

**Chamber Music Seminar:
Prof. Edward A. Parson, Michigan Law School, 2007-2008:**

Notes for the Third Session, November 28

Beethoven early chamber music:

Beethoven Life Notes:

Born in Bonn in 1770, his father was a minor musician in a minor court, that of the Elector of Bonn and Cologne. Ludwig went to work for the local court around 1783, aged 13.

He made a few trips to Vienna starting 1787 (aged 17), for lessons with Mozart (1787), then Haydn (1792, 1794), after he met Haydn when he (Haydn) stopped in Bonn on his way to and from his triumphant trips to London in 1790 and 1792.

His family life was pretty horrible. Of 7 children, only he and 2 younger brothers survived infancy. His mother died of TB during his first trip to Vienna (1787), requiring him to make a hasty return home after just two weeks there. His father was alcoholic and abusive. By about 1790, LVB had responsibility for raising and supporting his 2 younger brothers.

While he was visiting Vienna in 1794, French troops occupied the Rhineland, the Electorate of Cologne was dissolved and the Elector fled. With Beethoven's employment in Bonn vanished, gone, he made the move to Vienna permanent.

Over his first several years in Vienna, (~ 1795 – 1802), he was quite a star, principally for his piano virtuosity. He was popular, financially successful (gifts and commissions from aristocratic patrons; proceeds from publication of his works; lesson fees; and biggest share – performing income.) – and even got to move in high society by virtue of his brilliance, although impulsiveness, bad humor, rough manners offended lots of people (one of his aristocratic friends and patrons issued a decree, only partly humorous, that rules of courtesy did not apply to Beethoven.) Recall that the larger-scale social/economic context for music at this time is the gradual falling apart of the patronage system, from both sides: Courts were increasingly threatened by economic transformation and the threat of revolutions, while musicians (the good ones, anyway), were increasingly discontented with holding the status of domestic servants.

These early works are not those of the tortured Beethoven of later life – afflicted by bad health, family trauma, and (speculatively) bipolar disorder, as well as deafness (which came on gradually, starting with persistent ringing in his ears around 1796 or 1797 – and note, the most concrete harm posed by his deafness was economic, because it threatened the biggest source of income available to any musician, fees from performing.). I.e., these are not yet works of the “Heroic decade” of roughly 1803 – 1813, or the “cosmic/transcendent” Beethoven of ~ 1813 – 1827.

Rather, these early works are marked by 1) sticking mostly to established forms and styles, while standing out within them – competing for attention in a crowded field, seeking to make a striking impression; 2) lots of impetuosity, force – with rough humor, and often a rather improvisatory character; 3) he was first a performer and composer for the piano, then branched out to other forms.

Duo “with two eyeglasses obbligato,” for viola and cello

This little piece was composed around 1796, and so is among the earliest of his chamber music. It was written to play with his friend Nikolaus Zmeskall, an official in the Hungarian Chancellery in Vienna and a good amateur cellist. (Beethoven, like Mozart, played the viola – and the writing here suggests he was no slouch on the viola.)

Zmeskall wore thick eyeglasses for his extreme short-sightedness, and this duo was written soon after Beethoven also had to begin wearing eyeglasses. So the title is partly a joke about their state, and partly a joke about the “black” passages with many rapid notes. The writing for cello in particular has a few passages so high and fast that they must have been written partly as a joke at his friends’ expense.

The work was not completed. There is a complete first movement, a Minuet, and part of a slow movement, but the first movement is usually played (and often printed) alone. That’s what we’ll play.

A note on the practical problems of writing for just two instruments. You’ll recall that in our Brahms sextet evening, Yehonatan Berick talked about the luxuriousness of sextets, relative to the quartet: a quartet has just enough voices to give full harmonies, while the luxury of extra instruments in the sextet gives more liberty for colorful writing, a thicker texture, and more chances for individual players to get little breaks. Well, a duo is the opposite extreme. It’s hard to define full harmonies, you’re always fighting against having the piece sound too thin, and the part writing is awkward because it is frequently thickened by writing chords and double-stops in each instrument. And there is no rest at all, for anyone. Note as we play it, that neither player can ever even get more than half a second of rest to turn the page of their music.

String Quartet Op 18 No. 6:

Beethoven’s first six quartets were commissioned by Prince Lobkowitz, the employer of Beethoven’s friend the violinist Karl Amenda, composed between 1798 and 1800, and published together in 1801 as Opus 18.

At this point, the quartet form is still pretty new, having been invented by Haydn only about 30 years earlier, and was defined by the masterworks of Haydn and Mozart composed in the 1780s. Beethoven’s first move into this distinguished field has some elements of paying tribute to his teachers, in following many aspects of the forms they had defined – and even following what had become the convention of publishing quartets

together in bundles of six. At the same time, they show many stylistic marks of Beethoven, pushing at the limits of the form and ramping up the expressive intensity.

The first movement is bursting with energy. It's composed in little, malleable chunks more than in recognizable melodies. (For all his greatness, one thing you don't often find in Beethoven's music is great melodies). The development has passages of great inventiveness, with a remote, "outer-space" character that anticipates passages in the late quartets.

Second movement: slow, expressively rich and formally relatively conventional.

Third movement. Recall that the least ambitious link in conventional four-movement sonata form was the Minuet and Trio – a little dance in a moderate 3/4 time, that typically followed the slow movement. Beethoven often, as here, sped up this movement and re-titled it Scherzo (joke) – sometimes with the character of a gentle joke, but increasingly growing harsher, more prankster-like, wilder. This one is pretty wild for an early work, with the entire movement built on the idea of confusing you over where the first beat of the measure falls.

The fourth movement is an odd juxtaposition, of an intense, despairing slow passage, almost unmoored tonally (and in case you didn't get it, he titles it "la malinconia") – juxtaposed with a seemingly simple, happy (even banal) little dance.