

MUSICMAP NOTES

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Beethoven's String Quartet No. 2 in G Major, Op. 18, No. 2 – 1799

Though positioned as No. 2, this quartet was actually third in order of composition and seems to have been deliberately modeled on the quartet style of Joseph Haydn.

“The G major, the briefest and seemingly least ambitious quartet of Op. 18, emerges as a charming and witty work, very close in style and temperament to the best examples of eighteenth-century Rococo chamber music. Despite its apparent light, happy character, though, Michael Tree of the Guarneri Quartet, among many other musicians, considers it the most difficult of all Beethoven quartets to perform. And Beethoven's books reveal that the lightness was achieved only after a lengthy and arduous struggle, covering thirty-two notebook pages, to blend many disparate elements into a smooth, artistic creation.” (Melvin Berger)

Movement I – Sonata form, Allegro, 2/4, G major

“The subtitle, ‘Compliments’, comes from the opening of the quartet in which a series of short, balanced phrases of supple elegance conjure up, as described in Theodor Helm's 1885 book on the Beethoven quartets, an ‘eighteenth-century salon, with all the ceremonious display and flourish of courtesy typical of the period...with bows and gracious words of greeting.’” (Berger)

Exposition:

Main theme: Starts with 8-bar contrasting period (4+4). First 4 bars contain motives ‘X’ & ‘Y,’ each 2 bars. Motive ‘X’ consists of a quarter-note followed by a 32nd-note run, 1st violin solo. Motive ‘Y’ contains dotted rhythm descent in unison octaves for the whole quartet. Motive ‘Z’ is 4 bars of bowing gestures back and forth (as well as a consequent to the antecedent). Starts with upward leap of a 4th - 1st violin leads over regular rhythmic accompaniment. Much motivic and textural variety packed into the decorous opening statement, and regular pauses between the phrases add to the feeling of formality. Continuation of theme is more unpredictable and asymmetrical. First 4 bars reproduce rhythm of opening, but surprising first *f* is combined with high B and a new shape for ‘X’ & ‘Y.’ Next 4 bars are even more surprising as they repeat this whole new idea, but now ‘Y’ jumps to the upper octave. This repetition confounds any expectation of some sort of symmetry with the opening period. After these somewhat jarring events, a final 4 bars have the job of bringing things back to order and giving theme some sense of logical conclusion. This elegantly combines rhythms of both ‘X’ & ‘Y.’ This is an interesting and creative theme, but it is harmonically conservative.

Bridge: Built from rhythmically assertive 4-bar phrase. Starts with *f* short-short-long (short notes in unison octaves and longer note a chord). Bold opening then contrasted with soft oscillating 16ths. Repetition of 4-bar phrase pivots into minor with first instance of harmonic surprise in movement. The remainder of the bridge spins out this material, and then uses more typical passagework to conclude the process of modulation.

Subordinate theme: D major (dominant). Very regular after main theme. Statement 8-bar (4+4) parallel period. All strings harmonize staccato melody in rhythmic synch (tiptoe effect). Theme also decorated with 16th-note up-beat runs.

Counter-statement – Theme heard down an octave in lower strings as 1st violin embellishes above with more extensive 16th-note runs.

Closing material: Part I is 10 bars (5+5), parallel period. Busy music that sounds a bit more troubled harmonically.

Part II – Starts with 4 bars in which the two violins dialogue 2-bar phrases, launched by rising sextuplet runs. Seems to start over with another pass through the same material, but this soon changes into a free and rousing extension dominated by triplet rhythms (the outgrowth of the sextuplets). Reaches climax, including I-VI-IV harmony, that sounds for all the world like the setup for a concerto cadenza with the 1st violin in the role of virtuoso soloist. But instead of any cadenza, we get...

Part III – Sudden drop back to *p* for an elegant conclusion of exposition with a reminder of motive ‘Z.’ Beethoven then directs that exposition be repeated.

Development:

Part I: Brief extension of motive ‘Z’ in minor.

Part II: Development of bridge theme.

Part III: False return of main theme, just ‘X’ & ‘Y,’ in wrong key of E-flat major. (Haydn homage.)

Part IV: Longer section based on motive ‘Y.’ Contrapuntal style and passage through many keys.

Part V: Retransition. Dramatic manipulation of bridge theme with striking dynamic contrasts. Ends with forceful stretto on theme that initiates...

Recapitulation:

Main theme: Return is quite disguised and entire theme will be radically recomposed and manipulated in developmental style. After keeping theme harmonically-conservative in exposition, now Beethoven takes opportunity for wild harmonic departures. Start of recap continues stretto style with contrapuntal overlaps of motives ‘X’ & ‘Y,’ leading to ‘Z’ as the texture clears. Then ‘X’ & ‘Y’ more recognizably presented, but strange continuation is thematically and harmonically disorienting.

Bridge: Now most regular-sounding presentation of 'X,' 'Y' & 'Z' we have heard so far, except it is in the wrong and quite distant key of E major. In fact, this is the beginning of a radically-transformed bridge passage, from which the original bridge theme will be entirely absent. 'Z' is freely extended and transitions into modulatory passagework, only the last bar of which is parallel to the end of the original bridge.

Sub-theme: Quite regular in tonic key, but rescoring adds interest. Statement sounds lower than before, while counter-statement now finds melody up high in first violin over running 16ths in lower voices.

Closing material: All very regular.

Coda:

Part I: Recalls the development by extending motive 'Z,' but this time for longer and more gently and dreamily (and not in minor). Fermatas add to the sense of temporary relaxation.

Part II: Elegant, understated close gives one final, regular presentation of entire opening 8-bar main theme period. Subtle new scoring enhanced by pizzicato accompaniment.

Movement II – Song & Trio design (ternary form), Adagio cantabile, 3/4, C major (sub-dominant)

Principal song:

Soulful and sonorously scored theme has unusually free and unpredictable phrase structure. An idealized aria that evolves organically as it progresses.

Phrase *a* – 6 bars (3+3). 1st violin lead richly harmonized by other voices. No added rhythmic character to accompaniment.

Phrase *a'* – 4 bars (2+2). A highly-ornamented repetition of a material, but compressed to just 4 bars. 1st violin still operatic diva.

Phrase *b* – 4 bars. Introduces contrasting material and a contrasting texture. Viola briefly takes lead, and melody more shared between voices.

Phrase *c* – 4 bars (2+2). Another contrasting phrase that prominently features the cello.

Continued polyphonic effect.

Phrase *a''* – The theme then concludes with 5 bars that subtly harken back to the opening material while featuring the 1st violin in cadenza-like passages.

Codetta – After a pause, this brief contrasting extension is simple and spare with all voices in rhythmic synch.

Trio: Rounded binary form, Allegro, 2/4 (change to duple meter!), F major (sub-dominant) For Beethoven to place this scherzo-like fast music in the middle of a slow movement is a nice surprise, and quite daringly unconventional. This busy, contrapuntal music is clearly based on the preceding codetta. After a 2-bar wind-up...

Part I (phrase *d*) is 8 bars, with a literal repeat. Great rhythmic vitality.

Part II, at 16 bars, is twice as long. The first 8 bars act as a contrasting *e*, followed by a *d'* reworking of Part I. This also is literally repeated. Then instead of returning directly to the principal song, Beethoven adds an additional 6 bars to further the momentum of the scherzo mood and then wind it down gradually.

Principal song return:

This faithfully reproduces all the phrases of the original theme, but now Beethoven substantially rescores each phrase for maximum enhanced effect. His new intentions are signaled at the outset by featuring the cello with the lead. However, the melody will have much competition throughout with elaborate decorative material in all voices. As the theme proceeds, this rich string polyphony will continue, creating a lively and almost ecstatic mood. For the *a'* phrase, the 1st violin reclaims the theme, now with even more complex ornamentation. In phrase *b*, the general scoring is much as before, and phrase *c* also hews relatively closely to its original material. But *a''* is substantially rewritten, using new arpeggios across the supporting voices for climactic effect.

Treating the return of a slow movement's principal song to this type of decorative rescoring is common classical-era practice. Here Beethoven uses this convention to fully exploit a string quartet's potential for rich conversational interplay and independence.

Coda: Now the familiar codetta material follows as expected, but is then briefly expanded to form an actual coda that ends the movement with an air of grave austerity.

Movement III – Scherzo & Trio, Allegro, 3/4, G major

This is a witty and inventive movement, but Beethoven follows the conventional rounded binary form expectations pretty faithfully here.

Scherzo:

Part I (*a*): Characterized by delicate quicksilver exchanges. A lacy filigree of interlocking violin motives. 8 bars (4+4), parallel period. Literal repeat.

Part II: Contrasting *b* also 8 bars (4+4) – despite the effective new texture and feel, this nicely balances *a*. But after two such short, regular phrases, *a'* is surprisingly long and elaborate, as Beethoven really gets down to work making maximum use of his material, developing it with unexpected restatements, extensions, and irregular phrases. This is over three times the length of the original *a*. Part II is also literally repeated.

Trio: C major (sub-dominant)

Part I (*c*): Again 8 bars (4+4), parallel period. After the playful character of the scherzo, this starts out sounding quite solid and maybe even a bit stolid. Literal repeat.

Part II: Contrasting *d* is also 8 bars (4+4), but with a freer 4-bar extension. Dancy new triplets add welcome animation after the stiffness of Part I.

c' - As he did in the scherzo section, Beethoven now considerably expands and elaborates this return. The triplets from *d* are carried over and do much to enliven the balance of Part II. Again literal repeat, but with second ending that leads to...

Scherzo transition: Instead of going straight to the expected scherzo Da Capo, Beethoven adds a new 8-bar segue, using anticipations of phrase *a*'s thematic material.

Scherzo Da Capo:

All as before.

Movement IV – Sonata form (Rondo-like), Allegro molto quasi Presto (very fast, almost presto), 2/4, G major

“The finale...that Beethoven himself, in his own characteristic words, found to be ‘unbuttoned’ [‘Aufgeknopft’], begins in a dynamic march rhythm. The rondo is dominated by a rather buffoonish humour, starting with the comic and somewhat oafish interrogative motif, announced by the cello, to which the four instruments immediately provide the complementary response. The question and the reply from the theme, and the folksy vitality of this rondo seem to counterbalance the very elevated gracefulness of the first movement at the end of this work. Despite the presence of a gentler second theme, the first with its strong build continues to dominate the whole movement, developing to the full the spirit of the dialogue which is part of its very essence.” (Brigitte Massin)

“...impish, informal, lighthearted...” (J.Y. Song)

Exposition:

Main theme: Starts with balanced 8 bars (4+4). Solo cello leads with first 4 bars, introducing the basic motive that will dominate much of the movement. This opens with an upward tonic G-major arpeggio, and its rhythm and character offers a clear echo of the bridge theme from Movement I. The answering 4 bars give a complementary version of the motive, up an octave and harmonized in rhythmic synch by the whole quartet. The theme then continues more freely, still based on the catchy motive, but drifting into the relative minor. Beethoven is signaling us early on that he has harmonic tricks in store, and that this theme has a tendency to deftly shift from key to key. Then the theme is given out *f* in its most definitive and exuberant form. We are back in G major after leaving it so quickly before. Now the home key is celebrated by this strong affirmation, which is even followed by a 10-bar codetta that further reinforces the tonic.

Bridge: A dramatic shift into minor signals the start of the modulating bridge. This is also largely based on the main theme motive, sounding quite gruff and severe in the cello's lower register. What follows is powerful developmental-sounding music with strong dynamics and lively contrapuntal interplay. Towards the end, the harmonic clouds seem to clear as we settle safely in the tonic D major.

Subordinate theme: Starts with 8 bars (parallel 4+4), then what seems to be a counter-statement turns out to be more of a free 12-bar extension based on the opening of the theme. This theme is much more conventionally and conservatively harmonized after the playful freedom of the main

theme. However, a catchy syncopation at the start of each sub-phrase gives the material its own distinctive personality and charm.

Closing material: Part I – Up to now in this movement, there has been constant bustle and frenetic activity. But here everything seems to slow down and even sag with this odd theme, based on troubled-sounding diminished harmonies. Statement is 12 bars, towards the end of which the harmonies seem to clear and suggest resolution, but a deceptive cadence plunges us right back where we started for the counter-statement. After only 8 bars, however, this somewhat-rescored second helping of the same diminished chords seamlessly transitions into... Part II – Now instead of diminished harmony, we have dominant 7th harmony and a catchy new melody. But, oddly, the implication is that we will be resolving to F major, where we have no business going. Not to worry, though...Beethoven does some fancy footwork and gets us safely back to D major for... Part III – This final cadential material brings back the main theme motive, developed with exuberant contrapuntal flair (including an inverted version of the opening arpeggio) and clearly establishing and affirming the dominant. This comes to an expectant close that seems to beg for the start of the exposition repeat. However, instead Beethoven tricks us by continuing straight on into the...

Development:

Part I: Since we anticipate the start of the exposition, we are pleasantly confused at first when we hear the main theme seemingly quite regularly presented, but in the unexpected and distant key of E-flat! (We should remember that E-flat was the key used for the false return early in the Movement I development.) Though the theme seems clearly stated, it is newly-scored and does not start with the cello solo. Also, it is followed by the codetta material, which now is spun out into a busy extension, with even a cadenza-like flourish from the 1st violin.

Part II: C major (sub-dominant). Here we are offered a witty new treatment of the main theme, over a propulsive bed of throbbing 8th notes. This becomes more wild and exuberant as it proceeds, but then all sense of momentum is arrested by...

Part III: Retransition. We get a brief break from the main theme motive as the droopy diminished chords of the closing material's Part I take control. But soon a pregnant pause (with fermata) is followed by a joyful return of the main theme. This is another joke, however, as the key is A-flat. Instead of the expected recapitulation, we have been tricked by a false return, but Beethoven soon sets things right with the actual...

Recapitulation:

Main theme: After all the contortions this thematic material has been put through, its presentation here is reassuringly regular, even starting again with the cello solo. However, some new decorative counterpoint enters before the cello has finished, and there are interesting new scoring details from then on.

Bridge: Though harmonically altered, this is very similar in effect and length.

Sub-theme & Closing material: All of this is recapitulated very regularly with the expected adjustments in relation to key.

Coda:

Last time we heard the end of the closing material, it was setting us up for the surprise of the main theme in E-flat that started the development. Beethoven uses a parallel maneuver here by offering the theme in C major, the sub-dominant. However, this is only a brief feint, and soon the all-important motive rings out for the last time in G major before rushing on to the final, lively closing chords.