

Beethoven String Quartets--Budapest Quartet (1940-1950)

Added to the National Registry: 2003

Essay by David W. Barber (guest post)*



The Budapest Quartet

If Haydn is often called the “father of the string quartet” (just as, prolific progenitor, he’s also often called the “father of the symphony”), it’s Beethoven we should credit as the one--a loving uncle, perhaps--who raised the string quartet from its infancy and brought it into the world to its full maturity.

In addition to his nine epic symphonies, five piano concertos, 32 piano sonatas and a raft of other music (including a humorous “duet for obligato eyeglasses”), Beethoven composed 16 string quartets over the course of his career, beginning with the first set of six, Op. 18, written between 1798 and 1800, and ending with the so-called “late quartets” written in 1824 to 1827, Op. 127-135, which many consider to be among his finest works of musical expression.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) was born in Bonn, Germany, in a little house on Bonngasse. His family soon moved to a bigger house not far away on Rheingasse. (For years, tourists flocked to the Rheingasse house, took pictures and told everybody they’d seen Beethoven’s birthplace. They hadn’t.)

Like Mozart before him, Beethoven was a musical prodigy who had begun playing and even composing at an early age. For his first piano lessons, he was so small that he had to stand on the piano bench just to reach the keys. His father, like Mozart’s father and eager to exploit his gifts, showed him off as a prodigy, even telling everyone the boy was two years younger so he would appear even more talented. (Even Beethoven himself long thought he had been born in 1772.)

By 1792, aged 22, Beethoven had moved to Vienna, studying briefly with Haydn, Albrechtsberger and Salieri, though he was rather too stubborn to have learned much from any of them. (His friend Johann Schenk corrected Beethoven’s exercises before he submitted them to Haydn, thus saving him some embarrassment.) In Vienna, Beethoven set out to establish himself in a career as a composer and concert pianist. It was a brash move at a time when most

composer/performers in Europe still had to rely on the steady income of a position at some noble or royal court, or at least on a church job. Often both. Beethoven had neither a church nor court position to pay the bills, though he did accept commissions from various aristocrats when he could get them.

It was also a risky move considering Beethoven's outspoken temperament. With his raucous laugh and rough behavior, he often ruffled the feathers of polite Viennese society, which generally regarded musicians more as servants than as equals. Beethoven once told off a patron, Prince Lichnowsky, with the remark: "There are and there will be thousands of princes. There is only one Beethoven." He had a point there.

Still, it's hard to deny genius. And Beethoven owes his success more to his musical ability than to his manners.

Beethoven's increasing deafness in later life did not prevent him from composing the glorious musical monument that is his "Ninth Symphony," nor did it prevent him from exploring deeper musical ideas in the late quartets. "After completing the 'Ninth Symphony' in early 1824," Groves tells us, "Beethoven spent the two and a half years that remained to him writing with increasing ease, it seems, and exclusively in the medium of the string quartet."

But if now we regard Beethoven's string quartets, especially those final ones, as among his most profound musical works, it was not always so. Reviewing a performance of the "Quartet #13 in B-flat major, Op. 130," one H. Blanchard, writing in "Revue et Gazette Musicale de Paris" published April 15, 1849, wrote: "Beethoven extends his 'Quartet No. 13' to six movements. The first of these movements is remarkable for its search of strange harmonies, for the tiresome delay in the resolution of chords" and other failings that the critic takes to be "evidence of worn-out creative ability no longer capable of finding melodies." Time has generally corrected that first impression.

Even the violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh, who had formed a quartet in 1790s Vienna and gave debut performances of several of Beethoven's works, complained about a particularly difficult passage of one of the string quartets (possibly "Quartet #12 in E-flat major, op. 127," written in 1825, the first of the late quartets). To which the composer shouted at him: "I can't think about your miserable violin when I am speaking to my God."

Just as Beethoven had been a pioneer struggling to survive as a freelancer in late-18th and early 19th-century Vienna, it seems fitting that the Budapest Quartet was perhaps the first string quartet to attempt to make a living entirely off its concert earnings. Founded in 1917 by three Hungarians and a Dutchman, by 1922 the quartet had moved to Berlin. The Budapest Quartet made its first U.S. appearances as part of a 1931 tour and in April 1938 recorded the "Mozart Clarinet Quintet" with Benny Goodman for the RCA Victor label.

By 1939, the quartet had moved to the United States full time, taking up summer residence at Mills College in Oakland, California. Between 1917 and 1967, and with various changes in membership, in its final form the ensemble comprised four Russians.

Also in 1939, the Library of Congress had commissioned the group to play five Stradivarius string instruments as part of its instrument collection that needed regular use. These instruments had been purchased and donated by longtime influential contributor Gertrude Clarke Whittall. The recital hall on the grounds of the Library had been built in 1925 with funding donated by Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, a major benefactress of chamber music and of several music festivals, and became a frequent venue for the quartet's concerts and recordings.

Among those recordings is a complete set of the 16 Beethoven string quartets, recorded for the Columbia label between 1940 and 1950, and now inducted into the Library's historical Registry.

David W. Barber is a journalist, musician and music historian. He is the author of "Bach, Beethoven and the Boys: Music History as it Ought to be Taught"; "When the Fat Lady Sings: Opera History as it Ought to be Taught" and, in total, more than a dozen books of humorous music history and literature. See more at: IndentPublishing.com

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.