



CHAMBER MUSIC

When Aliens Encounter Beethoven

by Tom Rosenberg

The setting: a planet in a distant galaxy.
The time: 4,000 or many more years in the future.
The situation: a news report to the intelligent life on the planet about strange sounds from an ancient alien civilization found on a golden disc.
The result: an entire civilization experiences emotions they don't fully understand after listening to the Cavatina from Beethoven's String Quartet, Opus 130!

What on Earth? Or more correctly what *away from Earth*? am I fantasizing about?? Well, this could happen, and NASA hopes someday that something like this will happen. In 1977, they launched the Voyager I and II spacecrafts, with the mission for them to be the first explorers of the distant planets in our solar system, and then to continue on and beyond our solar system into the deep reaches of the Universe where maybe, someday they will be discovered by intelligent life. Attached to Voyager I is a disc made of gold embedded with digitized versions of images of earth, as well as written words and music of earthlings.

According to the *Star Trek* creators, in the first *Star Trek* movie released only a few years after the launch of the space probes, Voyager I did encounter an alien society, which altered it, gave it tremendous new powers and sent it back our way as V'ger (part of the name plate on the space craft had been damaged during it's trip) where it was destroying everything in its path back to earth in its new quest to gain all knowledge. Will it destroy the Earth too? Kirk to the rescue!!! (Actually, it's a pretty good movie.)

The *Cavatina* is the fifth movement of Beethoven's amazing string quartet in B-flat, Opus 130. It is a short, extremely personal slow movement, imbued with an overall sadness and in its own strange way, intense, almost transcendental beauty. It is truly impossible to describe it in words... it *must* be heard. It was considered, by those who had a say, to represent the greatest thoughts of the human species to an intelligent life form from the far distant future that might be able to decipher the golden disc. And yet, amazingly, so many people who love classical music, including professional classical musicians don't know it very well or at all.

The group of five string quartets by Beethoven known collectively as the *Late Quartets* are all spectacular works of genius. They are the only major works he composed after the *9th Symphony*, and were written between May of 1824 and November 1826, completed just a few months before his death. In the ten years following 1811, he had written very few major works, had become totally deaf and suffered from poor health and depression caused by a series of disastrous personal events, the loss of his patrons through their deaths or desertion and difficulties with his publishers. Then in 1822, he wrote in a letter "I feel I have long known what I want to do, but can't get it down on paper. I feel I am on the threshold of great things." His greatest achievements soon began to pour out of him, including the Opus 111 *Piano Sonata*, the *Missa Solemnis*, the *9th Symphony*, and what many feel are his most amazing works of all, the five *Late String Quartets*.

Opus 127, Opus 130, Opus 131, Opus 132 and Opus 135 between them explore nearly every mood and experience humans have, seen through the mind of one of the greatest geniuses who has ever lived, and whose experiences were unlike any great musician who had ever lived before him, and probably since. In addition to deeply personal and sometimes very simple utterances, he explores universal themes of the human experience. There are moments of extreme joy and profound sadness, strange and other-worldly beauty, and terrible violence and ugliness. He will often juxtapose conflicting emotions, and may have different instruments express different emotional ideas at the same time within the same measure. Each instrument is used in new ways and as if each is an equally important and profound individual voice. He explores

new musical structures, experiments in new ways of voicing and with radical ideas such as metric modulation, harmonic progressions, thematic transformation, passages sul ponticello, polymeters and more. All of these great quartets lend themselves to endless thought and interpretation. They present issues that are not really solvable... but instead can provide a lifetime of meaningful exploration that continually yield new things.

Here is a very brief overview.

Opus 127 in E-flat Major

- Completed in February 1825.
- Dedicated to Prince Nicholas von Galitzin (a cellist and amateur musician). Beethoven also dedicated Op. 18, 59, 130 and 132 to Galitzin.
- Premiered (apparently poorly) in March 1825 by the Schuppanzigh Quartet and received a hostile reception from the audience. Later, Beethoven had Joseph Bohm, a violin professor at the Vienna Conservatory, prepare successful performances.
- In 4 movements, but large in scope (nearly 40 minutes to perform).

Opus 132 in A Minor

- Completed in July 1825.
- Premiered in a small, private performance in September 1825.
- 5-movement scheme (about 45 minutes in length).
- Slow movement is truly transcendental. Beethoven wrote at the beginning of the movement, "Heiliger Dankesang eines Genesenen an die Gottheit, in der lydischen Tonart." (Sacred song of thanks, offered by a convalescent to the Godhead, in the Lydian Mode.) Also over other sections, "Neue Kraft

fuhlend” (with new strength) and “Mit innigster Empfindung” (with the most fervent feeling).

Opus 130 in B-flat Major

- Completed in November 1825
- Premiered publicly in March 1826 by the Schuppanzigh Quartet and then in numerous private gatherings.
- Huge architecture in 6 movements. In its original form, about 50 minutes in length.
- Original finale was very avant-garde *Grosse Fuga*, which many audience members and probably the musicians were not able to comprehend. Beethoven agreed to replace it (publishing it as Opus 133) with an alternate finale, completed in November 1826.
- In its original form with the *Grosse Fuga*, this quartet presents enormous conflict/resolution ideas.
- The *Cavatina* (slow 5th movement) is emotionally powerful and eloquent. Beethoven wrote that it had the strongest emotional effect on him of anything else he wrote. Its searing beauty makes the violence and eventual sense of triumph of the *Grosse Fuga* even more powerful, and almost comprehensible.

Opus 131 in C-sharp Minor

- Completed in July 1826 and dedicated

to Baron Joseph von Stutterheim.

- Not publicly performed during Beethoven’s life.
- Huge architecture in 7 movements, all played without pause (about 40 minutes in length).
- Considered by many to be Beethoven’s greatest work, it seems a personal journey through Beethoven’s mind.

Opus 135 in F Major

- Finished in October 1826 and dedicated to Johann Wolfmeir.
- Not publicly performed during Beethoven’s life.
- Written during a time of serious emotional turmoil. His nephew Karl, whom Beethoven had taken responsibility for, attempted suicide. In addition Beethoven’s declining health and financial situation added to the difficulties.
- In comparison to the others, this piece is much shorter, architecturally more traditional (4 movements, about 29 minutes in length) and less full of emotional turmoil.
- The *Finale* has a strange introduction and is mysteriously labeled, “Der schwer gefasste Entschluss” (the difficult question). He also writes under the pitches that make up the theme of the slow and dark introduction, “Muss es sein?” (Must it be?) and then writes, “Es muss sein!” (It must be!) under the cheery

and emphatic theme of the allegro.

The *Late Quartets* are ultimately the reason many musicians want to play string quartets, for it takes time and commitment to dig into them and try to tap into Beethoven’s mind. Many of the great quartets have recorded them more than once because as their life experiences expanded, their interpretations of the *Late Quartets* changed. The great Budapest Quartet recorded them four times. There are many interesting books dedicated to them, which offer many facts and ideas. But I believe the best way to truly get to know them is through repeated listening and score study, and of course, playing them with others who want to explore. Whether your involvement with them is as a listener or as a performer, the deeper you probe them the greater the rewards. If you haven’t started yet, I urge you to take the plunge! And...one has to wonder what will alien life forms make of that *Cavatina*?

Tom Rosenberg teaches chamber music and cello from the Opus 1911 Music Studio in his home in Saint Paul. In addition to his performing career, he also is on the faculties of the Carleton and Macalester Colleges, the McNally Smith College of Music and is Artistic Director of The Green Lake Chamber Music Camp in Central Wisconsin (www.greenlakechambermusiccamp.org). He received the Master Teacher: Studio Award from MNSOTA in 2004. †