

## Artemis Quartet – March 9, 2010

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

### *String Quartet No. 11 in F Minor, Opus 95 (“Serioso”) (1810)*

Anger and supplication are the emotional substrate of Beethoven’s F Minor String Quartet Opus 95. His shortest, most explosive and most concentrated quartet - titled “*Serioso*” by the master himself - it might well have been called “*Furioso*,” possessed as it is with rage only intermittently relieved. Short, intense, and written without commission, it is extraordinary among his quartets for the way it presents a coherent, high psychological drama comparable only to his Fifth Symphony. It was written in the wake of Napoleon’s second invasion of Vienna, a time of personal anguish for the forty-year-old Beethoven as, despite new-found assurances of financial stability, it began to dawn on him that his intense desire to marry would remain unfulfilled. Six years elapsed before he allowed its publication.

The work opens *Allegro con brio* with a violent, terse motif played in unison, launching the movement on its fitful course - a brief exposition of abrupt contrasts of mood and shifts in tonality, played without repeat and leading to a short, blunt development followed by an even more concentrated, always tumultuous, recapitulation.

The second movement, *Allegretto ma non troppo*, provides the only consistent respite from the general anguish of this work. Modeled on a *Da Capo* aria, it was written in an unexpected key - a major sixth from the primary tonality. It begins in quiet resignation with an exposed solo descending scale played by the cello. This simple theme transmutes into a beautiful fugal passage of increasingly complex harmonies interlocking all the instruments. Throughout the movement, Beethoven alternates dreamy, simple melodies with complex, quietly passionate passages that engage Baroque fugal devices such as inversion and stretto, **constructing** an interlude of deep beauty. But Beethoven found himself unable to end this exalted movement in peace, choosing instead to merge it directly with the furious outburst that begins - and permeates - the Scherzo that follows, marked *Allegro assai vivace ma serioso*. Here is another driving, tight-lipped expression of distress, erupting like a volcano; yet in its few moments of quiet, an uplifting hymn tune can be heard buried **under** the counterpoint.

The Finale, *Larghetto espressivo, Allegretto agitato, and Allegro* seems to express more sorrow than anger: anguish, elaborated in rondo form. A swinging waltz rhythm supporting a drooping melody in a minor key sweeps us along a mournful path, occasionally interrupted by gruff outbursts like the roar of a caged animal. Suddenly there is an astonishing about face. As if to shake off the gloom, Beethoven ends, after all, with a merry chase in a major key, in which sunshine and optimism win the day.

Program note © by Nora Avins Klein, January, 2004

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

### *String Quartet No. 12 in E-flat Major, Opus 127 (1824)*

Beethoven’s String Quartets span what are customarily known as the three creative periods of his adult life, the third period encompassing his last ten years. Beethoven’s hearing had

continued to deteriorate and by 1816 he could hear nothing. He was suffering from poor health, draining experiences as guardian of a difficult nephew, unrequited love affairs, and difficulties with his publishers. Yet despite his distress Beethoven wrote to his publisher in 1822: "I sit pondering and pondering. I have long known what I want to do, but I can't get it down on paper. I feel that I am on the threshold of great things." Shortly thereafter he began a period of incredible creation. After completing the Diabelli Variations, the Missa Solemnis and the Ninth Symphony, he set aside all other work and began to compose his five final string quartets. The late quartets are considered to be the pinnacle of Beethoven's creative achievements.

The first three "late quartets" were Opp. 127, 130, and 132. They were commissioned by a Russian nobleman and amateur cellist, Prince Nikolai Galitzin, who lived in St. Petersburg. In these works Beethoven abandoned the classical style almost entirely. His works of this period are no longer determined by a preset structure, but by the musical thoughts themselves. He composes in a meditative style, working with motifs more often than with melodies. He provides continuity by blurring the dividing lines between phrases and by making use of contrapuntal techniques---treating all four instruments as separate entities. New sonorities are introduced in this manner.

Beethoven began composing the String Quartet in E Flat Major in May 1824, while staying in the forested area around the spa of Baden. (Several pastoral elements can possibly be identified in the composition.) The first movement begins with a slow introduction, then moves into a lyrical melody which is marked "*teneramenta*", or tenderly. There follows a more forceful theme over sharp repeated notes in the second violin, viola and cello, and then the cantabile character returns. The slow introduction is used again at the beginning and in the middle of the development. After the recapitulation, the movement ends very softly with fragments from the closing of the first theme.

The second movement, in A Flat Major, consists of a theme in two sections, and five variations. These variations are no longer the standard embellishments of a theme. Instead, the statement is transfigured, making these alterations often difficult to follow. An abbreviated guide can help the listener follow the construction of the movement, but the ethereal quality of this movement truly escapes words. The first variation begins after the three quiet chords that close the initial theme, but the theme all but disappears in the polyphonic nature of the variation. The second variation starts with short dry notes in the cello, and can be likened to a gentle twittering---almost birdlike. The third variation is marked by a modulation to E Major, while in the fourth variation the theme is once again recognizable. A short minor section leads into the fifth variation, which is characterized by diatonic meandering and the movement ends with eight bars derived from the conclusion of the theme.

The third movement is a fairly typical scherzo and makes continual use of one rhythmical pattern. A middle section contains virtuosic passages for the first violin, and then the rhythmical pattern returns. The Finale is full of joyful country dance tunes. Its coda, while harking back to the original theme, takes on a completely different tonal aura and rhythm; then is punctuated by the final chords.

The premiere of this quartet was given on March 6, 1825, but because it was under rehearsed and consequently poorly played, it was also poorly received. Beethoven then invited another quartet to prepare the music under his tutelage. Though completely deaf at the time, he coached the group by watching their bow and finger movements. A highly successful performance on March 26 was the result, and this led to nine more performances over the next few weeks.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)  
*String Quartet No. 9 in C Major, Opus 59 #3 (Razumovsky )(1806)*

In 1805 Count Razumovsky, Russia's representative to Vienna, returned from a trip back home bearing a newly-published and rather gorgeous collection of Russian folk songs which he gave to Beethoven. He requested that some of the songs be incorporated into a set of string quartets he wished to commission from Beethoven. Beethoven wasted little time and in less than a year he had completed three extraordinary works, which changed the face of the string quartet. With these, Beethoven took an inexplicable leap into the future, forever ending the era of the Classical quartet, moving it from the palace to the battlefield of life. These were no longer conversations among four civil gentlemen, but rather vigorous, occasionally strident explorations into deep sensibilities, expanding all elements of performance – length, difficulty, sonic range - and employing technical devices that made new demands on the performer as well as on the audience. Music critics and musicians alike were not pleased nor would they be for decades to come until these works finally gained universal recognition as the masterpieces they are.

Opus 59 No. 3 is the only one of the three, which makes no use of Razumovsky's collection of songs. While it is the least complex of the three, the first movement nevertheless begins with an arresting introduction in the form of an astonishing harmonic maze. With each stately descending note played by the cello, a new harmonic region appears so that we have no idea what key we are in nor where we are going. Beethoven has gone beyond Mozart's Dissonant Quartet, K. 465 but in both, a slow, harmonically ambiguous introduction ends abruptly, spilling into the sunny landscape of a C major *Allegro*. And indeed, the rest of this movement is cheerful, well-knit and limpid. The *Adagio quasi Allegretto* which follows, is a *Barcarole* –that is, in the rhythm of the traditional Venetian boat song. It opens with that flowing beat accompanied somewhat mysteriously by the gloomy, steady beat of a plucked cello string. As the first movement began in mid air, so to speak, so too does this *Adagio* start on a note of uncertainty (the “dominant” region of the home key). And as in the introduction to the first movement, here too it is the cello's moving baseline. which underpins the motion of the movement.

The third movement begins with a look back to old forms - an easy-going *Minuet-Trio* instead of the *Scherzo* which Beethoven himself had previously championed in its place. To underscore his intent he writes *Grazioso* into the score and produces a delicate Minuet embellished with a flowing obbligato and with contrapuntal, beautifully inter-twining lines shared by all four voices. But he ends in a distinctly modern vein with an extended bridge, which serves as the introduction to the *Allegro molto*, a final movement of tremendous vigor and momentum cast as a fugue in sonata form. This is one of Beethoven's most famous and memorable quartet movements, a virtual perpetual motion with the fugue theme served up at top speed while a jolly counter theme joins the fray later, starting in the base line then appearing at one time or another in all the voices, a constant motoric presence holding everything together. This movement has a sense of power, inevitability and completeness that is unmistakably Beethoven.

Program Note © Nora Avins Klein, July, 2009

*Artemis Quartet*

The Berlin-based Artemis Quartet was founded at the Lübeck Musikhochschule in 1989. Walter Levin, the Emerson Quartet the Julliard Quartet and the Alban Berg Quartet have been and remain important teachers and mentors for the quartet. Since 1994, the four players have performed as a professional ensemble, quickly gaining a reputation as one of the leading ensembles of their generation. The ensemble's international stature was established by winning First Prizes at the ARD Competition in 1996 and soon thereafter First prize at the Premio Borciani. Rather than pitch themselves into the tempting fast track of career success, the members of the Artemis Quartet instead immersed themselves in further study. In 1998 the ensemble spent a year in residence with the Alban Berg Quartet in Vienna followed by a three month sabbatical at Berlin's Wissenschaftskolleg. Their debut at the Berlin Philharmonie in June of 1999 marked the formal start of their career.

Since 2004 the quartet's series of concerts at the Berlin Philharmonie has met with high praise from critics and audiences alike. In addition to their busy schedule of concerts at all the most important concert venues in Europe, the US, Japan, South America and Australia, and numerous appearances at international festivals, the Artemis Quartet is also committed to teaching. One example of this vocation is their joint professorship in chamber music at Berlin's Universität der Künste. The ensemble presented a master class at Rice University last evening prior to their performance with Houston Friends and shared a wealth of knowledge with aspiring musicians from the Houston area.

A new phase of the chamber group's life began in July 2007 with Gregor Sigl and Friedemann Weigle becoming members of the string quartet. Their first appearances with their two new members included performances at the Salzburg Festival, the Schubertiade in Schwarzenberg, the Rheingau Musik Festival as well as Septembre Musical Montreux-Vevey.

From the outset, the Artemis Quartet has highly valued sharing the concert podium with leading concert artists. Most recently they were on a concert tour with Juliane Banse, Truls Mork and Leif Ove Andsnes. Intensive study of contemporary music is also an important focus within the quartet's repertoire. Composers such as Mauricio Sotelo (2004), Jörg Widmann (2006) and Thomas Larcher (2008) have composed works for the Artemis Quartet.

In recognition of the ensemble's contribution to the interpretation of Beethoven's music, the Verein des Beethoven-Hauses Bonn conferred honorary membership to the Artemis Quartet in 2003. In 2004 the quartet won the 23<sup>rd</sup> "Premio Internazionale Accademia Musicale Chigiana" in Siena, Italy.

*Visit the Artemis Quartet on the World Wide Web at [artemisquartet.com](http://artemisquartet.com)*