

The *Quartettsatz* of **FRANZ SCHUBERT** is the first movement from an unfinished quartet. But it is an explosively complete work, surrounded as it is at start and finish by malevolent parentheses of C minor. The music between these episodes is peculiarly wandering - ranging widely from a fantastically sweet melody which seems loath to end itself, to outbursts of something like rage, to over-harmonized and diaphanous chorales. It also has a weirdly unsuccessful development section; perhaps, given the force of its beginning, an even greater travel in the outer sections can be felt by contrast with the architectural absence in the middle.

There exists a sketch for a second movement, but it trails off before it gains much direction. Surely Schubert had a solution in mind, but, for whatever reason, he left the project behind. The first movement alone, however, leaves both listeners and performers with an odd sense of absolute completion, and a range of expression extraordinary for any composer — it is a dense example of so much of the lyricism and formal adventurism which belonged especially to Schubert.



There is some risk in bringing elements of biography to bear on a musical work, especially for such an abstract work as a string quartet. Realistic messages from the outside world can doubtless inform the ears and imagination of performer and listener alike, but biographical detail also opens up broad possibilities for hearing what is not there and (more importantly) overlooking what is there. What is, is music, whose forces can too easily be frozen by specific reference.

In some cases, however, personal history brings so much to enrich both the motion and atmosphere of a work that it cannot be ignored. So it is with **BELA BARTOK**'s sixth string quartet, which not only is influenced by the context of its composition, but actually seems to react to it directly. To begin with: Bartók's context could hardly have been darker. He was writing this string quartet in 1939, during which time his mother was becoming more and more ill, his own health was weakening, and Europe was evidently preparing for a massive paroxysm of violence. Nobody could say exactly what would happen — or even discern what was already happening — but Bartók was distressed enough to be preparing to leave Europe despite poor health, despite his long-standing relationship with Hungary, and despite his advanced age. He moved to the United States in 1940, though he was not able to emigrate with much enthusiasm or professional preparation. He managed, with help, to subsist in New York for a few years, but died of leukemia in 1945.

The sixth string quartet does not mince words on the matter of mood. Every movement begins with a slow section marked *mesto* — 'sad,' in Italian — an unusual marking almost certainly referring to the slow movement of Beethoven's String Quartet Op. 59, No. 1, as well as to Bartók's state of mind. From each of these *mesto* musings (always singing the same tune, or almost), the quartet seems to slip from present sadness into ambiguous or light memory: the first movement becomes a curious and playful vivace; the second becomes a sort of misguided march (with wailing in-between); and the third becomes an almost-cheerfully corrupt burlesque. But the *mesto* present gains force each time it appears — first it is one voice, then two voices, then three. And in the fourth movement, which Bartók had originally thought would become a *perpetuum mobile* finish, the sadness of the present seems not to let him escape to another idea, and *mesto*, now in all four voices, prevails. Fragments of the other movements reappear, slowly, one by one, remembered as ghosts of themselves (as ideas rather than fantasies, if one may make a distinction — something into which one cannot lose oneself). The Bartók string quartets are one of the great achievements of classical music. There could hardly be a more touching and telling valediction than this, the last of the set of six. The message is simultaneously personal, interpersonal, abstract, and geopolitical — something only possible, perhaps, when the message is merely musical.



Somehow, the string quartet has allowed for the creation of architecturally significant castles in the air. Its combination of enormous expressive breadth with limited musical forces has created a uniquely

focused repertoire. And there has been no finer quartet-architect than **LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN**, whose late quartets in particular defy known laws of what should be musically possible. The String Quartet in C-sharp minor, Op. 131, a huge work even for Beethoven, cannot be summed up in metaphorical language, so what follows is a brief, rather technical description of its path.

The quartet opens with a fugue. There is an impression in it of the loneliness of playing with notes. The fugue subject is as follows:



Worth noting about this bit of music: it comes in two parts, A and B, above; A has a crescendo to a crisis note (creating a sense that there is, so to speak, a problem); B has a response, but no answer, to the content of A. A contains the notes of the top half of a harmonic minor scale; B retreats. The fugue, being a fugue, repeats and reconfigures these figures without losing its cool, but without settling on any answers, either.

The second movement comes as a big surprise at a small volume. It kicks the quartet from its home in C-sharp minor to D major — a big jump from closed to open sound — and the motion switches suddenly from fugue to *gigue*. The new music has only a faint reminder of A from the fugue theme. Although the movement remains bright and gains force, it maintains an unsettled mood.

The third movement is very short, perhaps a minute. It can be divided into two halves: one of questioning figures dodging around the quartet; and the other (introduced by an element of fantasy-cadenza in the first violin) setting the stage for the fourth movement.

The fourth movement is the heart of the piece, and although it is a fairly strict theme-and-variations, it is quite weird. The variations are defined by their theme, but they have a dangerously improvisatory quality, as though they are only moments from breaking down. Running through them all is a fragile fantasy of an impossible or imaginary duet. The variations spill into each other, switch identities or moods in their middles, and venture far enough from the theme itself that one can only feel its shape.

The fifth movement is frankly crazy, very fast, and describes itself best in sound. It is formed as Scherzo/Trio/Scherzo/Trio/Scherzo (quiet)/Coda.

The sixth movement is brief like the third: two minutes or so. The difficult intervals and crisis **sforzando** from movement one reappear, as does the phrase-form A-B of the unresolved problem:



The seventh (and final) movement is extremely powerful. The problematic intervals from the first movement return with great force, no longer rising, but falling straight down the scale.



This is a rough outline only, and massively reductive. Broadly speaking, it seems possible to say that the piece deals continuously in the problematic nature of escaping to musical fantasy. Ideas appear full of possibility, but other matters (which seem ‘realistic’ even though they are also musical fantasies) keep appearing. This problematic element feels a little like biography or reality — where we must accept that the facts from which fantasy arises are so often those from which one might have hoped to be freed. We don’t really know any non-musical facts from Beethoven relevant to this particular quartet, and speculation on his interior states can only remain speculative. We do know a bit of our own thoughts, though, or at least what they feel like, and somehow this quartet feels like the best and worst — or perhaps merely the purest distillation — of thought itself.