

Leipzig Quartet Plays for Beethoven

by Charles T. Downey | Wednesday, December 19, 2007

This review is an Ionarts exclusive.

It has been one of those weeks: this post makes nine concerts reviewed over nine days. That is not a complaint, as having too much music to hear is always better than having too little. Sunday was the 237th anniversary of the (presumed) birthday of Ludwig van Beethoven (December 16, 1770), and the National Gallery of Art and the Embassy Series joined forces to bring the Leipziger Streichquartett to Washington for a sampling of the group's extensive Beethoven discography. The last time that Ionarts reviewed the Leipzig Quartet, it was in 2004 at the Library of Congress, but the group is regularly mentioned in our reviews of new string quartet recordings as a reliable gold standard for many works. Three of the members who founded the group in 1998

were principals in Leipzig's Gewandhaus Orchestra, and there is a venerable, traditional sense to the quartet's sound and stylistic approach.

The good news is that the people lined up to get into this free concert were the most numerous in recent memory, of all ages and stripes (take that, Greg Sandow). The bad news is that many of them had to be turned away. They were right to pick this concert out of the month's schedule of holiday concerts and *Messiah* performances. The program featured three excellent quartets, one from each of the three stylistic periods of Beethoven's compositional career. Beginning with op. 18, no. 6 (from the end of the early period, last heard from the Jerusalem Quartet -- Michael recently reviewed the Emerson Quartet playing no. 4 from the same set), the Leipzigers gave the first movement crunch and bite. The second movement's tender and delicate reading, especially the sweet modal shift at the end, stood out, as did the agogic accents of the third movement.

Next it was op. 95, a dense, driven, and somber work (nicknamed "Serioso") that is an excellent choice to represent the middle period (last heard from the Borodin Quartet in 2005) -- the recent recording by the Takács Quartet was one of the Ionarts Ten Best Recordings of 2005. The crackling motifs of the first movement in this performance underscored Beethoven's memories of the artillery sounds of Napoleon's siege of Vienna, later soothed by the warm second movement. There was an almost panicked urgency to the third movement, except for its pastoral trio, and especially the fourth, where the agitation almost crept over the edge, to exciting effect.

As a celebration of Beethoven's life, it is hard to imagine a better choice for a late-period quartet than the mysterious, quasi-liturgical op. 132 ("Heiliger Dankgesang," from 1825). Its third movement, a Lydian-mode song of thanksgiving for Beethoven's recovery from illness, became the psalm of solemn gratitude from the hearts of generations of Beethoven's devoted listeners. The Leipzig Quartet played a perfectly tuned, pure, and unified rendition. With almost no vibrato and careful attention to each note and line, its celestial ending left the quartet visibly exhausted. The bubbly, joyous second movement contained an enigmatic contrast with its own drone-based trio, a moment of Arcadian repose. The appealing fifth movement was so forceful that the tone of the strings was occasionally distorted slightly, but it was a remarkably precise and controlled performance. The encore was introduced with the words, "What is better than music by Beethoven? For us, music by Bach." A contained, quasi-monastic reading of the latter's chorale *Nun sich der Tag geendet hat* (see this beautiful 17th-century English version) sealed the spirit of musical prayer.

Now that the sun doth shine no more,
And day hath reach'd its close,
They calmly sleep who wept before,
The wearied find repose.

And if this night my last should prove
In this dark land, I pray
Then take me to Thy heaven above,
The home of endless day.

Leipzig Quartet's
Beethoven:



Op. 18, no. 6



Op. 95 ("Serioso")

Op. 132 ("Heiliger
Dankgesang")