

THE MUSIC OF FRIENDS: SOME THOUGHTS ON THE STRING QUARTETS OF BEETHOVEN

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The announcement that the Lener Quartet is to commemorate the centenary of Beethoven's death by giving the whole of his String Quartets at a series of concerts in London, is welcome news. Such a delightful project must make every busy professional musician, however happy he may be in his work, envious of the privileges of the idle rich! Those who are able to attend regularly will have a rare opportunity of forming a comprehensive estimate of Beethoven's creative powers. The Quartets are not to be played in chronological order, which shows the wisdom of the organizers, for the programmes will not only gain in variety but also in educational value by such an arrangement.

Beethoven's achievements in other departments of music were so stupendous, and his influence so overwhelming, that people are apt to overlook his greatness as a writer of chamber works. Yet this is precisely the sphere in which the supreme qualities of his art were destined to be most fully manifested. 'Beethoven and his Nine Symphonies' is a familiar phrase. We need a new George Grove to reveal the importance of 'Beethoven and his Sixteen Quartets,' a phrase which, to the cultured student, expresses an even wider range of thought and experience. There can be no doubt, I think, that Beethoven's most characteristic utterances were those which he reserved for an intimate circle of understanding people. It is certainly significant that at the end of his career he discarded every other form of expression, and delivered his most cryptic musical speech through the medium of four stringed instruments, a slender combination which, oddly enough, alone seemed capable of suggesting the immensities of his thought.

The powers of intimate self-expression which Beethoven revealed in his last Quartets were, of course, only arrived at by gradual stages of development, and by long experience in the composition of chamber music of a more normal kind. But no composer was ever so eager to experiment as Beethoven. He was not content, as Mozart was, to settle down to any particular style, and show the world how much beauty he could express within circumscribed limits. Impatience was a habit of mind which coloured almost all of his works, emerging now in restless syncopation, now in odd ejaculatory rhythm and curt phraseology. Such characteristics appear even in the first six Quartets, those dedicated to Haydn and published in 1801 as Op. 18.

These Quartets have come into special prominence of late through the advocacy of Sir Henry Hadow, who has expended his masterly analytical faculties upon them in a capital little treatise recently issued by the Oxford University Press. One may not endorse all of Sir Henry's claims. The Quartets are unequal in merit, but the best of the movements certainly bear the impress of a personality which was new in music. It is true that they do not show the natural mastery, the lack of hesitation, the inmost perfection of spiritual beauty of Mozart's best Quartets, but nevertheless they reach new heights in their vigour of rhythm, and attain a richness of total effect to which Mozart never aspired. We may perhaps differ from Sir Henry's estimate that 'Beethoven had the greatest constructive genius of any musician who ever lived – perhaps of any artist except Shakespeare,' but at the same time we cannot fail to observe, even in these early manifestations of his art, the composer's power to triumph over limitations. Despite the respect which Beethoven paid to the constructive principles he inherited from Haydn and Mozart, there is astonishing freedom of movement in all the parts. Form seems for the first time in quartet-writing, to be divested of its formality, and the movements are built up with a unity and consistency which had not previously been attained. The musical phrases are so perfectly dovetailed that the listener is not conscious of the joins in the masonry. The main themes have almost always a distinctive quality. They are personal, like the characters in a play: we follow their progress with the same kind of attention that we devote to the delineations of a dramatist: we are interested in their behaviour in all kinds of different situations.

The Quartets which belong to Beethoven's middle period – the three fine examples dedicated to Count Rasoumovsky, Op. 59, the so-called 'Harp' Quartet, Op. 74, and the wonderful F minor, Op. 95 – are a tremendous advance, structurally and emotionally, upon Op. 18. The style of the music has greatly changed. It is now strongly individualistic, even consciously revolutionary and defiant. We can trace no likeness to Haydn or Mozart here, except in the preservation of the broad constructive principles of sonata form, which Beethoven never wholly deserted. The range of musical experience presented by these works, each of which is intensely characteristic while differing widely from its companions in style and mood, is amazingly various. We have much of the forceful Beethoven (the confident giant, striding in his strength); a good deal of the romantic Beethoven (passionate, yearning, and occasionally tender); moments of the unhappy Beethoven (dark and foreboding); and of the whimsical Beethoven (restless, somewhat sinister, and delighting in surprises and freakish contrasts). These were all new things in music.

How did the string quartet, the most delicate and fragile of all musical forms, stand such an onslaught upon its resources? One can only say that Beethoven's superb control of his utterance was equal to every strain imposed upon it. He proved that the quartet of strings was capable of much that would have seemed impossible before his time. There was no loss of dignity, for his style, even when most vividly dramatic, was never theatrical. There was no sense of exaggeration, for he was able to adapt his thoughts so perfectly to the means employed that the music never 'burst out of its frame,' or contradicted the essential character and intimacy of the chamber-music style. It was a miracle which only a great genius could perform.

But the climax of achievement was yet to come. It was during the last months of his life that Beethoven completed the group of famous works which are always spoken of, collectively, as the 'Posthumous' Quartets, although one of them (that is E flat, Op. 127) was published before he died. These Quartets were the crowning glory of his career. Once more there is a marked change of style to be noted. There is far more intimacy of thought and a good deal less assertiveness. They have never appealed to the public in general, and it doubtful if they ever will do so. But with cultured musicians it is different.

The late Sir Charles Stanford showed an uncommon appreciative insight when, in one of his books, he described these works as 'an epitome of Beethoven's career,' and averred that they presented

. . . the idealisations of all his characteristics – his tenderness, his grim humour, his innate fun, his wealth of tragic sense, his depth of untrammelled religious feeling, his width of exploration. The language of four stringed instruments was for him his most eloquent means of expression, and he used it to say things which he never succeeded so markedly through orchestral or vocal channels in bringing straight home to the listener. Even when that expression is obscure, there is always the consciousness that the dark places are in the mind of the hearer, not in the brain of the maker.

It is difficult to add anything to an estimate so sympathetic and so complete. A full century has passed since these Quartets were written, but, strangely enough, the subsequent developments of musical art have done little to elucidate the more mysterious passages of these elusive works. They still baffle us with their enigmatic and questioning spirit. They still wrap us round in a kind of cloud of mysticism. At times we are compelled to believe that Beethoven aimed as *suggesting* great ideas rather than at expressing them. Like the drawings of Blake, these Quartets seem to be striving to give coherence to things which can only dwell in the creator's imagination as a nebulous and formless vision. Perhaps they may be regarded as

sketches for later works too idealistic to be capable of actual realisation. Perhaps the tragedy of the composer's deafness made him seek to express in music those unheard melodies which the poet tells us are sweeter than those heard. The Symphonies, even the Ninth, were for the world, and spoke aloud to the world. The last Quartets were so full of intimate questionings that they were sometimes almost inarticulate, if one can describe music in such a way.

However we may choose to explain for ourselves Beethoven's motives and methods, we can hardly fail to be conscious of the grandeur of the minds which conceived these strange and moody human phantasies. They have never been imitated by other composers. They stand alone.

Sir Alexander Mackenzie once told us that there is only one way to approach the 'Posthumous' Quartets – 'with reverence, which is not exactly the most pronounced characteristic of the age.' The advice is sound, and the comment, I am afraid, very just. Our present younger generation which, happily, loves Mozart is, unhappily, impatient with the mature Beethoven. Moreover, Beethoven, in such works as these, demands not only reverence but surrender. He is essentially egoistic, a compelling force – and the youth of to-day dislikes compulsion in any shape or form. Personal characteristics in music are out of fashion. Fortunately the true lover of chamber music is not easily disturbed by fashions, but is devoted to an art which is essentially reflective, sensitive, and friendly, and therefore largely concerned with the individuality of each composer who creates it.

Beethoven was probably the greatest composer of chamber music the world has ever seen. He did not say the last word that was to be said, by any means; but it is certainly true that after Beethoven, chamber music descended into a valley – a very fertile one, no doubt, full of beauty, romance, and enchantment, but a valley. Beethoven himself remains on the mountain-top in splendid isolation. The present super-critical attitude towards his works is only a temporary phase, typical of an age which too often imagines it is the correct thing to stifle emotion, eliminate climax, and render art as level and impersonal as possible.

When the time returns, as it will do, for a revival of hero-worship in music, Beethoven will assuredly be a hero again.

[This heartfelt article was published in The Musical Times, no. 1008 - on Thomas Dunhill's 50th birthday. PV]

