

## A GUIDE TO BEETHOVEN'S OPUS 131

**Abstract** A new proposal is presented as to what Beethoven could have had in mind when composing his C sharp minor string quartet, opus 131. The quartet has seven movements to be played without breaks and it is not in the standard string quartet form. Attempts at describing the work have invariably exposed anomalies which so far are unresolved. For example: why seven movements, why begin with a fugue, is the third movement a dialogue, why is the scherzo so banal and goes on too long, and many others. Its composition came very late and there was no commission or public performance to generate contemporary comment. Initially, during a rehearsal, a concern arising with the viola's change to Adagio in the dialogue movement led the author to investigate, and on studying the score it soon became apparent that much of what Beethoven had written supported a pattern of ideas that have grown into a new credible scheme for the whole work which could be of general interest to both the professional and amateur music community. It should be noted that the findings only propose an underlying theme and should not necessarily impact on the established musical analysis of opus 131.

This guide presents a new take on Beethoven's C sharp minor string quartet opus 131. The author's original intention was to produce guidelines which would help amateur string quartet players better understand the quartet's structure and so be able to take a more focused approach to its performance. The ideas presented here were originally born out of performing the work. For example, when playing the 3rd movement it feels that one is taking part in some sort of dialogue that is beyond the context of pure musical form, and if that is the case what of the other movements? On studying the score it soon became apparent that much of what Beethoven had written supported a pattern of ideas that have grown into a new credible scheme for the whole work which could be of general interest to the professional and amateur music community. Although the author is an amateur music maker the reader is advised not to be misled because what is presented is a serious piece of work that proposes a new take on the work's form and its creation and the author is more than capable when it comes to questions of musical analysis and the historical background of opus 131's composition.

### Prologue

It is well known that while professional quartet players work hard for perfection the amateur is more likely to attempt anything going, and late Beethoven would be no exception. It was during a recent session, while playing the 3rd movement of Beethoven's string quartet opus 131, that a discussion arose over the change of tempo to the Adagio introduced by the viola. How slow should it be and on what note does it start? After a futile analysis the viola player was heard to say: "I do not know what I am supposed to do."

It was on reflection later that this author had the idea that perhaps there could be an underlying programme that may have been in the composer's mind which would provide answers to some of the anomalies that crop up during the work. For example: why seven movements connected by only small breaks, what is the subject of the dialogue that is the third movement, did Beethoven really mean the melodic line to be drowned out by the violin's trilling in the coda of the variations movement and why is the scherzo so banal?

In 1825, near the end of his late period, Beethoven was commissioned to write three new string quartets and following the practice of the time these would have been expected to be in the standard form. That is to have a first movement, a slow movement, a short dance movement and to have ended with a finale, using one or more of the varieties of sonata form.

The first of the quartets, opus 127 in E flat major, was in that respect a fairly conventional four-movement work albeit written in what could be called Beethoven's late

period style.

The second quartet, opus 132 in A minor, was possibly also going to be in the standard form but its composition was interrupted by illness. To mark his recovery, Beethoven composed a special slow movement that probed such a depth of feeling that he inserted an extra short movement, possibly to prepare the listener for the more light-hearted finale.

It is also worth noting that with opus 132 Beethoven started to use a motif device where he took note patterns from the harmonic minor scale to build thematic material. Having three semitone intervals plus an augmented second this had great potential. It was first used way back in the opening of his C minor string trio opus 9 no.3, which incidentally is recorded as being performed at the time of opus 131's composition.

Beethoven also made much use of the harmonic minor device in the third of the three quartets, opus 130 in B flat major, noted for its fugue finale that is huge and difficult for players and audience. Two extra small movements were also added making opus 130 a six movement work.

Adding an extra movement to opus 132 could possibly be musically justified, adding two to opus 130 less so. Perhaps he was freeing himself from the conventions of the time when he composed opus 131, sometime during November 1825 and the summer of 1826, as it has seven movements and is not in the standard string quartet form. By the middle of 1826 the three commissioned quartets had been completed so with no new commissions why not write one just for himself, it need not be in the standard form, just a collection of bits and pieces, as he was to tell his publisher. So what form could it take?

### **The Country Walk**

A possible scenario for the work's creation could have been along the following lines.

When out walking with friends, one of them, possibly the violinist Holz, suggested to Beethoven the idea of incorporating the joy and pleasure they experienced into his current output, as he had done earlier with the Pastoral symphony. This idea would have appealed to Beethoven but it would not be possible to include it in the current work, opus 130, although it could be considered for the next quartet, the one destined to be opus 131.

It could take the form of a country walk where the walkers could be represented by the four quartet parts and the variety of their experiences could be incorporated as a set of variations. It is possible that on some occasions the composer and friends had an animated discussion as to where to go today, and this could be introduced in the form of a short musical dialogue to precede the variations movement. On completion of a walk it was very likely that they would end up in some drinking house, probably of doubtful reputation, and this could be suggested by following the variations movement with a rumbustious scherzo movement.

So in these early stages there was the possibility of a three movement piece which starts with a short dialogue movement followed by a theme and variations to cover the walk and ending with a scherzo movement. Associating each instrument with each of the four walkers would lead to a particular form of part writing which emphasised their individuality. At times this could suggest individual actions, their joint actions and some times simply their appreciation of some external event, like a view say and the character traits of the four travellers could be made apparent from the composer's treatment of each part.

Later, after opus 130 had been completed and the form of the next work was being considered, Beethoven would have realised that such a three movement scheme would not stand as a complete work and it would require more movements to establish a beginning and an end.

One of the first decisions was whether the added material was to continue to feature the

four individuals. The directive that the movements should run on without breaks suggests that the answer is yes and there would be an underlying narrative that links each movement to the next as on a journey.

Normally the first movement of a string quartet would be in sonata form, but given the concept of a journey, this would not be the best choice for establishing the notion of four individuals. Although unusual, a better choice would be to open with a fugue movement where each voice enters one after the other. Such a movement was already at hand in the shape of a C sharp minor fugue, which had possibly been intended for a proposed Requiem. In character this is a slow and sombre piece which might have been influenced by J.S.Bach's fugue of the same key. This choice established the key for the new work to be C sharp minor, which is an unusual and problematic key for strings.

A second movement would be required to make the link from sombre fugue to the dialogue and, either by good fortune or by choice, the home key's Neapolitan harmonic relation with D major provides just what is needed. This allowed the movement to be a bright and sunny D major dance which conjours up an image of moving from the sombre atmosphere of playing homage to the father of music, in the village church possibly, out into the bright summer's day where the local villagers are dancing on the village green.

The next issue was how to bring the journey to a dramatic end. Looked at from a narrative point of view it was perhaps time to leave the real world and enter the metaphysical and bring the quartet to a conclusion with a gigantic struggle between good and evil. As with movements one, two and three, such a movement would require a change of mood after leaving the ale house and what better than a sad scene that reminds our travellers of their mortality.

So now Beethoven has arrived at a final scheme of seven movements that should be played without breaks and where the country walk could be the central part of a more general journey.

For example:

1. open with the four paying homage to J.S.Bach – possibly in the cool of the local village church then ...
2. ... emerge out into the bright sunshine to happy wild dancing on the village green ...
3. ... decide what to do next ...
4. ... embark on a country walk to the next village and ...
5. ... visit the village ale house and get evicted for being a nuisance ...
6. ... feel pathos on seeing a young village girl's funeral procession ...
7. ... engage in an epic battle of good against evil.

It was probably the normal practice of the day that a composer first considered form and its treatment before embarking on the actual music, so in that sense the composition of opus 131 was no exception, and with an outline scheme now established Beethoven was ready to concentrate on producing some great music.

Having made the assumption that the underlying form is a journey it is now necessary to examine how such an idea can be supported by the work as a whole. Such an examination requires making judgements that may be in detail influenced by the author, as obviously we cannot know what was actually in Beethoven's mind. For example variation six with a tempo of 9/8 comes across as rather ponderous with rather odd interruptions by the cello and ends with the four instruments in turn expressing a job well done. In the author's opinion this could possibly represent a part of the walk which is rather long and not particularly exciting. The cello is impatient and keeps saying "are we there yet?" Then

on reaching the end they each celebrate in turn. This of course is a personal view which is an uncomplicated way of describing how this variation fits the idea of a country walk without using too many ifs, buts and possibles.

It may also help at this point to consider the individual characteristics of the four travellers as suggested by Beethoven's treatment of the parts. The first violin comes over as probably the eldest, not particularly fit and assumes he is always in charge (a Schuppanzigh figure perhaps), the second violin feels it is his job to always support his leader, the viola is the shyest and most sensitive of the four and lastly the cello could be the youngest and at times rather immature.



**Figure 1** The entries of the four parts at the start of the first movement could be a declaration that part writing is going to be an important feature in opus 131.

### The journey

The first movement fugue, see Figure 1, as a homage to Bach being performed in the cool calm of a village church works well as the starting point for our imaginary journey. It ends with the harmony being reduced to just a C sharp and moving without a break to a D and then to D major, and despite the fugue's major ending, this has the effect of a stretched out Neapolitan that could imply moving out from the sombre atmosphere of the church into the bright summer sunshine and to the gaiety of the local villagers dancing on the village green.

The second movement is clearly a dance. The indication that the movement should begin very quietly, 'pp', seems at odds with the 'Allegro molto vivace' marking, but in the context of a journey this could simply be that on exit from the church the dancers are seen on the village green at some distance away. Again, as with the fugue, the four travellers could be either observers or participants. This is not formal country dancing but a free spirited spontaneous 6/8 affair probably involving all family members, wheeling and whirling, sometimes in pairs and then joining up into small groups. Could this unbridled activity account for the movement's loosely structured musical form and also suggests an element of improvisation. As the dancing is coming to an end there are two attempts at an 'all together' move and the dancing finally ends with every one exhausted.

It is quite obvious that the next movement is a dialogue. It begins with two attempts at making a decision and then the viola tentatively suggests a possible solution. This is immediately taken up by the violin in great excitement and all parties then agree.

The viola's suggestion could be that they go for a country walk, they all agree and the leader with great enthusiasm suggests they continue with a walk over to the next village. The theme and variations movement could then be seen to continue the journey as a walk. Such an idea would have appealed to Beethoven as despite his age and ill health he was still in the habit of taking local countryside walks. The opening theme section is a 4/4 Andante with the first beat of each bar omitted; so it is not a march but more of a easy going stroll. At the start there is nothing much to see so the two violins hold a conversation as they cross a local field and head towards a line of trees.

Without a break variation 1 has the foursome possibly reaching and entering a wooded area which is teeming with wild life. The music could suggest they are remarking to each other on seeing particular examples of wild life. The deeper in they go it becomes more active and noisy.

**Figure 2** The variations coda: each part has celebrated reaching the final stretch when, at A, it starts to spot with rain, they increase their stride until, at B, the rain stops and they skip along happily until at C they experience a heavy downpour.

There is a break as they exit the wood and in variation 2 come upon quite different undulated terrain where the path splits into many paths at different levels. The tempo becomes a romp and our foursome are going to have some fun. This takes the form of a 'I am king of the castle' game with the 1st violin saying how high he is, then at some point the music suggests they all go up together and come tumbling down again one after the

other with a 'bump bump bump bump'. This is all such fun it has to be repeated.

Variation 3 appears to be a brief reference to a Bach-like prelude and fugue that could suggest the earlier homage to the great master has awakened some early memories of learning piano. The mood has become calmer suggesting exhaustion and their recovery from the high spirited actions of the previous variation. The first violin seems to be the most effected and supported by the second violin as they lag behind the two lower parts.

The image displays a musical score for Variation 3, divided into three sections: D, E, and F. Section D features a first violin part with trills and a crescendo, while the other parts play a rhythmic accompaniment. Section E is marked 'Allegretto' and 'sempre più allegro', with the first violin playing a melodic line and the other parts providing accompaniment. Section F is marked 'in tempo' and 'cantabile', with the first violin playing a melodic line and the other parts providing accompaniment. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (p, cresc., dim.), articulation (trills, accents), and performance instructions (pizz., semplice).

**Figure 3** The variations coda (cont): the downpour ends, at D, turning again to light rain until, at E, it stops and they continue happily on their way, then at F, the violin declares the destination is reached and they all express their appreciation.

Variation 4 is entered without a break and it could suggest an unexpected appearance of

some beautiful panoramic scenery. Perhaps our travellers have reached a high point and have come upon the view and are exclaiming their appreciation.

Variation 5 is atmospheric rather than melodic, see Figure 9. It could be that the path has led into the shelter of a small grove of trees that covered an outcrop of rock bordering a pool of still water where all is calm and silent except for the occasional drip of water and rustle of bird life.

The music moves again without a break into an Adagio, variation 6, which although having a calm beauty has a 9/8 tempo that can make it seem rather ponderous. This could be suggestive of a long and not particularly exciting stretch of the journey which however has to be covered. The young cello is clearly not happy with the situation.

In the coda variation, see Figures 2 and 3, the distance has eventually been covered and each part expresses its satisfaction that the destination is now in sight. The music from this point to the end of the movement is made up of small sections of joyous expression interrupted by sections of trilling. A possible interpretation could well be that the trills represent rain that varies from just a light spotting and then leading to a drenching downpour. This view is supported by a more detailed analysis.

At A (bar 227): following the first violin's added final flourish there is a change of mood with four bars of sustained trilling by the violin above a repeated figure of rising crotchets in the lower parts. The dynamic starts piano and gradually reduces to ppp. A possible interpretation could be that after the celebration it starts to spot with rain, they get anxious, increase their stride and the rain slowly peters out.

At B (bar 231): the rain has stopped, the sun is out and the four travellers are happily skipping along. They increase their pace 'sempre piu allegro' but the violin points to dark clouds ahead, their pace slackens and soon, at C (bar 242), they are engulfed in a heavy downpour of rain indicated by the violin's trilling and the rumbling of the cello's repeated figure.

At D (bar 250): the rain has eased and the foursome are striding out as before but with rather more urgency this time (crotchets have become semiquavers).

At E (bar 254): the rain stops, the sun comes out, and it is back to happily skipping along again until, at F, the violin in great excitement declares the village square is just ahead. All then agree that it has been a great walk and how happy they are to have arrived.

At the 5th movement they now stand before a ale house of ill repute that the young cello has had in mind all along. He shows his delight with a four note figure, which is the first four notes of the scherzo theme. Although not identical, this could be related to the four note figure that formed his interjections during the sixth variation when he was perhaps thinking about what was to come. The music is a rough rustic dance and there are moments, bar 25, when the poor old tired violin seems to flag. The action is always eagerly resumed by the over excited cello and catches the others by surprise, they get out of time and tumble into a heap before getting back together at bar 45. A second subject is introduced at bar 69 and has a more flowing action suggesting a pairing up with the girls perhaps, which then leads on at bar 85 to a crazy offbeat ping pong action between viola and cello, then continued by the two violins. This is all repeated twice more and goes on far too long until the inn keeper has had enough and the four have to scuttle to the exit as they are eventually thrown out.

At the 6th movement there is a dramatic change of mood from drunken gaiety to pathos. Perhaps they have been ejected just at the moment of a passing sad funeral procession for a young village child. The viola is the first to be moved followed by the others and perhaps they are all contemplating their own mortality when they are rudely interrupted by the entry of the pale horseman of death come to claim four souls, see figure 4.



**Figure 4** The start of the 7th movement shows the arrival of the pale horse of death, come to claim four souls, represented by the dotted rhythmic figure of movement's first subject.



**Figure 5** The second subject of the 7th movement could represent the four travellers and is closely related to the fugue theme from the 1st movement.

A mammoth battle ensues, good versus evil in a conflict suggested in part by the switching from the home key to its Neapolitan D major. The first subject represents the pale horse of Death as a galloping horse suggested by its dotted rhythm. On the good side the second subject represents the four travellers with a C sharp minor harmonic scale motif, see figure 5, which is closely related to the first movement fugue theme, and possibly aided by their guardian angel represented by the third subject, see figure 6.



**Figure 6** Perhaps the third subject of the 7th movement represents the foursome's guardian angel coming to their aid.

In the coda the dotted rhythm slows to a stop and the work ends with good triumphing over evil and three crashing staccato chords, see figure 10. This final movement is the only one in Sonata form and was probably composed specially for opus 131.

### Quotes, questions and answers

Beethoven composed opus 131 so late and so near the end of his life that we are left with a scarcity of recorded contemporary comment that might have explained some of its anomalies. Given the new take on opus 131, this section presents answers to some of the questions and the possible reasoning behind the quotes and comments recorded in Thayer's biography, and the surviving conversation books.

Question: Why has opus 131 seven movements? Answer: because the three middle

movements come from the notion of a country walk, i.e. a dialogue of where to go, the walk then with a stop for drinks to finish. This then required to be extended to form a more suitable work with a significant first movement and last movement. These in turn each required a mood changing movement making a total of seven movements. Given that each movement follows without a break and is in some sense related to its neighbour there was no reason to add or remove movements.

Question: Is it possible that Beethoven had in mind the standard four movement form?  
Answer: one might be tempted to think so. The first pair of movements and the last pair both run on without a break and could form a composite first and last movements; the dialogue and variations movements are similarly joined and could be the slow movement. However, such a notion is unlikely to have been a factor in the composer's mind because the direction to play through without breaks is counter to such an idea.

Question: Why did Beethoven leave no indication of what was behind opus 131?  
Answer: At the time of composing it he was badly in need of extra income and probably did not want to jeopardize its publication. He was possibly testing the water when telling his publisher that it was just 'bits and pieces thrown together' and getting an adverse response decided to keep quiet.

Question: Why start opus 131 with a fugue? Answer: because it was the ideal way to introduce the idea of the part writing representing four individuals.

Question: Are there places in the outer movements where there are hints as to the character of the four individuals? Answer: No, the four parts are mostly given the equal treatment that one would expect. An exception would be choosing the shy and caring viola to be the one to first express pathos in the sixth movement. It is also worth noting the frequent occurrence of pairing the two violins or pairing viola and cello. This is clearly a feature and beautifully demonstrated in the first movement at bars 63 and 72 respectively,

Question: Why did the variations movement require the most access to the sketch books? Answer: because finding examples that could be used to suggest the physical events of a country walk would require more time than searching for examples of a purely musical nature.

Question: Why at bar 243 in the variations coda is the theme almost obscured? Answer: because if trilling represents the idea of rain it would suggest torrential rain where it is difficult to hear oneself speak.

Question: Why is the scherzo so banal and goes on too long? Answer: probably because Beethoven is having fun at the expense of his walking friends by depicting a visit to a low grade drinking place of kind they would recognise.

Beethoven quote: It is recorded that Beethoven said of opus 131 "You will find a new manner of part writing". Just what he meant is not clear because by 1825 the art of part writing was well established. Could it be that he was referring to a treatment of four parts that represented four individuals and that this would require a special kind of part writing.

Beethoven quote: Thayer quotes Beethoven as saying "I will be going on a short journey". At the time several journeys were being considered but the destination of this one was not declared and it was never taken. So could it have been a misunderstood reference to opus 131's journey.

Beethoven quote: Thayer states that Beethoven said of opus 131 "There is less lack of fancy than ever before". If 'fancy' means invention he could be saying that composing with an underlying theme dictates to some extent the choice of ideas whereas composing in a standard form, such as sonata form, is more challenging because of the wider scope for new ideas.

Beethoven quote: Thayer quotes Beethoven as saying during the composition of opus

130 " That is an idea meant for a later quartet", and he is probably referring to the underlying idea of a country walk.

### **Epilogue**

So can it be assumed that the ideas presented above are what Beethoven had in mind? There is hardly any circumstantial evidence to support such ideas. The composition of opus 131 came very late and there was no commission or public performance to generate comment. Much of the detail in this presentation is personal and certainly could not be attributed to the composer but this should not detract from the underlying idea of a journey undertaken by four individuals.

The idea that opus 131 is a journey which includes a country walk comes entirely from the music itself plus the need to find credible solutions to some of its puzzling aspects. The investigation was triggered by the questions raised by the viola's part in the third movement as chronicled earlier in this paper. Even if taken as pure music the movement obviously represents a dialogue of some kind between four parts and seems to suggest a posed question which is resolved to the agreement of all present. The fourth movement, which follows without a break, appears to be the object of the resolution and being in a steady 4/4 Andante (at walking pace), suggests a walking motion. Knowing the composer's liking for walks, it is a short step to the idea that Beethoven is using an underlying theme of a country walk. To check if such a notion is credible it is necessary to go through the whole work taking each section as it comes and check if the idea is supported or not. The sequence of the steps is too long to list here but it can be deduced by the points covered earlier in this paper. Some of the salient points can be summarised: the three inner movements emphasise a walk, its events and character of the four individuals; the four outer movements, which were added later, have less emphasis and are closer to being purely musical; the nature of each join between movements give crucial support to the idea a connected journey.

The suggestion that opus 131 is some kind of 'pastoral' quartet does not diminish its greatness. Beethoven was not in the habit of composing programme music and applied his genius equally to all the late quartets. He was a complex character who was happy to enjoy a drink with friends, walking the countryside as well as creating great music. At the time he was badly in need of extra income and probably did not want to jeopardize the quartet's publication and was possibly testing the water when telling his publisher that it was just 'bits and pieces thrown together', then getting an adverse response decided to keep quiet. The author is fully aware of the possible reluctance to accept that there may be an underlying story to opus 131 but suggests that sceptics might consider the following: suppose Beethoven left no evidence of what was in his mind when he composed his 6th symphony and sadly died soon after, what then would be the reaction to someone coming up with the idea that it was 'recollections of country life'?

The author hopes this guide will be of some use both to players and audiences and that the viola in the third movement will now know just how to pace the suggestion of what they could do next.

### **Some Performance Notes**

Accepting that opus 131 has an underlying form based on the ideas presented it is appropriate to consider the effect this could have on its performance. Performing works which have an underlying story can be problematic and as Beethoven did not normally compose explicit program music a first choice could be to play it straight and trust that any references to the underlying idea have been covered in the composition. Beethoven's pastoral symphony is a good example of a work that has an underlying theme which the audience may or may not be aware. If the joke in the trio section, where the poor old bassoon has a timing problem, is accentuated it could be mistaken for an error by the unwary but on the other hand if it is played down those in the know could be disappointed.

Note that the music that follows the trio is always likely to be recognised as a storm regardless.

Fortunately most music lovers are aware of the Pastoral symphony's association with the countryside. That is not the case with opus 131 and performers need to make a choice: a) disregard the notion of a journey and play it straight, b) take advantage of only the ideas that do not undermine the perception of a straight performance, and c) go the whole hog while of course still respecting the integrity of the music. It is worth keeping in mind that Beethoven's initial intent was to only cover the country walk and the outer movements were added later. As a consequence they are less likely to contain characterisation of the four walkers and any associations with a journey are likely to be passive and less evident.



**Figure 7** Shows the use of open strings for all three parts in the C Minor String Trio Opus 9, no. 3, circa 1798.

An obvious example of this last point is the fugal entry of the first movement, see Figure 1, which should always be played straight. Beethoven probably expected the violin to descend the minor sixth on to an open A string and this idea is supported by his isolation of the A in the indicated phrasing. The choice of an open or stopped string really depends on the required emphasis. A stopped note executed with a strong vibrato is likely to produce a sense of resolution whereas an open string is likely to produce a sense of interruption, a surprise say, and is very much a feature of Beethoven style. There is a precedent for it in the opening of his early C minor string trio opus 9, no. 3, see figure 7. There the violin has no choice but to use the open string and the viola and cello can and were probably meant to play their open strings. The idea is reinforced when the opening phrase returns 10 bars later with the violin now an octave higher but with the last two notes doubled at an octave below so that the open string effect is maintained. A minor problem with this idea of course is that in the opus 131 case the viola's A cannot be an open string. Fortunately, given a viola's inherent acoustic resonance due to its body size and firmly stopped with no vibrato, it is possible to get close to an open string sound.

It is an interesting point that the mention of this string trio crops up on several occasions about the time of opus 131's composition. It is the first example of Beethoven's use of the harmonic minor scale to build melodic material and it may be no accident that the Trio's theme transposed to C sharp minor is related to the fugue theme and used in the final movement.

The indication that the second movement should begin 'pp' seems at odds with the 'Allegro molto vivace' marking. It could be that the dancers are seen at some distance away. In performance maintain the highly active playing so that the change in volume is perceived as a change in distance.

As the third movement, see Figure 8, strongly suggests a dialogue perhaps it should be performed like one, that is, not necessarily be in strict time and could be more demonstrative than melodic. Dare it be suggested that in rehearsal the instruments are lain aside and the the movement is acted out using some concocted dialogue.

For example:

**Allegro moderato**

**Adagio**

стес. 10

**Figure 8** The 3rd movement seems to represent a dialogue where the four parts are deciding what to do next. The viola tentively suggests a country walk, then the over excited violin suggests they head for the next village, to which they then all agree.

“WHAT NOW” *they all chorus*

1st: “what shall we do?”

2nd: “whatever you say”

viola: “you decide”

cello: “don’t mind”

“COME ON” *they all chorus*

2nd: “it’s a nice day”

1st: “we must do something”

2nd: “I’m easy”

cello: “don’t mind”

viola: tentatively suggests “a country walk?”

all: “that’s a great idea”

1st: *in great excitement* “Yes, Whoopee, my favourite, we can walk over to the next village”

*they each agree* “what a great idea”

At the opening of 4th movement the treatment of the variations theme is unusual. If it was intended to sound as one part why not write it as one part? If the part writing is to suggest four individuals it would be more natural to make it sound like a conversation between two individuals.

The 2nd variation is just pure fun and should be played as such. In particular play all four of the sforzando endings of the climb and descents with equal emphasis as if our merry foursome have tumbled into a heap with a 'bump bump bump bump'.

Allegretto.

**Figure 9** Variation no. 5 is probably meant to be atmospheric and so to be played with no vibrato and with clear and precise tuning to get an eerie effect.

Variation 5, see Figure 9, could be said to be the problem variation both in interpretation and performance. One possibility is that it is atmospheric rather than melodic. The clue lies in the first violin's entry that is just asking to be played as a harmonic followed by open strings. This raises the possibility of playing the whole variation with no vibrato, bowing near the fingerboard and with perfect just temperament to get a clean eerie sound. Also one might try playing it much slower, say at half the specified tempo, and possibly muted, except of course the two violins are given no time to set their mutes.

The variations coda is full of possible effects of interpretation and which have been covered adequately in the journey section.

Tempo 1.

**Figure 10** If the final chords that end opus 131 are to be played very loud and staccato, like three thunder claps: so perhaps some prudential editing may be required.

At the end of the last movement Beethoven probably intended the three chords to be very forceful and staccato but after forty odd minutes of playing nonstop this can be quite an effort, see figure 10. The chords for the three upper strings are spread which seems to go against the marking of staccato. In rehearsal try it with only the two top notes of each chord and done with perfect tuning you should get a good clean 'bang bang bang' ending. Have in mind Beethoven's demise during a thunder storm. Of course you lose the dominant G sharp so some experimenting with reallocating notes or playing with a tighter spread might be necessary.

### **The author**

Finally some comments about the author who is a retired Computer Scientist and Research Mathematician. After a childhood without music, when in his late teens, he set out to discover the joys of main stream music. He took up the violin and joined the amateur chamber music scene and in the last 20 years has been playing as quartet leader. In addition to being familiar with a vast repertoire of chamber music he is also into analysis of musical forms, music history and the physics of music, i.e. modes, temperaments, tunings and harmonic relationships. He came to appreciate late Beethoven almost from the beginning when hearing by chance, on an ancient wireless, a broadcast of the second movement of opus 131 (1950, probably from Hilversham). As a consequence, although not in any way a professional performer or music academic, he knows opus 131 inside out, performed it, analysed it and regards it as his favourite piece of music. The point being that his appreciation of Beethoven's late style right from the beginning is to some extent unique and allows him to approach the analysis of this great work without awe and mystery.

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