

Postscript to the opus 131 guide

This postscript to the original guide takes a more professional approach based on a recent studied view of dates and events of the period 1825 to 1826. The author advises reading this before reading the guide.

Beethoven's C sharp minor string quartet opus 131 has seven movements and most, if not all, current descriptions dismiss the third movement as being of no consequence and in many cases the comment is 'Oh that's only 11 bars long and probably is there just to prepare for the variations movement, we can just ignore it'. Surely, Beethoven was not in the habit of introducing short runs of music just for no particular reason and it is this author's opinion that it is absolutely essential to determine as far as possible exactly why these 11 bars are present.



Figure 1 What is the purpose of the 3rd movement of just 11 bars?

Robert Winter comes close in his analysis by suggesting that the first two chords are a typical opera device that introduces a dialogue. Taking the 11 bars out of context the idea of it being a dialogue is fairly obvious but for most reviewers it has probably been ignored because to accept the idea poses the difficult question of why is it there. For this analysis we are going to accept that these 11 bars do represent a dialogue and that it is absolutely necessary to determine its purpose.

It is clearly not a musical dialogue but it is more like a mimicking of dialogue between individuals. The opening two chords rise in pitch possibly indicating a question, e.g. for instance "What now?", and is followed by the four parts responding individually in the negative, so that the question then has to be repeated. Again the responses appear to be negative except for the viola, who despite being interrupted by the impatient cello, responds quietly and in a slow measured tone to make a suggestion. This is immediately

accepted by all and causes the violin in particular to be ecstatic about the result. The dialogue comes to an end with the other parts saying something along the lines of “Yes lets do it then” and then as a result the variation movement is started. So it is highly possible that we have a representation of four individuals deciding to begin a music form which, being composed of a series of episodes, implies an activity of similar form. So what activity could it be? Ruling out the possibility of examples like pictures at an exhibition as being too static, a more likely form would be that of one of Beethoven’s great joys, that is a country walk. But can such an idea be supported by the recorded events of 1825 and 1826?.

Beethoven was known to take regular walks, usually on his own and occasionally with a larger party. As an example, it is recorded that on 11th of September 1825 Sir John Smart visited Beethoven at Baden to hear a performance of the new A minor quartet op 132 and that during his visit he was invited take part in a walk around the countryside near Baden with a party of five which included Schuppanzigh, Holz and Joseph Ries. As was usual on such occasions the day ended with partying and drinking with lots of good humour.

In the autumn of 1825, when he was working on opus 130, a note written by Beethoven to Holz reads, **Dear friend, I have had another inspiration, but that will have to be for the next quartet but one (131), as the next (130) has too many movements already’.** As it was very unusual for Beethoven to discuss the details of a new work and it is more than likely that the subject of the inspiration was to be a major feature. The idea of a country walk could easily have come to mind during, or after, John Smart’s visit. The four parts could represent the walkers who would initially decide where to go followed by depictions of the different aspects of the walk and ending up with a raucous party.

Beethoven was to say of op 131 that **there was a new kind of part writing** and expressing the actions of four individuals would certainly qualify for that. In another quote Beethoven said of opus 131 **There is less lack of fancy than ever before.** If ‘fancy’ means invention he could be saying that composing with an underlying theme dictates to some extent the choice of ideas whereas composing in a standard form is more challenging because of the wider scope for new ideas.

Later in 1826 when Beethoven started to work on opus 131 he would have recognized that to be accepted by the publishers it would need to have more than three movements and so he added four more movements. His direction that all seven movements must be played without a break implies a connection between the added movements and the original three walk movements. This makes it possible that the seven movements could represent a journey for the four individuals which at some point includes a country walk. Thayer records that at the time in 1826 when Beethoven had to assure his publisher that he was joking when said opus 131 was just a few odds and ends, he also said that **he was going on a short journey.** The fact that these remarks appear to have been made at about the same time suggests that the mention of a journey could have been a reference to opus 131. The sketch books show that Beethoven first began working on the fugue at the end of 1825 and then worked on the variations movement which could indicate that the idea of a walk was paramount.

As the start of a journey the unusual choice of a fugue with no counter subject was possibility to promote the idea of there being just the four individual parts. Martin Cooper points out that the fugue has a close resemblance to J.S.Bach’s fugue of the same key so it could possibility be some kind of homage to the great master where the four individuals have a passive role rather than an active one.

The second movement is entered without a break using the Neapolitan of C sharp minor going to D major that changes the mood from sombre to gay. Although not generally accepted as such, it is my opinion that it is clearly a dance, wild in nature, and its form has an improvisatory feel to it. The indication that the movement should begin very quietly, ‘pp’, seems at odds with the ‘Allegro molto vivace’ marking, and reinforces the idea of a journey where the dancers are at first to be seen at some distance away. After a final flourish dancing ends in a relaxed mood leading directly to the dialogue where the

four walkers decide what to do next.

The variations movement is marked as 'Andante', that is at a walking pace, and with the cello's pizzicato beats indicating the leisurely paced steps that would feature at the start of a long walk. Also note that the theme, which could easily have been played by one instrument, is shared by the two violins reinforcing the idea of individuals perhaps in conversation. It would be pure speculation as to what each variation depicts but the nature of sixth variation strongly suggests a section of less interest which must be covered ending with a celebration of job well done. Then on to the variations coda with its short sections and trilling that could possibly represent short showers. Note: the proposals for this section are described in more detail in the guide. The movement ends with quiet satisfaction of completing the walk. This is then followed immediately by the cellos boisterous introduction to the scherzo where the mood is abruptly changed to that of the drunken gaiety of a country alehouse. Like the dialogue the scherzo provides a fertile opportunity to suggest the different characteristics of the four individuals. Note also that it uses the device of attempting to go round for a third time which at this stage in Beethoven's development is rather old hat but it is probably used here because it fits the underlying story.

The move from the scherzo into the sixth movement makes an abrupt change from the crazy scherzo to one of pathos with three loud E major chords which could imply ejection of the four followed by some passing sad event. The sixth movement appears to be another mood changer inserted to move from the crazy scherzo to one of pathos where perhaps each of the four come to reflect on their destiny and then are rudely interrupted by the entry into the last movement.

This is a significant movement in sonata form that would seem to depict a battle between forces, one represented by the dotted figure, perhaps implying the horseman of the apocalypse, versus one related to the first movement theme, i.e. the four individuals and a third theme in D major which could imply their guardian angel.

In this analysis the author has tried to avoid too much speculation and the result seems to be more positive in its conclusion. One might ask 'How come an amateur has come to this conclusion which has been missed by countless professionals over the period since the mid 1800s. By accident really as described in the guide. When rehearsing a performance it all came from needing to find the answer to the question 'how should the viola change the tempo at the adagio marking in the 3rd movement?'. This then led to 'what is the purpose of these 11 bars? which was a question that was never before followed up'

As an example of a professional's view consider this quote from Martin Coopers description of the C sharp minor string quartet. *To Holz's question, which was the greatest of the quartets 'Each in its own way' he answered. 'Art demands of us that we do not stand still. . . . You will find a new kind of part writing, and thank God there is less lack of imagination than ever before.'* *The work is in seven movements which the composer numbered and clearly wished to be played without any substantial break between them. Add to that the fact that the first movement is a fugue, and **even the least musical can hear at once that this is a new kind of string quartet.*** Like other commentators, Cooper is clearly of the view that opus 131 is of a new form but avoids delving any deeper.

The author would like to make it clear that he just stumbled on to these new ideas and this being his one and only such work he has no ambitions to join the professionals. This new take on Beethoven's C sharp minor string quartet opus 131 should make no difference to the respect for one of the greatest pieces of chamber music. The effect on performers and listeners will probably be minimal but as with all music of the classical period knowing the narrative always enhances the listening experience.

Bibliography

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