ON BEETHOVEN'S *LATE STYLE* AND THE STRING QUARTET IN F MAJOR, OP. 135

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In the String Quartet in F Major, Op. 135, Beethoven's final string quartet (and last completed full work),[1] we find an interesting combination of his characteristic *late style* as well as something that points towards Beethoven's *beginning*—his first style, so to speak. As part and parcel of the bundle of Beethoven's *late quartets*, Op. 135 is a little bit of an outlier due precisely to its style. In this short reflection, we will be considering Edward Said's concepts of *late style* and *beginning* to frame some of the problems that arise when addressing Op. 135 as part of Beethoven's *late style*.

Late Style

At the start of *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain,*[2] Said considers how this work of his is related to an earlier book, *Beginnings: Intention & Method* (1975). In the work from 1975, Said calls attention to the fact that "the mind finds it necessary at certain times to retrospectively, locate a point of origin for itself as how things begin in the most elementary sense with birth."[3] Said then relates this notion most easily to the germination of written works. Nevertheless, it can also apply to the creative process in different kinds of artistic practices (as in the composition of music, or the creation of an artwork).

This activity of looking for a beginning necessarily seems to recreate a kind of timeline. Thus, the mind itself is not the only thing that is of interest. What one is considering is the location of a specific change in thought in the artist or composer that led to the necessity to create a specific work. The timeline becomes populated with a myriad of compositions, divided into periods that point to drastic shifts in style or sound.

If we take the timeline and break it down into smaller parts so that a specific composition is given its own timeline, we find that the work of some musicologists consists precisely in this: locating the earliest germs of a specific work, such as fragments or early drafts and determining how *difficult* the compositional process for a given piece was or to debunk that the depth of expression in a piece bears little relation to the actual compositional process.

Taking a step back and considering the broader timeline spectrum of a composer or artist's work, we can then focus our attention to the latter section of it (the section closest to the individual's death). It is here that Said suggests that there is a specific *idiom*—which he calls a *late style* associated with these later works.[4] His examples

include Shakespeare's later works and Sophocles' *Oedipus at Colonus*, where "the aged hero is portrayed as having finally attained a remarkable holiness and a sense of resolution."[5] Resolution in this case is one possible element of *late style.*

Other elements of *late style* can also be works that "crown a lifetime of aesthetic endeavor"[6] as in the late works of Henri Matisse and J. S. Bach. And yet there are instances where *late style* does not follow this pattern and instead is better articulated as "intransigence, difficulty, and unresolved contradiction" where we cannot identify a sense of serenity.[7] The problem is, of course, that even in the more explicit cases, how does one compare Matisse's chapel at Vence (1951) or *Memory of Oceania* (1953) to *Blue Pot and Lemon* (1897) or *Still Life with Compote, Apples, and Orange* (1899); or Bach's *Musical Offering* (1747) or *B Minor Mass* (1749) to *Der Herr denket an uns* (BWV 196, 1708 [?])? It seems that in these cases it is necessary to comment on an earlier tradition to which the artist or composer arrives at and molds when they begin their artistic activity and then uses it as a springboard for innovation. For example, we might say that we can sense a foundation for the later works in the earlier period in Matisse, that *Woman with Hat* (1905) began to take shape in the colors on the wall of *Still Life with Compote, Apples, and Orange.* The color arrangement may also be seen as foreshadowing, however incomplete, the color scheme of *The Snail* (1953).

From Said's description, it seems that, with age, the artist comes to acquire new *qualities of perception and form*.[8] To continue with Matisse, this notion fits the artist's cut-outs extraordinarily well. Maturity and weakness of the body leads to new forms and methods, new *perception* or techniques for execution of an idea, all of which contribute to a critical assessment of Matisse's later works and method. Matisse's age and illness can shed light on the question of why he may have chosen that new direction in his art.

To return to Beethoven, the Quartet in F Major, Op. 135 does not fit into Said's scheme nearly as neatly. He acknowledges that, depending on the author or artist, *late style* can be determined in the finest works created during a lifetime, or be fraught with *unresolved* elements and perplexing *difficulty*. Beethoven's late quartets are often an example of characteristic *late style*, and yet the very last of them, Op. 135, is lighter in style than the others. Its expression does not reach the depths of the *Heiliger Dankgesang* of the String Quartet in A Minor Op. 132 (third movement) or the otherworldly elegance of the Cavatina in the String Quartet in B-flat Major, Op. 130 (fifth movement)—which Beethoven reportedly suffered greatly to compose, bringing tears to his eyes at the thought of it,[9] working through several drafts to finally nail down the melody that comes apparently so naturally to the ear. The complexity of the String Quartet in F Major, Op. 135, even with its curious fourth movement *Der schwer gefasste Entschluss* [Muss es sein? Es muss sein!] (The Difficult Question [Must it be? It must be!]) is unable to reach that brilliance, harmonic foresight, and unbridled genius of the *Grosse Fuge* (Op. 133).

More than a general sense of *unresolvedness,* Beethoven's late works (especially the late quartets) seem to be known for a stylistic *fragmentariness* which may have gained even more traction in 20th century criticism due to the influence of Adorno. This may be traced specifically to Adorno's radio address for Norddeutscher Rundfunk, Hamburg, 1966 (which was transcribed and later published as "Beethoven's Late Style") that highly influenced Said.[10] He gives his interpretation on Adorno's

evaluation of Beethoven's *late style*, saying: "what Adorno describes here is the way Beethoven seems to inhabit the late works as a lamenting personality, then seems to leave the work or phrases in it incomplete, abruptly dropped, as in the opening of the F Major Quartet or the A Minor."[11] This evaluation of the A Minor Quartet (Op. 132) and the F Major Quartet (Op. 135) almost seems to draw an exaggerated amount of emphasis on the dissonance characteristic of certain sections of the later quartets; but calling the melodic material (*phrases* in Said's terms) as *incomplete*, or *abruptly dropped* actually makes it seem that Beethoven was somehow rushed or indifferent to the shape of a musical phrase in order to get to the next section. Let us also remember that the first motivic fragments of the introduction to the Quartet in F Major, Op. 135, continually reappear in memorable ways throughout the movement. This notably shows a special attention to thematic fragments and was something Beethoven was known to do (the weaving in and out of thematic material) throughout his career.

If we imagine that a musical theme has a specific, rigid, shape that must always be played or sung in that order, in that same extension every time, it looks as though we are studying the parts of an aria; to follow something Daniel Barenboim once said, a musical theme has a shape that must be upheld or else it falls to the ground. When this happens, the theme becomes incoherent and essentially unmusical. When discussing opera, oratorio, *lied* or song, this maneuvering of thematic material, which Adorno and Said refer to in late Beethoven as being left incomplete, makes sense. Especially in vocal music, the last thing one wants is for the theme to *drop*.

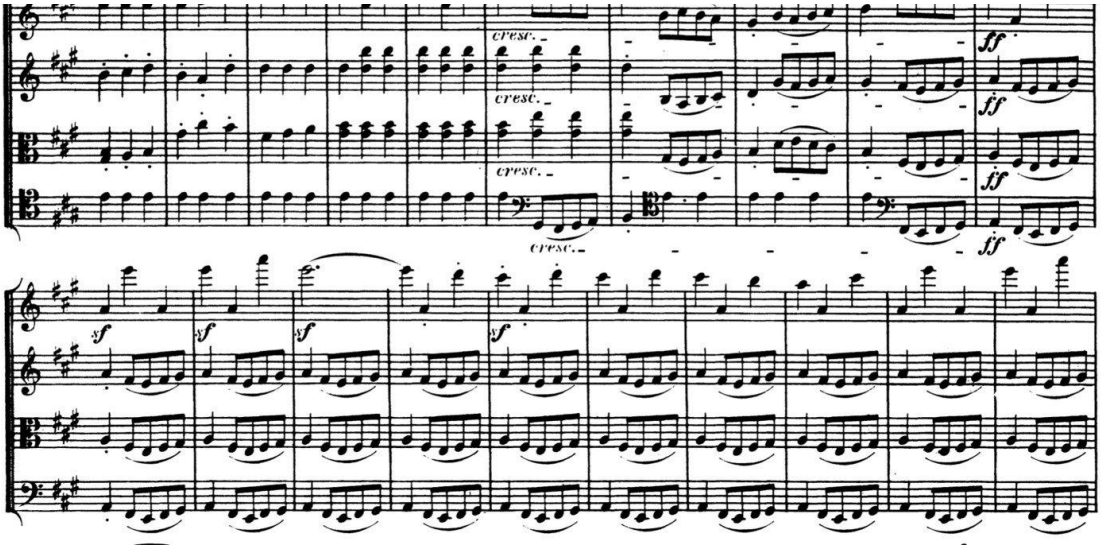
Yet if we consider an instrumental theme as a long string of pearls (to borrow an expression from Beethoven, although applied in a different context), we can break that chain into smaller segments of three or four pearls, or maybe even six or seven pearls. We might call these smaller segments *motivic elements*, bits that retain some of the *sound* of the original melody but are simply partially truncated, like someone telling the same story and an interlocutor (here our interlocutor is metaphorical for transitional musical material) interrupting as though to say: "yes, I know; but what is the point you want to express?" And the melodic fragments start up again and stop, until at some point later in the movement, we hear the theme in its extension again (perhaps in a new key or slightly altered) and the listener gains some pleasure in recalling the whole theme and hearing it in this new way.

Motivic elements dropped and picked up again is something we find in Beethoven throughout his career and thus this insistence on *fragmentariness* may simply be one method a critic found for not comprehending a universal Beethovenian coherence in thematic breaks. The motivic elements at the beginning of Op. 135 are also not exactly fragments, but simply the repetition of a very short theme (and can give the impression of being a *fragment*). Put in a different way, it is as though we look at one of Matisse's cutouts and find that a form appears through much smaller shapes (as in *Blue Nude II* or *The Snail*); however, our insistence would keep us from enjoying that larger form because we insist on looking at one spot, at one particular, imperfect edge of a rectangle or triangle and not allowing ourselves to see the whole of the work.

The Quartet in F Major, Op. 135

These comments on general elements of what is considered Beethoven's *late style* in the context of the Quartet in F Major, Op. 135, do not really get at the heart of why the quartet is unique among its fellow late quartets. These comments especially do not address why Op. 135 is considered to be Beethoven's "Haydn" quartet, because it combines the lightness characteristic of Joseph Hadyn's compositions while capable of expressing a depth of feeling that somehow opposes the clarity and simplicity of the form. The "classicism in structure"[12] of the first movement especially harks back to an earlier time—to Beethoven's study of the quartet form and directly to his tutelage under Haydn.

For all the supposed *fragmentariness* or abandonment of thematic parts in the first movement of Op. 135, it is the second movement that exhibits a curiosity that is so loud and flagrant that it drove one contemporary critic to question its bizarre nature. This is not so much with relation to dissonance or any kind of motivic fragment, but actually might be better considered as Beethoven questioning *good taste*. Clearly Beethoven has put to paper a wonderful musical joke.



Example. String Quartet, Op. 135/II, Vivace [Scherzo], bars 133-152.

This example merely shows the beginning of the passage in the B section of the scherzo that has been viewed so problematically by critics. This is due to the excessive repetition of an accompaniment fragment in the Violin II, Viola, and Violoncello at *fortissimo*, and the Violin I skipping about octaves at an extraordinary *fortissimo* volume. A. B. Marx, a noted 19th century critic, wrote in the *Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* a few years after Beethoven's death that this section of the scherzo has the potential to undermine the entire movement. He described that the accompaniment figure "is repeated in thrice-doubled octaves […] more than fifty times in succession as accompaniment to an upper melody that is just as striking, this must appear baroque, indeed repugnant, if one fails to recognize a higher idea."[13] Marx's *higher idea* is a critical concept, one that would bring this movement together coherently. And rather than be a sense of *late style* unruliness, it seems to be a comment on the form of the scherzo itself, and on the quartet as an elegant example of consonance, of looking backward to a style that was influential for the composer, and also looking forward to a compositional style in the 20th century where repetitions

became used to form an altered sense of perception. As William Kinderman has more recently noted, this section serves as a kind of *climax* of the scherzo, where "there is an almost frightening character to the passage; an apocalyptic vision emerges, supplanting the rustic humor of the earlier music."[14] The strong language of Kinderman's description may act as kind of warning to any interpretation that does not find something *off* about the expression in that passage.

Nevertheless, the contrast between sections, the contrast between the theme and the accompaniment, contains something rather dramatic about it. It is as though there were a conflict between arguments on two sides, between lower registers and the leaping Violin I melody that seems to consistently escape being trapped by the heavy thud of the repeated accompaniment fragment as it lands on the crotchet on beat 1 of every bar. The *drama* between sides resembles the brutality of the second movement of the Fourth Piano Concerto, but of course the Quartet in F Major, Op. 135's scherzo is lighter and at a much faster tempo. But this earlier work from 1805-1806 shows a faint reflection of itself in the opposition between parts now in 1826.

Apocalypse or no apocalypse, the listener must decide on their own because the scherzo holds its ground until the quartet moves into the more remote key area of D-flat Major for the third movement. It is the third movement, the Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo, that lends coherence to the slow movements of the other late quartets and Op. 135. (This may be a result of having been composed earlier and envisioned to be an eighth movement for Op. 131, the Quartet in C# Minor and hence the remote key area of D-flat in a quartet written in F Major.)[15] The humor and fantastical (or horror and repugnance) of Op. 135's scherzo is subdued in this calming movement. As mentioned earlier, it is no Cavatina of Op. 130 but its cantabile melody transfigures any resentment a critic might feel after being subjected to the scherzo of Op. 135.

The fourth movement *Der schwer gefasste Entschluss* ("The Difficult Decision" or "The Hard-won Resolution")[16] has many interpretations for its namesake. But the interpretation that seems most plausible is one that recalls an event from Beethoven's life, bringing back a sense of wit and humor to the quartet. The *muss es sein?* [Must it be?] is said to relate to a question of money.

Supposedly around late March 1826, a person named Ignaz Dembscher owed Ignaz Schuppanzigh (a long-time friend of Beethoven, and a violinist who had his own quartet that performed and premièred works by Beethoven) for wanting a performance of Beethoven's Op. 130 (String Quartet in B-flat Major) at his home. Beethoven

demanded, through Karl Holz [one of Beethoven's friends and secretaries, and a violinist in Schuppanzigh's quartet],[17] that Dembscher exonerate himself by sending Schuppanzigh the subscription price; Dembscher replied, according to Holz, by asking 'whether it must be'. Beethoven evidently intrigued by the quasi-philosophical nature of such a question, responded by composing the canon 'Es muss sein' ('It must be! yes yes yes yes! Out with your wallet', WoO 196). This canon, completed at the very end of July gave Beethoven the perfect theme for the finale of his quartet. Half-humorous, half-philosophical, it provided an ideal conclusion for a witty but profound quartet.[18]

The earnest and nostalgic interpretation that can be read into the final movement (as outlined by A. B. Marx)[19] adds an interesting dimension to how we can define

Beethoven's *late* musical humor in light of the biographical episode, balanced by philosophical reflection on the significance of the phrase *Es muss sein*.

And thus, we return to humor, to lightness in the face of a conclusion: the conclusion of the late quartets, the conclusion of a life in art. Because even with the dissonance that arises in the final movement, the last voice is one of lightness, joy, and melodic simplicity. Thematic parts and motivic moments return throughout the final movement, weaving through to eliminate any question or hesitation we might feel before that overall sense of lightness in the quartet. The pizzicato figures that begin 27 bars before the conclusion of the quartet reinforce this—a lightness and joy that pizzicato technique can so easily bring along with it—and fills the conclusion with delight before its final concluding chord.

As a side note, Beethoven's String Quartet in F Major, Op. 135, has been transcribed for orchestra and, as odd as the orchestration sounds at times, one performance stands out. Let us remember that the conductor of an orchestra necessarily imparts their interpretation of a work on the whole. Therefore, when we wonder whether the scherzo in this F Major quartet is terrifying, or a musical apocalypse, or simply repugnant, we need not look further than Leonard Bernstein's performance with the Vienna Philharmonic (1989).[20] The section becomes brilliant, a noisy arcade, and full of energy. The multiplication of instruments over those repeated accompaniment fragments is a force to be reckoned with; the melody can hardly jump across the wall of sound. One wonders: why is this all at *fortissimo*? But it seems that that is all part of the musical joke (*scherzo* meaning "joke" in Italian, after all) that we are either *in* on or not. The transition out of the joke, something it seems comedians must contemplate at length, moves gracefully into the theme of the A section with an 18th century lightness that rivals the heavy insistence of that accompaniment fragment. The argument for Beethoven's *late style* somehow falls apart here, amongst the humor and the so-called *fragments*. Everything is tied together, transitions together, concluding with joy and wit. Op. 135 may not be the "crowning achievement" of Beethoven's career, but it is a string quartet that carries a lightness that balances out some of the expressive complexities of the earlier *late* string quartets. Beethoven's last word with this quartet, in any case, seems to be one on the joy of composition: on progress and humor, a reflection on method and on Haydn. There may be a moment when it leads us to question the limits of sound and whether a musical joke (even by Beethoven) can cross the line from good taste into absurdity. But then again, that seems to be essential to humor; and as Beethoven holds up a mirror to the lightness of the 18th century, he may as well have fun with it at the same time.

[1] William Kinderman, *Beethoven.* Second edition (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2009), 358. Beethoven's final work is a "substitute finale of Op. 130," 358.

[2] Edward Said, *On Late Style: Music and Literature Against the Grain* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2006). Said began writing this work in 2003; it was later published 2006.

[3] Said, *LS,* 1. The way Said articulates the concept of *beginning* in the early pages of *Beginnings* is explicitly related to the act of writing and literary works. See Edward Said, *Beginnings: Intention & Method* (London: Granta, 1975), 3-8.

[4] Said, *LS,* 3.

[5] Said, *LS,* 3.

[6] Said, *LS,* 7.

[7] Said, *LS,* 7.

[8] Said, *LS,* 3.

[9] Barry Cooper, *Beethoven* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 357.

[10] See Said, *LS,* 4, 8; as well as "Late Style in Beethoven" in Theodor W. Adorno, *Essays on Music*. ed. Richard Leppert, with new translations by Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 2002).

[11] Said, *LS*, 7.

[12] Barbara Barry, "Op. 135: Beethoven's 'Haydn' Quartet" in *The Musical Times*, vol. 159, no. 1956 (Winter 2018), pp. 59-84, 72.

[13] Adolf Bernhard Marx, "Op. 135. String Quartet in F Major" ("Evaluations." *Berliner allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 6 [30 May 1829]) in *The Critical Reception of Beethoven's Compositions by his German Contemporaries, Op. 126-WoO* 140, translated and edited by Robin Wallace (Boston: Center for Beethoven Research, Boston University, 2018), 63.

[14] William Kinderman, *Beethoven.* Second edition (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 2009), 362.

[15] See Cooper, 367-8.

[16] Interpretation of the heading for the movement, and subsequently how one desires to interpret the expression "*muss es sein?",* depends greatly on how one translates and/or understands the word *Entschluss;* for example, see Cooper, 368; Lewis Lockwood, *Beethoven: the Music and the Life* (New York and London, 2003), 481; and Barbara Barry, 67.

[17] Holz became a close friend of Beethoven's by 1825; as Barry Cooper describes: Holz "could quote Schiller from memory and make pertinent comments about Goethe and Shakespeare, as well as providing useful practical assistance such as arranging for the copying of the parts for Op. 127 [String Quartet in E-flat Major]. Holz meanwhile felt honoured to be of service to such a great man, and the friendship blossomed quickly" (Cooper, 355).

[18] Cooper, 368.

[19] See A. B. Marx, 63.

[20] Ludwig van Beethoven, “String Quartet in F Major – Version for String Orchestra” on *Streichquartette – String Quartets, Opp. 131 & 135, Quatours à Cordes*, Wiener Philharmoniker, cond. Leonard Bernstein, Deutsche Grammophon – 435 779-2, 1992, CD. See also Ludwig van Beethoven, “String Quartet Op. 135” on *Leonard Bernstein Conducts Beethoven & Haydn,* Wiener Philharmoniker, C Major 711508, 2012, DVD.