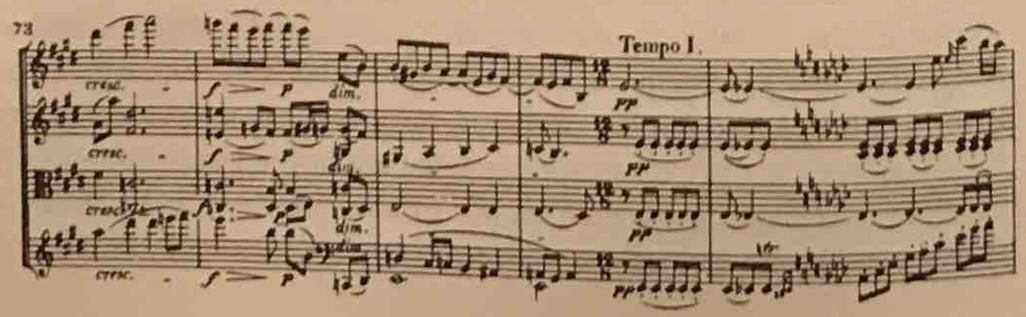
thirty-second-, and sixty-fourth-notes. There exists a letter (analyzed by Heinrich Schenker and Oswald Jonas) in which the composer discusses a refined point of technique in this variation.

The climactic subdominant harmony from bar 17 of the theme now obtrudes angrily as a minor subdominant, preparing another touch of minor subdominant (C♯ minor) at the very end—which can twist abruptly to E major for the crucial Variation 3. The echo, the cadential close, and the 3-note cadence-figure are all smoothed together by the florid figuration.

That the central contrasting key-area should be led into not by a proper modulation but by a spasm, and that it should be left in just the same way (see below), is entirely typical of Beethoven's methods in the last period. Not to speak of the Great Fugue, similar dissociated strokes isolate the *B* sections of the slow movements of the Ninth Symphony and the Quartet in A minor. These are cases close to home; each of them "non-modulates" to a form of the sixth degree, as here, and each of them creates its own variety of that insistent religious experience which also inspires the *Cavatina* of the B♭ Quartet and the climactic *Adagio* variation of the C♯-minor. Indeed, Variation 3 is a hymn-variation of the melody, slowed to *Adagio molto espressivo* and simplified into *alla breve* time. Sustained by quiescent chords, the elemental melody picks out only certain chief notes of the original theme, a procedure quite opposite to the busy ornamenting of the early variations. The decided tone of prayer makes a spiritual crown for the movement, and for that matter, for the quartet as a whole.

E major makes one think back to the mystical E-major hymn in the second "Razumovsky" Quartet, and also—as Philip Radcliffe observes—to the slow variation-finale of the Sonata in E, Op. 109, whose half-cadence resonates so curiously in a harshly scored augmented-6th chord here. This chord clarifies itself into plain ♭VI of E (as though to remind us that E major arose in the first place as ♭VI of A♭) and marks a displaced variation of the cadential echo (bar 74, last beat) before falling into an alarmingly Brahmsian version of the chromatic close (bar 75):

Example 106

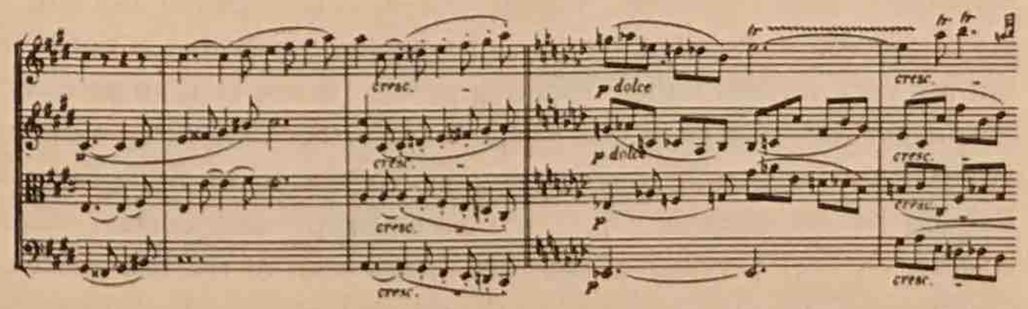


In this variation the 3-note cadence-figure is passed over.

Almost with a sense of relief, Variation 4 drifts back to the original mood—back to Tempo I and A♭ major, with figuration first resembling that of Variation 1, but sprouting into new riches of trills and slow-sweeping *arpeggios*. Presently the melody is restored almost verbatim, in the same pair of dialoguing instruments that had it originally; this accentuates the strong sense of return in the *A B A* structure. By eliminating subdominant harmonies from the second strain, Beethoven makes the melody sound all the more emphatic in its return, and circumspectly keeps the sequel fresh. After the chromatic close, a brief extension of the 3-note cadence-figure leads innocently to the subdominant and to Variation 5.

Perhaps this wonderful passage does not altogether earn the name of variation; if you wish, call it an episode in the subdominant with strong thematic connections. Of its 13 bars, the theme is followed only by the first 4, a bare gentle canon tracing the characteristic melodic 6th and ending on the characteristic half-cadence. Thereafter Beethoven falls, abstracted, into a meditation upon the subdominant note D♭ (C♯) and upon its minor triad—the note itself spread out as a sonorous four-octave pedal, the triad wound around in sequential double counterpoint (derived from the chromatic close that had first glowed with C♯ minor, many variations ago). Beethoven is celebrating the subdominant climax of the original melody, in bar 17. This becomes clear as almost tentatively things slip back on the track with a recollection of the end of the melody (bars 17–18):

Example 107

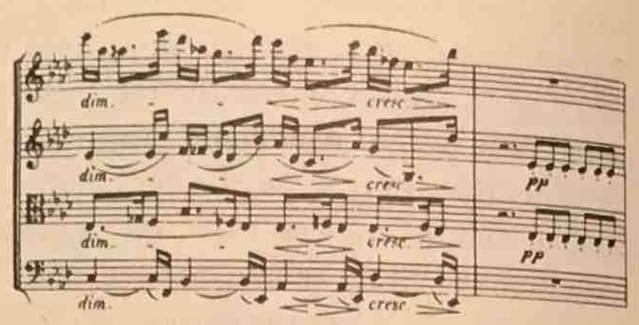


From D♭ (C♯) the line moves not up the major scale to high B♭, but up the minor scale to B♭♭ (A). The cadential echo is heard one extra time, in the cello, as though to confirm the return to the major mode as the rich trills break in once again; but the chromatic close and the 3-note cadence-figure are saved for Variation 6.

The last and simplest and shortest variation glides over the melody in continuous flowing sixteenth-notes. It sounds similar to the second variation in the *Adagio* of the Ninth Symphony, and just as serene. Were the

powers so malign as to permit us to retain of Beethoven but a single bar, we might take this last variation of the chromatic close:

Example 108



Again the subdominant is avoided, to save its darkening color for the terse coda which retells the whole harmonic story of the movement. The main material of this coda is that which is due after the chromatic close: the 3-note cadence-figure. This was bypassed in Variations 3 and 5, but now comes into its cadential own (see Example 105, p. 214).

The treatment of the three cadential ideas is only one aspect of the superb shaping of this piece. Besides being the most sensuously beautiful movement Beethoven ever wrote, it is one of his masterpieces of expressive form and without much doubt his most sophisticated structure in a slow movement. The rudimentary *A B A* arc is articulated as subtly as a great cathedral articulates its basic cruciform plan (the simile is Tovey's): the first member freely embroidering the theme, the central member reducing it to a mystic vision in a remote tonality, and the final member restoring the theme to its original aspect—more or less, in spite of the placid decoration of the last variation. In spite of the subdominant meditation of the penultimate one, Variation 5, Variations 4–6 sound together as a unit, moving as they do in the same tempo and with figuration that is not identical but not very variable either. Speaking purely (if one can) of architectural eloquence, this movement goes deeper and further than other slow movements of the last period. In terms of structure, the Ninth Symphony seems bulging by comparison, Op. 130 merely happy and correct, Op. 132 austere, Op. 131 permissive. Only the *Lento assai* of the last quartet, the Quartet in F, Op. 135, inscrutably the simplest of all, is built so perfectly and so eloquently.

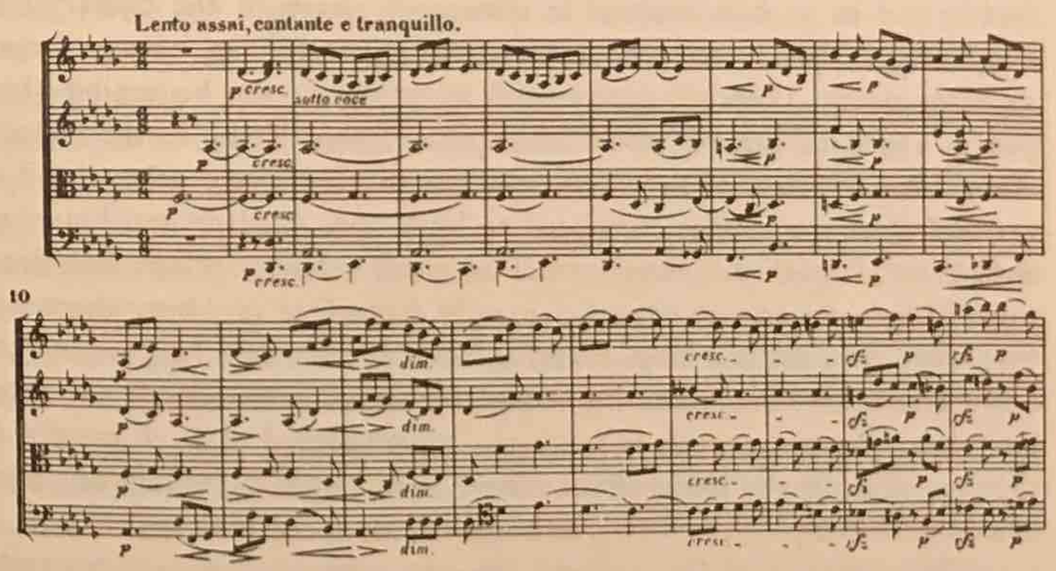
· 7 ·

Variations, in the Quartets in E♭ and C♯ minor, allowed Beethoven to work up to a luxuriance unparalleled in his earlier music. That was one obvious

path for lyricism to travel—the sometimes primrose path to Richard Strauss. In the Quartet in F, the same technique allowed him to attain an unparalleled quietude, simplicity, and (one might even say at first) sobriety. This small variation movement does not seek extraordinary frontiers for its theme; it looks steadily in on the theme and seeks its purest essence. Instead of unity in variety, the effect is simply of unity—the unity of a circle, not that of a crystal, a leaf, or a cathedral. To characterize the piece as a microcosm of the art of variation, then, is to think of microcosm in a very particular way.

The innovation of this set of variations is its thorough-going lyricism; it sings all the way through. Beethoven marked it *cantante e tranquillo*, "singing . . ." where the weaker conventional term would have been *cantabile*, "singable" or "songlike." Embroidery, decoration, and ornamentation are simply not in the picture, and far from investigating imaginative transformations of the theme, the composer now seems reluctant to disguise it. Variation 1, which starts at bar 13, flows directly out of the initial thematic statement, like a melodic continuation. The violin eases

Example 109



its way up to the high octave in the same note values, tempo, dynamic, etc., adding some chromatic inflections but deserting none of the important notes of the original tune. Variation 2, *Più lento* and a little *beklemmt*, strikes the one appreciable note of contrast—something less than tranquil, yet carefully muted in its distress or menace. Variation 3 restores the theme to all intents and purposes literally, achieving such novelty as it wants by means of a trancelike free canon above. (This accords excellently with the small cadential echoes at the end of the

theme.) The last variation, Variation 4, changes the figuration, but not the tempo and really not the mood. The exquisite and exquisitely singable violin arabesques seem once again to carry the impulse of the previous variation—that is to say, of the theme mirrored in canon—up to its natural lyric fulfillment.

So solid is the lyric continuity between the theme and Variation 1, and between Variations 3 and 4, that various critics either have overlooked the construction of the piece as a set of variations or else refuse to recognize it. They speak merely of a threefold *A B A* pattern—which of course exists, superimposed upon the fivefold pattern; both are essential to Beethoven's idea. His intention to force the *A B A* feeling is obvious, but the four variations are equally obvious, lucid, and strict. (The contrasting *Più lento* section can "count" as the standard *minore* variation—Variation 2—just as well as a middle *B* section.) To miss or to minimize the recurrent pattern of the thematic matrix is to miss something fundamental, because the recurrence contributes to the fundamentally static, contemplative quality of the movement as a whole.

People may have been put off by the brevity of the theme, but the fact is that its 10 bars succeed in conveying much of the character of Beethoven's typical variation themes, with their full 16 bars and their repeated strains. There is a touch of repetition at the beginning (bars 3–6: p. 219), and there is plenty of sequential pressure up to the melodic climax. But the theme forgoes modulation; and like every other detail of the technique, this seems calculated to build that fundamental hovering, almost mystic quality. Even the brief cadential echoes work in this direction. They were borrowed rather exactly from Op. 127, but whereas in that work they settle a long, eventful melody, here they harp on a curiously premature conclusion. No modulatory excursions outside the regular variation scheme, such as mark the superimposed *A B A* pattern in Op. 127, disturb the static effect. There is not even a modulatory feint in a coda, as in Op. 131. There is no coda.

The variations of Op. 127 and Op. 131 treat subdominant harmony with great subtlety. In Op. 135 the subdominant is almost entirely absent —a circumstance that suggests a startling parallel with an even more ostentatiously mystical movement, the Lydian *Heiliger Dankgesang* of Op. 132. The theme of Op. 135 uses no subdominant triads up to a pair of plagal cadences in the last two bars, and even this detail is excised from some variations. It is restored, quietly, to illuminate two bars at the end of the piece which serve in lieu of coda. The sense of this studied reticence with so standard a harmonic resource as the subdominant is

very hard to specify, and it is not much easier to characterize the feeling when the plagal cadences are finally restored. One can speak of security and grace, perhaps, of lightness, and of an incredible transparency.

These feelings have been growing all through the final variation, with its limpid violin figuration, which sounds so pliant and which is in fact so perfectly rigid in technical manufacture. There is nothing quite like it in Beethoven, this combination of severity and ineffable tenderness, this tearless clarity of vision, an emotion self-absorbed yet entirely open. Though passion and even warmth have long since been distilled out of the song, its tranquillity belongs very much in the world. In fact this variation seems to me to modulate the feeling decisively away from the mysticism that earlier was enveloping the work. It is not a voice enlarging or exhorting, it is a voice stating; an unimaginably beautiful speaking voice, perhaps, rather than a song; but unmistakably a human voice.

For Stravinsky this movement is another "pedestrian" one. In a more romantic age, Theodor Helm could rhapsodize in a contrary vein: "Never in his wanderings through the gulfs and labyrinths of the human soul had Beethoven sung anything more noble and inward than this Adagio [sic!] of his last Quartet—outwardly so small, consisting of but 54 bars, but inwardly so deeply significant." [6] Without much favoring this language, I rather agree with Helm's superlative. In the *Lento assai* of the Quartet in F, Beethoven seems to touch a true note of sublimity missing from the other hymnlike slow movements of the last years; even the hymn-variations of Op. 127 and Op. 131 emanate a slightly sententious tone which can bring to mind those earnest religious maxims that he liked to jot down or set in frames. In Op. 135 there is no suspicion of straining for solemnity, as in the *Cavatina* of Op. 130, or straining for asceticism, as in the *Heiliger Dankgesang* of Op. 132. The piece is neither operatic nor churchy, nor excessively humble either: it may *look* plain, but the sonority is so calculated that the term "sobriety" hardly seems to do justice to the fullness of the effect. The game with the subdominant has something to do with this fullness. Beethoven's own characterization is just: "*cantante e tranquillo*," which he wrote on the final score, after trying "*süsser Ruhegesang oder Friedensgesang*" in a sketchbook.

For a certain generation of musicians and listeners, this movement will stir memories of Arturo Toscanini, who used to perform and broadcast it at the beginning of orchestra concerts along with the second movement

[6] P. 310.

of Op. 135. The impression is unforgettable, and while such memories remain, one can never be sure about the freshness of one's critical response. From the puristic point of view, Toscanini's action was sufficiently horrifying; it falsified Beethoven's texture, and ignored the progress of feeling between movements of the cyclic work—a powerful development in the late music, which forms the burden of the remaining chapters of this study. All the same, the idea of magnifying the song in such a way as to project it to the *Millionen*—that corresponds to something very deep in Beethoven's own conception, whatever it destroys in the manifestation. One wonders how puristic he himself might have felt inclined to be about it.

For in essence—to resume the burden of the present chapter—the vocal impulse represents a grandiose impulse toward directness of communication. Elemental song in the form of the country dance, the folk song, and the nursery song, and sophisticated song in the form of the aria, lied, recitative, and hymn, all converge in the major effort for immediacy of contact. The gradual development of Beethoven's lyric sensibility, from the gauche beginnings of Op. 18 to the superb flights of the last period, is too large a matter for treatment here; say only that the process proved as laborious and as valuable to him (and can prove as inspiring to us) as his development of harmony, motivic work, fugue, and so on. Yet I think one misses the point if one views this progress purely or even mainly in technical terms. All the developments were forging language; the development of song was forging language straight for the "common listener." This was, after all, Beethoven's most significant response to the Romantic stirrings of the 1820's, a response that did not fail to impress the nineteenth century. If perhaps the impression has dimmed for later, revisionist generations, something has been dimmed of Beethoven's essential voice.

8

CONTRAST

Quartet in E♭ Major, Op. 127
Quartet in A Minor, Op. 132

In the last years of his life Beethoven had become a very great celebrity; information about him is much more plentiful than in the earlier years. Not to speak of accounts and descriptions and conversations (recorded in Conversation Books) and correspondence, more than a dozen sketchbooks are preserved containing material for the last quartets of 1824–6.[1] The history of these quartets, outlined very briefly, is as follows.

Early in 1822 Beethoven mentioned in a letter that he was working on a string quartet—for the first time, presumably, in a dozen years, since the Quartet in F minor of 1810. And late in 1822 he was treated to a loquacious, flattering request for "*un, deux, ou trois nouveaux quattuors*" from a Prince Galitzin in St. Petersburg. It is strange how large a role was played by Russian noblemen—Lobkowitz, Razumovsky, and now Galitzin—in the story of Beethoven's quartets. Beethoven very gladly accepted the fifty ducats, and in the next couple of years he is speaking of his quartet plans to all sorts of people: to Charles Neate of London, who was interested in a commission on behalf of the Royal Philharmonic Society, to the publishers Peters and Schott, to friends, and to celebrity-seeking visitors. However, in these years he was fully occupied, not to say preoccupied, with the *Missa solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony, two works which cost him more trouble than almost any others in his whole career. It was necessary not only to compose them but also to promote and sell them, and this was an exhausting process, especially as Beethoven

[1] See pp. 383–4.