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

Notes for the Fourth Session, January 16, 2008: Middle and Late Beethoven Quartets

In this session, we'll hear two great string quartets of Beethoven – one from his middle period – the period from about 1803 to 1813, sometimes called his "heroic decade," in which he wrote a ton of his most famous and popular works; and one of late quartets – five astonishing quartets plus a large left-over movement called "the great fugue." These were his last major works, from the last three years of his life. (He died in 1827, aged 57)

(Recall for context – Beethoven wrote 16 string quartets: the bundle of six in his youth, opus 18, of which we heard one last session; the five of his middle period; and five plus the great fugue from the end of his life).

I'll be joined by three advanced performance students from the UM School of Music, Theatre, and Dance: Rachel Patrick (violin), Marcus Scholtes (violin), and Tom Carter (viola).

Quartet in E minor, Opus 59 No. 2:

The first one we'll hear tonight is one of a group of three quartets written in 1805 and 1806 on a commission from Prince Andrey Rasumovsky, the Russian ambassador to Vienna – and known as the "Rasumovsky" quartets. You can use your wealth to buy immortality, if you're careful enough what you spend it on.

Rasumovsky was a talented dilettante (and pretty good violinist), an admirer and sponsor of culture and science, and a libertine. The posting of ambassador in Vienna, the most culturally vibrant city in Europe, suited him perfectly – but as an associate wrote, "Rasumovsky lived in Vienna on a princely scale, encouraging art and science, surrounded by a valuable library and other collections, and admired or envied by all; of what advantage this was to Russian interests is, however, another question." He commissioned these quartets to mark his taking over from a friend the patronage of the best string quartet in Vienna – the ensemble led by, and named for, Ignaz Schuppanzigh, which gave the first performance of most of Beethoven's quartets. (They are also regarded as the first professional string quartet – although aristocratic households frequently employed musicians, chamber music hitherto tended to be played by ad hoc ensembles, very frequently mixing staff musicians with amateur patrons. As the scale of the form grew, the market in its wisdom responded with quartets that could play these bigger and much harder works.)

Also recall for context, that Beethoven was pretty thoroughly deaf by the time of these quartets, and consequently could not earn income from performing or conducting – and only with difficulty from teaching – but had to rely on his compositions. His patrons were being stingy and unreliable, and he was frequently falling into debt – so a commission of three major works, particularly from such a famous and popular figure –

and an intimate of Prince Metternich to boot – was a good career move. His financial situation did not get much better, however: times can get tough in a war, and just two years after these quartets, Beethoven was on the verge of taking a salaried Court position in Westphalia, until three rich friends (Archduke Rudolf, Count Kinsky and Prince Lobkowitz) promised to pay him pension of 4000 florins/yr. Even so, only Rudolf paid reliably – Kinsky died in the war having made no provision for continued payment in his will, and Lobkowitz simply stopped paying in 1811.

The best known fact about these quartets is that there is an obvious Russian folk-song theme written into the first two of them. Popular opinion is that Beethoven did this as a gesture of respect or gratitude to his Russian patron – or perhaps out of sympathy for Russian support for the Austrian empire in fighting Napoleon – there were many Russians in Vienna at the time, principally recovering in Viennese hospitals after being wounded (and defeated) at Austerlitz, 60 miles to the north. In his great 1967 book on the Beethoven quartets, however, Joseph Kerman gives an alternative speculation. He notes that the treatment of the Russian theme in this quartet in particular is so clumsy it sounds more like a prank played on a poseur of a patron than a gesture of respect. He writes "It sounds as though Count Razumovsky had been tactless enough to hand Beethoven the tune, and Beethoven is pile-driving it into the ground by way of revenge."

The three Rasumovsky quartets are big, complex, dramatic works, of such a seriousness and expressive intensity that even the highly sophisticated audiences of Vienna aristocrats found them difficult to digest at first. In this respect, this one (number 2) is the most challenging of the three – its character, especially the first movement, is intense, serious, and somber, with almost nothing light-hearted to relieve the intensity.

As is normal for major works of the period, it's in four movements.

First movement: Allegro. Oh boy, is the use of the Italian word "allegro" (cheerful, happy) to denote a fast tempo ever out of place here. If Beethoven needed a mood word rather than simply writing "fast", it should have been something like "urgent" or "desperate." Like (nearly) all first movements of major works, it's in Sonata form, although the second subject – which normally contrasts in mood as well as in key from the first – barely gives you a break from the prevailing intensity and darkness. There's a passage in the coda (the closing section) that one of my teachers called the music to accompany being marched to your execution.

Second movement (Molto Adagio, with the additional marking "Si tratta questo pezzo con molto di sentimento" – this piece must be played with great feeling). In contrast to the darkness of the opening movement, there follows this heartbreakingly beautiful slow movement with a hymn-like opening theme. (Beethoven's quartets are good places to find such slow movements of great beauty and tenderness – to borrow terms from films, "tear-jerkers" or "two-hanky movements." There are about half a dozen of them in his quartets, including three in the middle group – whereas in his other major works like piano sonatas and symphonies the character of the slow movements is most frequently less intimate, more formal, more austere and impersonal (Warning: this is my

idiosyncratic opinion and lots of people disagree.) Unusually for a slow movement, this one is in Sonata form. Remember, sonata form imposes substantial formal requirements (an exposition with two contrasting subjects in different keys, then a development that messes around with these subjects, then a recapitulation that repeats both subjects in the home key, then an ending). If the basic material you're writing with goes by slowly, the need to get through all these elements can make a piece very long – but of course, this one is so unspeakably beautiful you don't mind that it lasts a little longer than usual. Carl Czerny – Beethoven's musically facile but doltish student, famous for his piano exercises – wrote that this movement occurred to Beethoven as he contemplated the starry sky and thought of the music of the spheres – thereby providing yet another illustration of how easy it is to fall into triteness and cliché when you try to speak about great music.

Third movement (Allegretto). Remember how in conventional early four-movement works, the third movement was Minuet and Trio, a simple dance in 3/4 time, played twice with a contrasting section or "trio" in the middle – but as Beethoven expanded the form he sped it up and make the character sharper, usually calling the movement "scherzo" (joke)? Well in this piece, unusually, he slows it down again so in speed alone it is back pretty close to a minuet. Except he doesn't call it Minuet, and the character is haunting, even a little eerie: This piece gives me an image of an aristocratic ball danced by ghosts in a haunted palace. In addition, this is the movement where he inserts the "Theme Russe" – a simple like folk tune that was later used by Mussorgsky in his opera Boris Godunov – with the extremely awkward, labored setting mentioned above. It's hard to play this section without making it sound ridiculous – like a nasty joke mocking the clumsy counterpoint writing of an untalented music student. In one pass through the trio, the simple theme is repeated eight times (!) with little variation to relieve its monotony. Then as if that wasn't enough, or to beat you into submission, he repeats the whole thing! I.e., where the convention structure for these movements is: 1) main part (minuet or scherzo) with each of two sub-sections repeated; 2) trio (with sub-sections repeated); 3) Main part again without repeats – here, as in many of his later works, he expands it to five parts: 1) main part with repeats; 2) trio; 3) main part again; 4) trio again; 5) main part again.

Fourth movement (Presto): Not as much to say about this one. It strikes me (warning – another idiosyncratic and unsupported opinion) that as Beethoven was so greatly expanding the scale, formal richness, and expressive depth of the other movements, in many of his middle-period works the final movements kind of get left behind. This one is pretty much a standard "rousing finale" which I find a little unsatisfying after the intensity and depth of what's gone before. Of course it's not quite as simple as that – in contrast with, say, the finale of the 5th symphony (roughly contemporary with these works, by the way), which is so uncomplicatedly triumphant you could with a straight face use it as a college football fight song ("Hail to the Hapsburgs valiant"), this one has a little bit of darkness, or maybe irony, hanging out around the edges. And in contrast to a simple triumphalist structure, it does not resolve from the minor to the major for a happy ending.

Quartet in A minor, Opus 132:

OK, fast-forward 20 years. The Rasumovsky quartets were written when Beethoven was about 35 (and the remaining two middle-period quartets just a few years later). He turned back to string quartets at age 53 (in 1823), following a commission from Prince Nikolas Galitzin – a Russian aristocrat and amateur cellist living in St. Petersburg (Getting a commission from someone in St. Petersburg is an indication of Beethoven's continent-wide renown).

Although he remained unfailingly industrious and was producing many of his greatest works, Beethoven's life was pretty miserable by this time, due to continued financial insecurity, increasingly bad health (persistent and extremely painful gout, plus a persistent and mysterious abdominal inflammation – and oh yeah, deafness), and increasingly strained and painful social relations. No surprise here: he was stone deaf, unkempt, rude, perhaps manic-depressive, and had a terrible temper, and he couldn't keep servants and his domestic circumstances were growing progressively more disorganized. One friend reported calling on Beethoven and finding all manner of dirty clothing, leftover food, and other garbage strewn around the apartment – including an unemptied chamber-pot under the piano. After a vicious court battle, Beethoven in 1820 won custody of his teenaged-nephew Karl (son of his late brother Kasper Karl) from the boy's mother, and proceeded to make the life of this sullen, troubled, and rebellious boy a living hell with his obsessive, controlling ways. (One part of the court battle involved Beethoven's obtaining a favorable judgment in a court reserved for the aristocracy, playing on Viennese confusion over the meaning of the "van" in his name. Had he been German and this name "von", it would have denoted at least some minimal degree of aristocratic heritage. In fact, he was Flemish and his family name "van Beethoven" meant "from the beet farm." When this ruse was exposed, he had to go back and fight the case – ultimately successfully – in commoner's court. Karl attempted suicide in 1826.

But these miserable circumstances did not stop him from creating these five-plus works whose greatness utterly defies description. There are five quartets –Opus 127 in E-flat, Opus 130 in B-flat, Opus 131 in C-sharp minor, Opus 132 in A minor, and Opus 135 in F – plus the single-movement "Great Fugue" (Opus 133), which Beethoven originally wrote as the final movement of Opus 130 but relented when friends persuaded him that this piece was too hard even for his sophisticated audience: instead, he published the Great Fugue separately, and wrote an alternative final movement for Opus 130 – the last thing he completed before his death.

Have I already indicated that there are no superlatives sufficient to convey how great these works are? Stravinsky is reported to have said that the Great Fugue was the greatest work of music ever written. When pressed by an impertinent acquaintance, Beethoven himself stated that he regarded the Quartet in C-sharp minor, opus 131, as his greatest work. Ever sour and self-critical, he said of it "there is less failure of imagination here than ever before."

These quartets are marked by extremes of formal creativity, on all scales from the smallest fragments to the overall structure of the works; extraordinary inventiveness in

creating new sounds, like nothing you've ever heard before; and an expressive character that is transcendent, Olympian, as if it's plugged into the cosmic and infinite – not completely withdrawn from mere human concerns, but viewing them as if from some distance. Given how utterly inventive and contemporary these sound nearly 200 years after their creation, it's hard even to imagine how they must have sounded to their first listeners. (Incidentally, a fourth characteristic that marks these quartets is ridiculous technical difficulty. It was to a complaint by Schuppanzigh, one of the greatest violinists of the day, about the difficulty of the parts, that Beethoven replied with the great quotable line "Do you suppose I think about your blasted fiddle when the spirit moves me?" … There is a passage in the cello part near the end of the quartet we're playing tonight that my principal teacher Andor Toth Jr., a great quartet player, got around by playing a repeated low note ***with his chin***, allowing him to keep his left hand high on the instrument where it was needed.)

The quartet is in five movements (sort of):

First movement (Assai sostenuto – Allegro): A slow introduction with a four-note unit that is later combined with the main subject of the principal, fast section – in a highly modified sonata form. Watch out for the astonishing sound-effects in the final twelve measures, opening with the dissonant super-soft pedal-tone in the viola and cello (so quiet but so harsh it reminds me of the subliminal cues used in horror movies to get you riled up by signaling that something horrible is coming), to the virtuosic closing passage in the first violin intentionally built around the harshness of the open E string.

Second movement (Allegro ma non tanto): an uncharacteristically gentle and formally conventional movement – pretty much recognizable as a "minuet and trio" as in early sonata-form works, although more lyrical and larger in scale. Many commentators find connections between this movement and the A-major minuet movements in an early quartet of Beethoven (Opus 18 no 5), and one by Mozart (K. 464) that we heard in our first session. Note, however, that this movement is in the "wrong place." It is not the gentle pick-me-up after the expressively intense slow movement – and after you hear the slow movement, you'll understand why this movement could not be adequate that role – but rather is moved to come before the slow movement.

Third movement (Molto adagio): -- with the additional marking, "Heiliger Dankgesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart" (Holy song of thanks, from a convalescent to the divinity, in the Lydian mode). This movement is the core of the piece. The text refers (at least in its superficial meaning) to a spell of severe illness that set back Beethoven's work on the quartet by a couple of months. The piece is built on two sharply contrasting sections. The "heiliger dankgesang" of the title is a simple hymn of five short, *extremely* slow phrases written in a harmony so open and pure it reminds you of medieval plainsong (Gregorian chant), with the phrases separated by slightly richer and more mobile two-measure passages that sound like punctuations. The "heiliger dankgesang" recurs twice (i.e., three times in total), with each repetition adding progressively more rhythmically complicated accompaniment to the basic song and, in the third repetition, a building of volume and expressive intensity to a climax of

astonishing and vaguely alien grandeur. Words fail me. The contrasting middle section, labeled "Neue Kraft fühlend" (new strength sensed) is a perky, highly ornamented, and more harmonically conventional passage. It's hard to put your finger on the character of this passage: it's fun, I guess it's kind of happy, but there is this feeling of slightly abstracted weirdness hovering around it – maybe it does capture the fragility of the feeling of convalescence following a serious illness. And of course, note that the great strength of this movement, the overwhelming climax, is not in the "neue kraft" section (which by the time you've heard the whole thing sounds kind of pathetic and childish in its bouncy little celebration of merely human strength), but in the final repetition and extension of the "heiliger Dankgesang." It's as if he's saying "You think you know strength? I'll show you strength."

Fourth movement (Alla Marcia, assai Vivace; piu Allegro): God help us, what could you write to follow the "heiliger Dankgesang"? What he writes is a raucous, vulgar march – whose bitter irony fits perfectly with a 20th -century aesthetic. The only thing that I find makes it not absolutely contemporary is that there's nothing evasive or indirect about the irony and bitterness – it is in your face. This movement would fit as the soundtrack in some sour, despairing contemporary film about the buffoonery and brutality of militarism – Catch-22 or maybe even better, The Tin Drum. Remember, Beethoven's lifespan pretty exactly mirrors that of Napoleon: he came to adulthood in the idealism of the French Revolution, initially named his great 3rd symphony "Bonaparte" then ripped the dedication page off the manuscript when Napoleon declared himself Emperor (in April 1804), and subsequently lived through multiple battles around Vienna, the evacuation of the aristocracy (his livelihood) from the city, and its occupation by French troops. I think he's making his views on militaristic culture and invocations of patriotism pretty clear.

But that's not all there is to the fourth movement. It is joined to the fifth and final movement by a bizarre passage, piu allegro, that precisely mirrors an operatic "recitative" (the half-spoken, half-sung patter in operas of the day, that allowed the presentation of enough text to advance and explain the plot – "Oh dear, has the Count fled the city, pursued by his brother who is still enraged over the insult to his wife? Oh what shall I do?" – always with an extremely thin accompaniment, so the audience could hear the words clearly.) This recitative, a virtuosic passage for the first violin over chunk-chunk-chunk and tremolo accompaniment in the other three instruments, has a desperate driving intensity, until it fades away into a brief hold that introduces the final movement.

Fifth movement (Allegro appassionato) – more serious intensity, this time with a somber character that harkens back to the first movement; more amazing inventiveness of sound-effects; and a frenzied conclusion (Presto) with a long melodic passage played in unison by first violin and cello (playing in a ridiculously high register). The movement to the conclusion is so intense that the piece trips over the finish line and has to go back 50 measures and try again. (No, I know – a better metaphor is trying to land an airplane – it arrives at the runway too fast, and has to circle for another approach). In these late quartets, the most crucial and profound material is still usually in first and middle movements, but you no longer have the sense of vague inadequacy in the final movements that I expressed above for the middle quartets.

There are a couple of connections between this movement and the final movement of Beethoven's 9th symphony – the famous one with the chorus and vocal soloists, using the text of Schiller's "Ode to Joy." First, Beethoven's sketch books show that he was considering using the main theme of this movement as the theme of a purely instrumental alternative final movement for the symphony (He started sketching these ideas even before the 9th symphony was completed, and was quite dissatisfied with the final movement and considered replacing it). Second, even more precisely, the violin recitative that links the 4th and 5th movements of this quartet is essentially identical – although inverted (reflected top to bottom, so each movement to a higher note is replaced by an equal-sized movement to a lower note) – to the recitative by the bass soloist ("Oh freunde, nicht diese töne") that introduces the vocal part of the symphony movement.

OK, back to my real job. I look forward to seeing you all tomorrow evening.