Beethoven  
String Quartet No 7 in F, Op 59 No 1 (Razumovsky)  

Allegro  

Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando  

Adagio molto e mesto  

Thème russe: Allegro  

Like the Haydn quartet that we heard in the first half, this quartet comes from a set that were a revolution in quartet writing. In Joseph Kerman’s words “It is probably not too much to say that Op. 59 doomed the amateur string quartet.” (!) The conversation between equal players of Haydn, Mozart and even Beethoven in his earlier Op 18 quartets here gives way to “the heroic discourse of the symphony” - and no ordinary symphony at that. The Op 59 quartets were written in 1805-6, four years after the Op 18 set and shortly after the third, “Eroica” Symphony (op. 55). The commission was from Count Razumovsky, the Russian ambassador to Vienna and a very able second violinist in his own quartet. His first fiddle was Ignaz Schuppanzigh a friend, inspiration and perhaps also violin teacher to Beethoven. As well as playing with the Count, Schuppanzigh had formed his own professional quartet in 1804 in order to give public quartet concerts, a radical new departure. This accomplished quartet may have encouraged Beethoven to stretch the technical demands on the players to match his more ambitious musical conceptions.

The F major quartet shares the expansive length of the Eroica Symphony; it lasts about 40 minutes (Beethoven had thought of making it even longer by repeating the second part of the first movement and indeed a substantial part of the Scherzo and a small part of the Finale). Such length is all the more remarkable since instead of conventionally repeating the initial, exposition part of the first movement, Beethoven misleads us with 4 bars that are indeed identical to the opening but then he radically diverges. The opening theme itself makes you wish you were even an amateur cellist as it gradually unfolds over harmonically almost static repeated quavers. The exposition’s richness - smooth leisurely themes contrasting with lively and wide-ranging triplets and arpeggios – is matched by a wonderful long development at the end of which the first violin triplets up piano to a top Bb, B then C heralding the return of the F major first theme, but then Beethoven side-steps into another theme and swerves through some unexpected keys before finally allowing the recapitulation to start.

In contrast to the lyrical richness of the first movement, the second, scherzo movement starts as pure rhythm: piano on the cello, with a lively fragmentary answer from the second violin. Not much to go on, but enough for Beethoven to provide us with a remarkably long and witty bout of musical ball-tossing. The slow movement – very slow and sad – uses the high register of the cello with keening poignancy and ends with a piano cadenza from the first violin ending on a trill which leads us into the "Russian theme" (perhaps at the request of Razumovsky) of the finale. Energetic and emotionally more straightforward, the movement presses on relentlessly, only briefly pausing to reflect in a dying-away Adagio, before racing the last 9 bars to the finish.

Acknowledgments:


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