



Winter Warmer I: Bartók and Beethoven

Béla Bartók (1881-1945): String Quartet No. 5 (1934)

Béla Bartók was born in a small town in the Kingdom of Hungary in present-day Romania. While in his early 20s, Bartók overheard a young nanny sing folk songs to the children in her care, sparking a lifelong fascination with folk music which coincided with a broader social interest in traditional national culture. He spent a considerable amount of time traveling and researching folk music in different parts of the world, and is regarded as a pioneer in the field of ethnomusicology.

The fifth of Bartók's six string quartets was composed in 1934 on a commission from Elizabeth Sprague Coolidge, at the time America's most prominent musical patron. As he often did, Bartók uses an "arch" form, with a central scherzo sandwiched with two slow movements, which are in turn bookended by energetic fast movements.

The mesmerizing first movement is itself arch-like, like a massive musical palindrome where melodies return mirrored or inverted (played backwards or upside-down). After the second movement, featuring mournful phrases and spine-tingling trills, comes a vibrant Scherzo marked "in the Bulgarian style." The fourth movement, like the second, is a great example of Bartók's "night music" style with its eerie dissonances, lonely melodies, and evocations of nature. The finale has a furious urgency, but there are also breaks in the intensity for moments of humor. At one point, the action stops for what sounds like a surrealist lullaby that the players are directed to play "with indifference," before the culminating energetic coda.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827): String Quartet No. 12 in E-flat Major, Op. 127 (1825)

Ludwig van Beethoven was a German composer and pianist, and one of the most admired composers in the history of Western music; his works rank among the most performed of the classical music repertoire and span the transition from the Classical period to the Romantic era.

Beethoven's Op. 127 is the first of his legendary "late quartets," six string quartets that comprise his final and perhaps greatest musical achievement. With his complete deafness (not to mention unrequited love, an obsessive legal battle over his suicidal nephew, and problems with his publishers, finances, and physical health) came a world of social introversion and music of deep personal exploration: innovative forms, sublime beauty, intimate emotion, epic lengths, superhuman virtuosity and a

seemingly endless fascination with variation.

Boldly dignified opening chords create an intriguing contrast with the gentle lyricism of the main theme. These elements converge and intertwine to transformative effect, concluding this expansive movement with a surprisingly delicate quasi-Mozartean turn.

The second movement is essentially an extended and passionately emotional song, with notes of wistful vulnerability. Situated in the astonishing realm of Beethoven's fantastically imaginative variations, a simple, lovely theme twists and turns along great arcs of loosely woven textures.

A jaunty Scherzo brings the music back to earth with muscular drive, rhythmic complexity, sudden stops and starts, and a quicksilver trio that erupts into an even wilder dance.

The compact finale has a large-hearted, even jolly mood. Vibrant musical conversations are infused with unabashed joy, and a thrilling sense of exploration. But something special happens at the end, one of so many magical moments throughout the late quartets. With a sudden change of key, meter, and tempo, a coda floats us into the ether amid a shower of magical, shimmering trills, then gently returns us to terra firma.