

**Ludwig van Beethoven (16 Dec 1770 - 1827) String Quartet No 13 in Bb Op 130
with Grosse Fuge Op 133 (1825)**

Adagio, ma non troppo — Allegro

Presto

Poco scherzoso. Andante con moto, ma non troppo

Alla danza tedesca. Allegro assai

Cavatina. Adagio molto espressivo

Große Fuge (Op. 133): Ouvertura. Allegro — Meno mosso e moderato — Fuga.

Allegro — Meno mosso e moderato — Allegro molto e con brio.

Beethoven's last three years (1824-7) were predominantly occupied in composing what we now refer to as his late string quartets: Ops 127, 132, 130 (and 133), 131 and 135. In November 1822, it had been 12 years since he had completed a quartet - the F minor Op 95 *Serioso* - and his interest in quartet writing might never have seriously revived had he not had a commission for "one, two or three quartets" from Prince Nicholas Galitzin, an excellent young amateur cellist from St Petersburg, living in Vienna. The commission almost went to Weber, whose recent opera *Die Freischütz*, had excited Galitzin; but fortunately Karl Zeuner, the viola player in Galitzin's own quartet, nudged him towards Beethoven instead. Completing the *Missa Solemnis* and the Ninth Symphony occupied Beethoven for another eighteen months, but he finished three quartets for Galitzin, Ops 127, 132 and 130, in February, July and November of 1825, and received 50 ducats for each one. The overall design of the first two of the three quartets is conventional enough, but the six movements of Op 130 make it "wayward... inspired eccentricity *in excelsis*".

The first movement, while broadly in traditional sonata style, "confronts us constantly with extremes – unisons [as in the 4-note sliding semitone descent to G of the opening bar] and densely polyphonic textures, the odd and the straight, the propulsive and the hesitant". The next *Presto* movement rushes by in barely a couple of minutes: its breathless first part contrasted with the triplet off-beat stomping of the second. The poignant chromatic sighs of the first two bars of the third movement give no hint of its lighter *scherzoso* mood set by the carefree theme in the viola over a jaunty cello. The playful delights continue right to the last chord, preceded by two piano staccato chords – a pause – then piano grace notes landing forte to finish in D flat major. Now another surprise: the fourth movement (*Like a German Dance*), starts (in G major) with D natural in the first violin – it is as if the

turntable had suddenly speeded up a semitone. The movement is marked *very fast* and at that speed the unpredictable hairpin dynamics give it a disturbing drunken queasiness. Shortly before the end, just to disorient you even more, Beethoven chops the theme up into bar-sized bits, and tosses them between the instruments, unaccompanied, in the wrong order: bars 1-8 of the initial theme become 8,7,6,5,1,2,3,4 !

The fifth movement is the wonderful *Cavatina* (a simple melodious air). Karl Holz, the second violin in the Shuppanzigh quartet that first performed it, remarked that the *Cavatina* “cost the composer tears in the writing and brought out the confession that nothing that he had written had so moved him”. The first violin mostly has the melodious air, but each instrument contributes wonders to the miraculous whole. The melody is interrupted by half-a-dozen extraordinary bars that stare into the abyss. After two bars of tensely throbbing triplets from the lower instruments the first violin enters *beklemmt* (oppressed, anxious, suffocated) with hesitant, stammering, part phrases. The attack passes and a shortened version of the cavatina melody returns before the first violin’s poignant two-bar farewell over a reassuringly throbbing accompaniment.

Our tranquillity is shattered by forte then fortissimo threatening, unison Gs followed by pairs of sinister sliding semitones. “*Tantôt libre, tantôt recherchée*” (part free, part studied) says the title page of the *Grosse Fuge*. The free introduction bombards us with fragmentary ideas before the theme of the studied fugue, leaps out at us fortissimo from the first violin, as the viola throbs out those sinister semitone intervals. The fugue is worked out at ferocious length in music of immense complexity and technical difficulty before the skies clear in a freer section of lyrical semiquavers which eventually slows to a trill. Out leap yet more jagged passages with the free and the studied interrupting each other in violent contest. More breaks, more uncertain turns and pauses. The violins suggest a return to the initial fugue. No. The lyrical semiquavers? No. Back to the opening unison and thence to a triumphant end.

The audience at its first performance (on Bach’s birthday 21 March) demanded encores of the second and fourth movements, but to Beethoven’s disgust they did

not demand an encore of the final *Grosse Fuge*. Beethoven castigated them from a neighbouring tavern: “Asses, cattle!”. The musical press considered it “as incomprehensible as Chinese”. His friends later pleaded with him that the *Grosse Fuge* was rather difficult both for audience and players, and couldn’t he possibly provide something a little easier? Six months later, Beethoven uncharacteristically obliged with a new and uncontroversial last movement – the last piece that he completed – which was published as the end of Op 130. The fugue was republished as Op 133, dedicated to Archduke Rudolf, and remained neglected; even Joachim, an enthusiastic performer of Beethoven’s late quartets, refused to play it. Today’s performance, as is now common, reinstates the original last movement, which is still difficult for performers and listeners alike. Without it this wonderful quartet, and indeed the set of three so fortunately commissioned by Galitzin, loses its characteristic shape: contrasting movements culminating (like the Op 59 set commissioned by Razumovsky) with a fugue.

Footnote: Beethoven’s Bb Op 130 quartet is sometimes given the epithet the “Lieb” (“dear”) quartet, purporting to reflect the composer’s particular fondness for it. But this attribution is the result of not-so-scholarly chinese whispers. Beethoven’s conversation books from 1826 record that “On Wednesday [March 15th 1826] at 7 o’clock in the evening, the Beethoven Leibquartett [body / stomach / personal quartet] will assemble with drums and fifes in the heights of Schwarzspanien, and maneuver” - a jokingly punning and militaristic reference to a rehearsal by the portly Schuppenzigh’s quartet (Beethoven’s personal quartet) in Beethoven’s apartment. Subsequently, in the English-speaking musical literature, the term Leibquartett became transferred to Op 130, which the quartet were about to premier, and then transformed to the more familiar (to English speakers) “Lieb”.