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**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827): String Quartet No. 13 in B-flat Major, Op. 130 (1825)**

Though notion that Beethoven's monumental late quartets were ignored or misunderstood during his time is exaggerated, the myth holds most true for the thirteenth quartet, which met with confusion in Beethoven's lifetime and continued posthumously to be his most widely disputed string quartet. Most of the controversy centered around the unusual circumstances of its equally unusual last movement, a massively complex quarter-hour structure that Beethoven appropriately labeled "Große Fuge" ("Great Fugue"). Although the quartet's first audience, at a private concert, responded well to the five movements that preceded the finale, the fugue met with general bafflement. A Leipzig reviewer was fairly representative when he derided it (mixing metaphors unfortunately) as "incomprehensible, like Chinese...a concert only Moroccans might enjoy." Concerned, Beethoven's publisher tactfully suggested that Beethoven write a new, lighter finale to round off the quartet. In a highly uncharacteristic move, the usually obstinate Beethoven agreed—perhaps even he had misgivings about the unwieldy finale. He republished the fugue as a separate work, Op. 133, and completed a new, tamer movement for Op. 130 late in 1826. Although historically the relative merit of the two endings has been a subject for debate, Beethoven's sprawling, visionary fugue is the widely preferred and performed finale today.

Beethoven's six-movement quartet is innovative in its design, but the first movement follows relatively standard sonata form, as if Beethoven were consciously easing the listener into his radically idiosyncratic work. The quartet opens with a slow introduction, with a stern chromatic descent in octaves that turns reassuringly into warm, richly voiced harmonies. After the slow opening, scampering sixteenth-note runs suddenly appear in the first violin and herald a declamatory, fanfare-like theme from the second. After a brief interruption by the adagio, the instruments are all swept up in the enthusiasm of the racing sixteenth notes, continuing the exposition (first part) in triumphant spirits. The development (middle section) of the movement begins hesitantly, but soon locks into a softly swaying rhythm, over which the cello introduces a warm, serenading theme, trading it off with the first violin as if in dance. An enthused return of the scampering sixteenth notes signals the recapitulation, short-circuiting the slow introduction.

Unusually, Beethoven places four shorter movements between the two hefty ones that bookend the quartet. The second movement is a true miniature, racing by in scarcely two minutes. Its tone is urgent but hushed, like rustlings in the dark, though a

brilliant, dashing trio provides a light. The third movement is perhaps the quartet's most contented, moving unhurriedly along and displaying a splendid richness of texture. The mood of the amicable fourth movement, "alla tanza tedesca" ("in the manner of a German dance"), is ostensibly similar with its swaying rhythm and contagious melody. At the same time, though, it is quite literally the greatest possible departure—while the third movement is in D-flat major, the fourth is in G major, a tritone away. The jarring shift in tonality between the movements gives the fourth a fantastical, slightly surreal cast that persists throughout its brief duration.

If the transition into the fourth movement signals a turn away from the reality of the quartet, the move into the fifth pulls the listener into its heart. The unusual title, "cavatina," refers to a short operatic aria, and here the first violin acts as singer, pouring forth a long, seemingly endless melody. The accompanying instruments sing too, interweaving their melodies into a single texture, in which every note seems to communicate something profoundly important. Only at one point, towards the end of the movement, does the accompaniment back away and let the singer-violin take stage by itself, in a passage Beethoven labels "beklemmt" ("anguished"): as the other strings provide a triplet pulse, the violin stammers out a broken, breathtakingly plaintive melody, fractured and shy, as if the attention were too much and it were at a loss for words, or, perhaps, as if what it wished to say were too important to risk being spoken aloud.

The fugue that concludes the piece is one of the most discussed pieces of music and one of the most challenging Beethoven wrote, both for listeners and players. The fugue is structured in three sections (fast, slow, faster) that mimic the movement-divisions of a freestanding piece. It opens with an overture, with the movement's jagged, stony-faced theme belted out in octaves. The overture tries out five different beginnings, each with more trepidation than the last. When the fugue proper does begin, however, it is wholly without hesitation, and a massive section ensues in which the theme is torn relentlessly inside out. When the music finally settles into the slow section, Beethoven explores a lyrical, spiraling sixteenth-note idea, offsetting it against slower versions of the fugue theme, which now seems to creep ominously beneath the music's relatively tranquil surface. This calm comes to an exceptionally abrupt end when the quartet suddenly bursts into an extremely fast, dance-like variant of the theme. Soon, Beethoven combines frantic, fragmented versions of the dance theme with slower, assertive statements of the immutable fugue theme, like bits of material whirling about in a vortex. The movement is an epic working-out process typical of Beethoven, but as it rushes on one cannot help but note that there is probably nothing that could fully banish the anxieties and forces accrued throughout the quartet so far; instead, Beethoven

recognizes this, leaving the questions and tensions unresolved even in the hurry towards the final cadence, bringing his great, strange quartet to its staggeringly powerful end.