

Christopher's Classics – The New Zealand String Quartet plays Beethoven Late Quartets

The Piano, Christchurch – 20 August 2020

Reviewed by Tony Ryan

Beethoven's late quartets are the bane of my life!

It seems that knowing and loving all of Beethoven's symphonies, concertos and piano sonatas, and even the earlier string quartets, is no guarantee that these last five works in the quartet genre will easily give up their secrets. I don't think there is any music that I've spent so much time and effort trying to bend into submission – they just keep playing extremely hard-to-get. Occasional live encounters along with countless playings of the many recorded versions on my shelves, from the Quartetto Italiano and the Alban Berg Quartet's two recordings, to the Lindsay, Belcea, Tokyo and Takács Quartets, still return frustratingly little reward. No scores come down from my bookcase as often as these highly esteemed works, and stories of Stravinsky's uncomprehending wonder at the genius that could create such artistic perfection or Edward Dunsberg's wonderfully enthusiastic recent book *Beethoven for a Later Age* have served merely to increase my vexation rather than to open any doors of appreciation.

But then . . .

Yesterday afternoon, during the New Zealand String Quartet's programme which included two of these late masterpieces, came a hint of revelation. Towards the end of the programme, as we reached the final *Molto adagio* of the slow movement of Opus 132 in A Minor, with its marking of "Mit innigster Empfindung" (with the most deeply felt expression), something about cellist Rolf Gjelsten's way with those darkly expressive low open Cs, combined with the higher strings' almost airless tone quality, touched a chord. Then, for the first time, the following brief *Alla marcia* no longer seemed out of place as it always has, and the final *Allegro appassionato* at last opened its heart.

Today I'm slow to sit down to start this review. Do I dare try to replicate the experience by listening to one of my recordings? Until this point, I resist. . . . But now I give in to the hope that I've broken through that haughty wall of resistance. I start with that immense *Heiliger Dankgesang* (Holy Song of Thanks) movement . . . and there it still is – that heart-felt, slow-motion elation that twice gives way to a more commonplace expression of joy before finally reaching that last *Molto adagio* sense of overwhelming thankfulness.

Earlier in the afternoon's programme I'd looked around the audience, socially distanced in alternate rows with empty seats between couples or individuals in recognition of the current strangeness of the world, and wondered if others were already part of these works' inner circle. A solitary man further along my row moved a hand and knee in response to the biting discordant accents of Opus 135's *Finale*; later, two rows in front, a woman's head moved with the pulse of the players on stage. At the concert's end, a few individuals of varying ages stood, as if to applaud the fulfilling experience of reliving their already consummated intimacy with this music.

When a live musical performance really 'works', I don't find myself devising the words to describe it in a review as I'm listening. But in the first half of this programme I made mental notes of the players' polished ensemble, unity of style and eloquent, if sometimes too restrained, expression. This seemed particularly evident in the alternative *Finale* of Opus 130, where the relaxed tempo lacked the urgency that it ideally wanted.

But today, all that seems of little significance in the context of a concert that brought such unexpected revelation and makes me impatient for the next opportunity for a live encounter with these works.

As it happens, the recording I've chosen today goes on to that Opus 135 Quartet in F Major which opened the NZSQ's programme; and there it is again – the secrets revealed; well, at least in part. With any truly great music, its mysteries are drip-fed, and so I look forward to the discoveries that are surely still to come from these works, and I thank the New Zealand String Quartet for pointing me towards the first real chink in the door.