

The Guarneri Quartet, Vol. 4: Beethoven, Haydn – St-Laurent Studios

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The Guarneri Quartet, Vol. 4 = BEETHOVEN: String Quartet in D Major, Op. 18, No. 3; String Quartet No. 11 in F Minor, Op. 95 "Serioso"; String Quartet No. 16 in F Major, Op. 135; HAYDN: String Quartet in G Major, Op. 76, No. 1: Finale: Allegro ma non troppo – ST-LAURENT STUDIO YSL T-1225 (72:42) ***:**

The Guarneri String Quartet (1964-2009) and I have a long prior history, commencing with their residency at Harpur College (later, SUNY Binghamton) in 1964-1968, exactly coinciding with my undergraduate years and with the beginning of my reviews in 1966 for the school's *Colonial News*. When they first appeared, they had little sense of ensemble, often out of tune, and ragged in their approach to their chosen repertory, yet

communicating an urgency and sincerity that would mark their style as the other issues resolved themselves. The group rather cultivated their sense of spontaneity and the energetic, rough edges that emerged in the heat of performance. When I approached cellist David Soyer with a point of difference on a musical gesture, he drily and forcefully quipped, "We play it as we perceive it at the moment."

Yves St-Laurent presents the group in the music of Beethoven – with one Haydn encore – from Salle Pleyel, Paris on 17 January 1980. Recorded sound is warm and focused, each of the participants in clear, articulate definition. The opening D Major Quartet from Beethoven's Op. 18 (1800) actually marks his debut as a creator in this medium, so long dominated by Haydn and Mozart. Even within the genial cast of the first movement *Allegro* and *Presto* finale, Beethoven's capacity for counterpoint makes its mark. Guarneri emphasizes the seamless fluency of Beethoven's early style, its simultaneous adherence to Classical conventions while occasionally jabbing us with a new feeling of forceful expression. The second movement *Andante* presents us a charming lied, touched by ornamental moments and sudden sighs indicative of a refined sense of *sturm und drang*. The syncopated *Scherzo* enjoys a refreshed rusticity, especially in the *Trio* section, in which the violins indulge in humorous, gypsy effects. Beethoven utilizes Haydn's rondo-sonata form for the last movement, a hectic affair demanding much of Arnold Steinhardt and the busy accompaniment that supports him. The quick shifts of color and register impede our principals not at all, and the movement hustles by in the manner of a virtuoso, *concertante* piece for the first violin.

The so-called *Serioso Quartet* of 1810 reveals the compressed passion of which Beethoven had become a master, especially in his two-movement piano sonatas. Beethoven in a letter at the time had complained, "Oh, life is so beautiful, but for me it is poisoned forever," referring to the progress of his deafness. The *unisono* opening of the F Minor has a mere 11 notes, at first cramped but quickly escalating in octave space and harmonic audacity. The gambit of five-note urgency plays throughout as the music gains in fever and only momentary repose. The ensuing *Allegretto* poses an opening cello lament that soon becomes an intimate love song, ripe for fugato treatment. Michael Tree's viola sounds particularly ardent as it leads into Soyer's deep response. The third movement *Allegro* appears suddenly, an outgrowth of Beethoven's severity of style, fervently intense and prone to find consolation in hymn-like passages. While driving tension and grueling anxiety define much of the last movement, a sudden, shimmering incursion of the major key serves to transcend all prior conflict and emotional turmoil. The resultant Bravos! Are well deserved.

The disarming simplicity of style Beethoven reveals in his 1826 F Major Quartet seems to relish its transparent economy of means, especially in the four-note tune set by the viola that infiltrates the texture of the opening *2/4 Allegretto*. The Guarneri ambles along in this genial, somewhat mocking tone, that does occasionally soar to an ardent moment. The genial classicism of procedure seems to have taken its cue from the Eighth Symphony. The *Vivace*, however, derives its perverse pleasure from off-the-beat periods, landing on E-flat reluctantly. Steinhardt has a series of upward scales that sound like

some weird practice-room exercise that soon sparks a madhouse ostinato that refuses to quit, only to return to the original, acerbic motive.

The slow movement in D-flat Major presents a devotional hymn that so appealed to Arturo Toscanini that he performed it as an orchestral showpiece. A theme and four variations, the music compresses Beethoven's existential doubts and reassurances in an unbroken procession of a most intimate, personal nature. When the Guarneri took on Beethoven's late quartets back at Harpur, John Dalley openly confessed in his pre-concert talk, "We are a bit afraid of this music." Beethoven designated the last movement, "The Difficult Resolution," marking the slow, minor key opening "Must it be?" The brief explosion of agonized doubt cedes to an affirmative Allegro, "It must be!" a kind of Hamlet's debate on the value of meaningful action. The sunshine playfulness announced first by Soyer dominates until the uninvited return of introductory phrase, now an ominous, enraged presence. But the clouds dissipate, and the coda dances a merry form of the affirmation, moving *pizz.* and *pp* to a last nod of acceptance that the Paris audience well appreciates.

As a vibrant encore, Guarneri plays the *Menuet* (really a scherzo) from Haydn's 1798 Quartet in G, a boisterous, syncopated business ready for Beethoven to imitate. The middle section has first violin Steinhardt offer up an Austrian *laendler* before the music breezes to its witty coda. A most satisfying demonstration of American, chamber music ensemble, highly recommended.

Gary Lemco