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*From Berlioz's Fugitives to Godard's Terrorists:*

*Artistic Responses to Beethoven's Late Quartets*

Christopher Reynolds

**P**erhaps because I live in Davis, California, I followed the saga of the Unabomber with particular interest. Davis is a mere twelve miles from Sacramento, the home of one of his last victims and, as a consequence, the site of the trial. We received not only much of the national coverage but many local manifestations as well. So when a local bookstore prominently displayed a copy of David Gelernter's book, *Drawing Life: Surviving the Unabomber*, I thumbed through it out of curiosity. Gelernter, a computer scientist at Yale University who received his explosive package in 1993, speaks from the political right. Taking his own recovery process as an opportunity to expound on what is wrong with a society that can produce a Unabomber, Gelernter criticizes our culture for its failure to believe in evil, for our refusal to take moral stands on public issues. He blasts a society that strives to be "nonjudgmental" and ridicules a culture that has succeeded even in "taking religion out of religion." As Gelernter puts it: "If you browse the New Age section of your local book store — spiritual healing, power of myth, Bill Moyers — you will discover an amazing accomplishment. Never mind the schools, universities, public affairs, in our missionary zeal we have even succeeded in taking religion out of religion."<sup>1</sup>

What really attracted me to Gelernter — why I in the end bought the book, and

I am grateful to Stephen Hinton for his comments on an earlier version of this paper presented at Stanford University (January 1998), to David Cairns for sharing his thoughts about Berlioz, and to my student Melissa de Graaf for her research assistance.

1 David Gelernter, *Drawing Life: Surviving the Unabomber* (New York: Free Press, 1997), p.76

why I am discussing him now—is that he credits Beethoven’s late string quartets with restoring him at a turning point in his recovery. I would like to quote him at length because, aside from calling the *Große Fuge* “mankind’s greatest musical achievement,” he has an arresting view of the quartets:

It is mid-October when I finally stumble on the mother lode of cool. It takes the form of late Beethoven string quartets. . . I had always loved the late Beethoven quartets but hadn’t paid much attention to them in recent years, partly on account of an intense obsession earlier in life. . . One day in October I return to the late quartets, starting with mankind’s greatest musical achievement, the *Große Fuge*—and as I sit wearily and aimlessly on the living room sofa listening, the music begins to shepherd my chaotic thoughts back together again.

An explanation of these quartets’ magical power would take dozens of pages (and might even fail at that), so I will simply make an assertion and move on—Beethoven’s music has no emotional content. None of it does, except for the beautiful and weirdly anomalous last movement of the *Tempest* Sonata. Music without emotional content feels cool to the touch, and I desperately need cool. The late quartets are more intense than anything Beethoven wrote—and for that reason they feel cooler than anything else in music; anyway, they do to me. You get the sensation listening to this music that you have staggered out of a hot, smoky, drunken, noisy saloon onto an arctic plain where you wander in amazement under high bright stars.

One afternoon I am listening to the last movement of the C-sharp minor quartet [op 131]—it has a stupendous climax, a mere sequence of modified scales in dotted rhythm in which the earth shatters, followed by a strange unraveling conclusion where the remains dissipate like smoke; and suddenly I find that I am aware of the backyard and the fall. . . . Coming out of a long daze. Quiet, grateful relief: the child waking from a nightmare to find his bedroom just as it is supposed to be, and his parents down the hall.

And as I listen to Beethoven quartets, the purpose of the 1930s stuff finally comes clear. I have a book in mind about the 1939 New York World’s Fair. Part novel, part history. The project is a decisive turnabout in my life. . . .

So Beethoven cools me down.<sup>2</sup>

Beethoven’s late quartets are the agents of Gelernter’s creative epiphany; in this, Gelernter follows unknowingly in the footsteps of Virginia Woolf, who decided

2 Ibid., pp 81–85.

on the ending of her novel *The Waves* while listening to the late quartets.<sup>3</sup> But aside from his astonishing description of the quartets in terms more commonly associated with the Modern Jazz Quartet or Miles Davis, there are some strong critical and artistic precedents for the views Gelernter expresses. Gelernter's denial of an emotional content in these quartets has a notorious precedent in the views of Eduard Hanslick. Hanslick of course denied an emotional content not only for these quartets but for all instrumental music and argued that form, not feelings or emotions, is content: "The form (as tonal structure), as opposed to the feeling (as would-be content), is precisely the real content of the music, is the music itself, while the feeling produced can be called neither content nor form, but actual effect."<sup>4</sup>

But others have identified meaning and emotion in Beethoven's late quartets. In contrast to Hanslick, several nineteenth-century composers attributed meaning to these quartets, most obviously in critical essays but also in vocal compositions; and whatever Gelernter's views, writers and filmmakers from the late twentieth century have associated the late quartets with specific images. I would like to examine some of the ways in which other artists have responded to Beethoven's late quartets, incorporating them, or echoes of them, into new creations. I will not be dealing with works like Mendelssohn's String Quartets, ops. 12 and 13, or with Bartók's Quartets because I would like to focus on works that use Beethoven's music (or derivatives of it) in contexts that make it possible for us to identify an interpretation of poetic meaning or a specific dramatic idea. Although some of the works I will discuss are musical compositions, I include films and literature here in order to broaden the possibilities for comparing the ways in which late-twentieth-century views extend nineteenth-century traditions. I will also relate artistic responses to critical commentary, because the French film director Jean-Luc Godard—in so many ways an innovator—contributes to a postmodern critical understanding of what these quartets "mean," no less than composer-critics such as Wagner and Berlioz played on contemporaneous critical views of the quartets' meaning.

From the very outset, Beethoven's late quartets have challenged and troubled their listeners and performers. For everyone like Berlioz, Mendelssohn, and Schumann who embraced them as great works by the greatest of composers, there were innumerable more who considered these compositions to be the disturbed and flawed

3. James Haule introduction to Virginia Woolf, *The Waves* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1993), p. 17.

4. Eduard Hanslick, *On the Musically Beautiful*, ed. and trans. Geoffrey Payant (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1986), p. 60.

products of a demented mind and sick body, of a deaf composer who—because he was deprived of the “compass” of his hearing—had lost his musical direction. Recent studies of how critics received these quartets have persuasively shown how dependent almost all of nineteenth-century criticism was on an awareness of Beethoven’s biographical circumstances. In particular, K. M. Knittel has argued that “the turning point for the quartets came not when critics could discuss their musical procedures, but when Wagner had effectively explained how deafness and illness could be a positive rather than negative influence”<sup>5</sup> An understanding of these works as the product of a suffering genius helped effect a reformulation of how they were accepted musically. An early view of this work as chaotic and incomprehensible began to give way to a view that has dominated much formalist criticism in the twentieth century—namely, that the quartets are a thoroughly integrated and unified musical whole. Today it is even possible to esteem them as “cool.”

Artistic interpretations of meaning can emerge in many ways. Composers can of course write an essay about a work or group of works, but nineteenth-century composers took advantage of more indirect means as well. One of these involved supplying a text to a particular composition or even just to motives derived from an earlier work. This sort of “texting” is a form of composition or arrangement that was not unusual in the nineteenth century, even if it is little recognized today. The amount of music that a composer texted could vary from a motive or a theme to an entire movement, and the treatment of the material could range from exact repetition to moderate forms of transformation. Texting is an act that proclaims “this text is appropriate for the character of this piece (or motive),” and as such, it broaches the barriers between composition and criticism. As the composer André Grétry asked in the year 1800, “Why shouldn’t [instrumental] music be supplied with words, just as one has long set words to music?”<sup>6</sup>

The texting of previously composed instrumental music asserts an association between text and music in a way that quickly leads to questions about how composers viewed their own creative processes. Although texting occasionally involved an entire movement, such instances are commonly not considered to be a form of composition. A. B. Marx, Jérôme-Joseph de Momigny, Johann Friedrich

5. Kristin M. Knittel, *From Chaos to History: The Reception of Beethoven's Late Quartets* (Ph.D. diss., Princeton University, 1992), p. 8, and “Wagner, Deafness, and the Reception of Beethoven's Late Style,” *JAMS* 51 (1998), 49–82.

6. I quote from the contemporaneous German translation of Grétry's treatise, *Grétry's Versuch über die Musik. Im Auszuge und mit kritischen und historischen Zusätzen*, trans. Karl Spazier (Leipzig: Breitkopf and Härtel, 1800), p. 187. “Warum soll man nicht die Musik eben so in Worte bringen, als man seit lange schon Worte in Musik gesetzt hat?”

Reichardt (a friend of Goethe), Grétry, and others who matched the slow movement of a sonata with a text had not composed the works they texted. Yet at a time when composers often wrote criticism and critics composed, verbal and musical processes had many opportunities to influence each other. The impulse to provide interpretative readings of musical works that began in the late eighteenth century has been linked appropriately to the contemporaneous emergence of thematic elaboration as a musically significant technique.<sup>7</sup>

In the nineteenth century, musicians worked within an aesthetic that had many opportunities for adding or subtracting texts or textual associations to compositions. Vocal works could be performed without words, as with numerous piano transcriptions of Lieder and opera, or as when Brahms and Joseph Joachim transcribed a song by Schumann and performed it in concert on violin and piano. Composers gave instrumental works poetic titles such as *Ballade*, *Lieder ohne Worte*, *Romance* (or with Kalkbrenner, *Romances sans paroles*), and even an entire *Operetta ohne Worte* by Schumann's friend Ferdinand David. Brahms, Liszt, and others published sonatas and symphonies with poetic verses that indicate an underlying vocal conception.<sup>8</sup> And among the many instances of instrumental works being published or performed with a text, Chopin's collaboration with Pauline Viardot-Garcia to perform Chopin's mazurkas with text and the texting of several of Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte* by the editor of the *Hamburger Blätter für Musik* are not unusual.<sup>9</sup> Within a year of Haydn's death, six of the slow movements from his last symphonies had been supplied with sacred and edifying texts and issued by Breitkopf and Härtel as a cantata entitled *Der Versöhnungstod*, literally, if inelegantly, "The Reconciliation-Death."<sup>10</sup>

7 Mark Evan Bonds makes this observation in *Wordless Rhetoric: Musical Form and the Metaphor of the Oration* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard UP, 1991), pp 169–70. See also my "Florestan Reading Fidelio," *Beethoven Forum* 4 (1995), 143–45.

8 See George Bozarth, "Brahms's *Lieder ohne Worte*: The 'Poetic' Andantes of the Piano Sonatas," in *Brahms Studies: Analytical and Historical Perspectives*, ed. George Bozarth (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1990), pp 348–58, and Dillon Parmer, "Brahms, Song Quotation, and Secret Programs," *ICM* 19 (1995), 161–86.

9 Bonds, *Wordless Rhetoric*, p.173. Regarding various associations of texts, programs, and narratives with instrumental music in the nineteenth century, Bonds has much of interest, see pp 169–76. On Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*, see John Michael Cooper, *Felix Mendelssohn Bartholdy and the 'Italian' Symphony: Historical, Musical, and Extramusical Perspectives* (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 1994), pp 258–59; and R. Larry Todd, "'Gerade das Lied wie es dasteht': On Text and Meaning in Mendelssohn's *Lieder ohne Worte*," in *Musical Humanism and Its Legacy: Essays in Honor of Claude V. Palisca*, ed. Nancy Kavaleff Baker, Barbara Russano Hanning (Stuyvesant, N.Y., 1992), pp 355–79.

10 This and a subsequent cantata were arranged by one J. A. Schulze, not to be confused with J. A. P. Schultz, in 1809 and 1810.

As I have argued elsewhere, a text added to an instrumental work (or even motive) could contribute to the critical tradition for a work no less than the printed word. Franz Liszt put words to the first-movement Allegro theme of Beethoven's Third Symphony in the cantata he wrote for the 1870 centenary celebration in Weimar, *Zur Sakularfeier Beethovens*.<sup>11</sup> Perhaps he never published it because Peter Cornelius had also texted the same theme in his *Beethoven-Lied*, also from 1870.<sup>12</sup> In subtler cases than this—and almost any other example fits that description—the dramatic or poetic idea associated with the instrumental work exists on a latent level. This occurs especially when the original motive was altered before being used in a later composition, as when Schubert adapted the funeral march of the *Eroica* Symphony in his song *Auf dem Strom*, written for the anniversary of Beethoven's death.

The link between a critical interpretation of a work and a new composition that derives musical material from the earlier work is evident in another composition of Beethoven, the C♯-Minor String Quartet, op.131, which immediately began to generate critical commentary and musical responses. This quartet has already been discussed by others as the inspiration for two very different vocal works. As Nicholas Marston has demonstrated, Schumann derived the harmonic plan and the closing motive for his song cycle *Dichterliebe* from op.131; and Thomas Grey—also noting a bond between criticism and composition—has detected a Wagnerian reminiscence of op.131. He considers it “possible to hear a resonance of the opening movements of the op.131 Quartet (and the ‘poetic idea’ Wagner discerned there) in the musical-dramatic conception of the beginning of Act III of *Tristan*.”<sup>13</sup> The musical similarities are supported and enhanced by the similarity between Wagner's text in *Tristan* and Wagner's published program for op.131.

However close this Wagnerian correspondence, there are still closer resonances—both musical and textual—in Berlioz. Berlioz also turned to Beethoven's op.131

11 We know of this texting through the dismissive entry his daughter wrote in her diary a month later (30 June 1870) “Beethoven-Kantate meines Vaters, leider ungenießbar durch den Text, auch ist die ganze gattung (das Thema der Eroica wird gesungen!) Unerquicklich” (Cosima Wagner, *Die Tagebücher*, ed. with comm. Martin Gregor-Dellin, Dietrich Mack, 2 vols. [Munich, Zurich: R. Piper, 1976], p.252). My earlier remarks on the link between criticism and composition are in “Florestan Reading *Fidelio*,” pp.144–45.

12 Regarding hermeneutical interpretations of the Third Symphony in the nineteenth century, see Scott Burnham, “On the Programmatic Reception of Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony,” *Beethoven Forum* 1 (1992), 1–24, and Martin Geck and Peter Schleuning, “Geschrieben auf Bonaparte” *Beethoven's “Eroica” Revolution, Reaktion, Rezeption* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1989).

13 Nicholas Marston, “Schumann's Monument to Beethoven,” *19CM* 14 (1991), 247–64, and Thomas S. Grey, *Wagner's Musical Prose* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1995), p.116.

Example 1a. Beethoven, C  
#-Minor String Quartet,  
op 131, first theme

1

Adagio ma non troppo e molto espressivo

Violino I

Violino II

Example 1b. Berlioz, *L'Enfance  
du Christ* (1854), imitative  
subject of the movement  
"L'Arrivée a Sais."

b

Allegro non troppo

Le Récitant  
Ein Erzählender  
A Narrator  
(Tenor)

De - puis trois jours, mal - gré l'a - deur ca vent, Ils che - mi  
Drei Ta - ge so in heis - sen Win - des Weh'n sei war - dern  
Now three whole days in spite of storm - ing winds, they wand - er't

Violino I

Violoncello

to create a striking allusion in part 2 of his oratorio *L'Enfance du Christ* (1854), modeling the imitative subject of the movement "L'Arrivée a Sais" on Beethoven's first theme. The correspondence extends through ten notes (ex. 1). Although the intervallic differences are substantial, Berlioz follows the contour of Beethoven's line and supports the allusion with orchestration and key: the movement is scored initially for string quartet and tenor in the ungainly—now as then for nineteenth-century French string players—key of C# minor. Later, at the end of this aria, additional ties emerge. Berlioz copies Beethoven's transition to the succeeding movement, writing a pulsing series of dynamic attacks (*sf*—diminuendo—*piano*) leading directly to a triple meter movement with a tonal center a half step lower (which Beethoven begins with an eight-and-a-half-measure pedal and Berlioz nine).

Through similarities of rhythm, instrumentation, and key, Berlioz made a private connection to a work of Beethoven that had come as a revelation nearly twenty-five years earlier. He recorded his impressions of the French premiere of op. 131 in three different places: his memoirs, a review in *Le Correspondant* soon after the performance, and a personal letter from about the same time. Berlioz put it in typically dramatic terms in the third installment of his biography of Beethoven (published in October 1829, written in August). Trying to define what sort of person was capable of understanding op. 131, Berlioz dismissed musical training as only a preliminary:

Beyond this, it is necessary for one's being to be capable of responding to that of the composer; it is necessary to have experienced the type of feelings



depicted in the music; it is necessary to know the ills described by Shakespeare:

The oppressor's wrong, the proud man's contumely,  
The pangs of despis'd love, the law's delay,  
The insolence of office, and the spurns  
That patient merit of the unworthy takes.<sup>14</sup>

Berlioz evidently had already made his own connection between Beethoven's personal plight and the expressive content of his music.

In the letter he wrote shortly after the premiere, Berlioz described the impact it had made on the few who could grasp what they had heard: "There were nearly three hundred there, and precisely six of us half dead with emotion. . . . He [Beethoven] soared into regions where one breathes with difficulty." The images of this description are literally those of the text Berlioz set, which describes the physically arduous journey of Mary and Joseph fleeing through the desert into the city of Saïs, of three days without water, of burning sand, the death of their mule, and their own arrival "out of breath, near death" (*haletants, presque mourants*).<sup>15</sup> Berlioz derived from Beethoven's op. 131 the appropriate musical texture and from his own reaction to that quartet the symbolic meaning.

In the twentieth century, texting has fallen into disrepute, at least among consumers of what has been called "high culture." Popular songwriters of the 1930s and 1940s struck commercial gold—and critical scorn—by writing lyrics to the melodies of Chopin, Tchaikovsky, and Rachmaninov. The most substantial scholarly exercise in texting attracted an even greater degree of derision. In 1936 Arnold Schering attempted with his book *Beethoven und die Dichtung* (Beethoven and Poetry) to prove that Beethoven's symphonies and sonatas were essentially dramatic works from which poetic texts had been removed. He then attempted to reunite specific texts of Goethe, Schiller, and others with specific compositions, by matching individual notes and syllables. In this way the Third Symphony was

14. Berlioz, *Revue musicale* (6 October 1829), 252.

15. The translation is from David Cairns, *Berlioz: The Making of an Artist* (London: André Deutsch, 1959), p. 288. Berlioz elaborates on the physicality of his response in *Le Correspondant*, 6 October 1829, p. 251: "Peu à peu je sentis un poids affreux opprimer ma poitrine comme un horrible cauchemar, je sentis mes cheveux se hérissier, mes dents se serrer avec force, tous mes muscles se contracter et enfin à l'apparition d'une phrase du final, rendue avec la dernière violence par l'archet énergique de Baillot, des larmes froides, des larmes de l'angoisse et de la terreur, se firent péniblement jour à travers mes paupières et vinrent mettre le comble à cette cruelle émotion."

“about” *The Iliad* and the Sixth about *The Seasons* by George Thomson. Although Schering attempted to join literary and musical works that had been written over a century earlier, the principle he espoused—little did he know—had survived into his own generation with Alban Berg’s *Lyric Suite*. Berg’s secret program surfaced only because he took the trouble to copy out an autograph score with his private texts underlaid.<sup>16</sup>

The unstable, fluid mixture of criticism and composition evident in texting is not an artistic aberration; it is at the center of Romantic creativity. While criticism is often seen to be at the opposite end of the creative spectrum from composition, the two are no less related than a series of oppositions that Friedrich Schlegel articulated in his 1798 definition of Romanticism. “Romantic poetry is a progressive, universal poetry. Its aim isn’t merely to reunite all the separate species of poetry and put poetry in touch with philosophy and rhetoric. It tries to and should mix and fuse poetry and prose, inspiration and criticism, the poetry of art and the poetry of nature.”<sup>17</sup> Romantic composition and Romantic criticism were linked by metaphor. The use of allusion evident in Berlioz’s “L’Arrivée a Saïs” creates a metaphorical relationship between it and his reading of Beethoven’s Quartet, op.131, as did Wagner in composing the beginning of act III of *Tristan* to correspond both musically and dramatically to his interpretation of op.131. The metaphorical language with which critics described the meaning they perceived in Beethoven and others corresponded to the metaphorical level of meaning that composers created by means of allusion. Critic and composer were often one, especially in the persons of Berlioz, Schumann, and Wagner.

The texting of the canonical repertoire has not completely disappeared. One occasionally encounters such examples as Billy Joel texting the slow movement of Beethoven’s “Pathétique” Sonata or the rock singer Sting borrowing a theme from Prokofiev’s *Lieutenant Kigé Suite* for his song *The Russians*. But a far more vital and creative use of Beethoven and other composers exists today in film. The processes by which a composer or arranger in the nineteenth century would decide that a particular text and a particular composition suited each other are not vastly different from those by which a director or music director in a film decides to accompany a particular scene or moment with a previously composed work. And in many cases

16. George Perle, “The Secret Program of the Lyric Suite,” *Alban Berg Newsletter* 5 (1977), 4–12, and *Encrypted Messages in Alban Berg’s Music*, ed. Siglind Bruhn (New York: Garland, 1998).

17. Published as fragment no. 116 in his magazine *Athenaeum*, see Friedrich Schlegel’s *Luonde and The Fragments*, trans. Peter Firchow (Minneapolis, U. Minnesota P., 1971), p. 175.

the match of music to drama or mood contributes to the critical tradition no less than in the nineteenth-century examples of texting discussed earlier.

There is no greater example of this than the related use of the Ninth Symphony in two very different movies: Stanley Kubrick's *Clockwork Orange* and the more recent action film *Die Hard* with Bruce Willis.<sup>18</sup> In 1971 Kubrick, working in a world of global violence that included Vietnam, urban race riots, and the threat of nuclear annihilation, linked ultra-violence and gang rape to the "Ode to Joy" and "Singin' in the Rain"; and *Die Hard*, glamorizing more contemporary acts of violence, likewise supports the machinations of the happy band of German terrorists with the "Ode to Joy" and various transformations of "Singin' in the Rain." This ironic use of Beethoven's hymn to brotherhood to celebrate the camaraderie of criminals and their violent bonds gives artistic voice to a viewpoint expressed more bluntly by Thomas Mann and Herbert Marcuse. Already in 1947 Mann, speaking through his fictional composer Adrian Leverkühn, had repudiated the Ode to Joy in *Doctor Faustus*.

And as I turned around he said, "I have discovered that it ought not to be."

"What ought not to be, Adrian?"

"The good and the noble," he replied, "what people call human, even though it is good and noble. What people have fought for, have stormed citadels for, and what people filled to overflowing have announced with jubilation—it ought not to be. It will be taken back. I shall take it back."

"I don't quite understand, my dear fellow. What do you want to take back?"

"The Ninth Symphony," he replied. And then came nothing more, even though I waited.<sup>19</sup>

And two decades later, in the aftermath of urban race riots and at the height of the American war in Vietnam, Marcuse echoed Mann, describing a culture that was not worthy of the Ninth

Today's rebels against the established culture also rebel against the beautiful in this culture. . . . Their libertarian aspirations appear as the negation of the traditional culture, as a methodical desublimation. . . . The black music,

18 The musical relationship of these two films is discussed in Robynn J. Stilwell, "'I Just Put a Drone under Him . . .': Collage and Subversion in the Score of 'Die Hard,'" *MI* 78 (1997), 551–80.

19 Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus*, trans. John E. Woods (New York: Knopf, 1997), p. 501.

invading the white culture, is the terrifying realization of "O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!"—the refusal now hits the chorus which sings the Ode to Joy, the song which is invalidated by the culture that sings it.<sup>20</sup>

Expressions such as these are all part of a post-World War culture that produced numerous artistic inversions of earlier narratives; I think also of the Brazilian classic film from 1958, *Black Orpheus*, in which Orpheus decides hell is preferable to the world, or of Ray Bradbury's vision of a malicious society in which children turn on their parents, or of Theodor W. Adorno's terrifyingly bleak assertion: "To write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric."<sup>21</sup>

But the comments of Mann and Marcuse and the association of Beethoven and violence that has emerged in recent feminist criticism of the Ninth Symphony are not so much new as they are the latest iteration of a long-standing trope of Beethoven reception. Literature in the nineteenth century and film in the twentieth have frequently turned to Beethoven when the context suggests violence, or sexual aggression, as when Tolstoy finds in Beethoven the appropriate degree of illicit passion to motivate his tale of murderous jealousy in his short story *The Kreutzer Sonata*. One of the most sophisticated associations of Beethoven with violence in films—and certainly the easiest to miss—that I have encountered is one that is never even heard. In Hitchcock's *Psycho* from 1960, a scene in Norman Bates's room helps establish his tormented character by surveying the contents of his small, dark room. After surveying his unsettling collection of childhood dolls and toys, the camera allows us to focus for a fleeting second on his record player and on the record on the turntable, Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony. Whether this was Hitchcock's inspiration (as I suspect) or that of his music director Bernard Hermann, it is a symbol of power and heroism made painfully incongruous by its presence in the dilapidated, sinister Victorian house on the hill above the Bates Motel.

In the twentieth century, Beethoven's music has had an association with violence in film that is virtually an unbroken tradition, beginning in the days when music first began to serve as accompaniment to film. A "how-to" manual for film accompanists published in 1920 includes a repertoire list grouped into several common dramatic situations. Beethoven's music is absent from numerous works recommended for nature, love themes, and "elegiac moods", but for scenes depicting tragedy (both "impending" and "aftermath"), death, and storms, Beethoven

20 Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), pp.46-47

21. Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. S. and S. Weber (London: Neville Spearman, 1967), p. 34

is one of only three suggested composers.<sup>22</sup> These associations recur in the large collection of music published by G. Schirmer in 1924, *Motion Picture Moods for Pianists and Organists*, which provides a detailed record of how classical music first served the dramatic needs of film.<sup>23</sup> It assembled 288 selections according to fifty-two moods and situations, including obvious ones like “Funeral,” “Humorous,” and “Passion,” but also music for more specific needs such as “Fire-fighting,” “Monotony,” and “Orgies.” The editor Erno Rapée chose various selections of Beethoven piano sonatas as appropriate for “Battles,” “Dances,” and “Sadness,” and the *Coriolanus* Overture for “Sinister,” by which he designated “situations like the presence of the captured enemy, demolishing of a hostile aeroplane or battleship, or for picturing anything unsympathetic.”<sup>24</sup> The enduring influence of the musical accompaniments prescribed for silent movies on the musical tastes of film composers in the first decades of sound films is evident in the 1920 association of Beethoven’s “Pathétique” Sonata with “impending tragedy.” This is the precise usage of this sonata in esteemed films such as George Cukor’s *Gaslight* (1944), in which Ingrid Bergman’s cruel and murderous husband tortures her to the brink of insanity, and Robert Siodmak’s *Spiral Staircase* (1946), the small-town tale of a man with a compulsion to kill deformed girls.<sup>25</sup>

Where then do Beethoven’s late quartets fit into this tradition? Tellingly, none of Rapée’s examples makes use of Beethoven’s late string quartets, or indeed of his quartets from any period. That is in part because traditionally one function of film music has been *not* to call attention to itself; as a result, many types of absolute music were avoided, unless Chopin was needed to suggest an aristocratic environment in films from the 1940s to the present day, or for the same purpose in recent years, Boccherini’s Quintet in C Major.<sup>26</sup> As one film observer noted: “We

22. Edith Lang and George West, *Musical Accompaniment of Moving Pictures: A Practical Manual for Pianists and Organists and an Exposition of the Principles Underlying the Musical Interpretation of Moving Pictures* (Boston: Boston Music Co., 1920), p. 30.

23. Erno Rapée, *Motion Picture Moods for Pianists and Organists* (New York: G. Schirmer, 1924).

24. *Ibid.*, p. [iii]. On the association of Beethoven with sinister moments in silent film accompaniments, see Roy M. Prendergast, *A Neglected Art: A Critical Study of Music in Films* (New York: New York UP, 1977), p. 10.

25. Lang and West, *Musical Accompaniment of Moving Pictures*, p. 30.

26. Only rarely does Boccherini’s Quintet occur in period movies, as in *Princess Caraboo*, where it is used in a garden party that takes place in 1817. More typical are *Private Benjamin* (1980) and *The Hudsoner Proxy* (1994). In the latter, as a sign of how success has gone to Norville Barnes’s head, a string quintet in his presidential office plays Boccherini’s Quintet while Barnes gets a massage and smokes a large, bulbous cigar.

would not underline a dramatic film with a Beethoven Symphony because, no matter how good the film, the audience might end up listening to Beethoven."<sup>27</sup> Films such as Roman Polanski's *Death and the Maiden*, which makes integral use of Schubert's String Quartet, or *Out of Africa*, which features Mozart, have become increasingly rare.

Yet even the late quartets have a presence in film and literature from the latter half of our century, occasionally to contribute to an aura of violence. The Quartet that seems to have attracted the most attention is that in F Major, op. 135, which figures in two movies by the French filmmaker Jean-Luc Godard and in the novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* by the Czech writer Milan Kundera. The popularity of this quartet almost certainly stems from the presence of the fatalistic question and its answer that appear in the score at the beginning of the final movement: "Muss es sein? Es muss sein! Es muss sein!" (Must it be? It must be!) Beethoven places this question and answer under the heading: "Der schwer gefasste Entschluss." Kundera's interpretation of this phrase forms a central image in his novel:

To make the meaning of the words absolutely clear, Beethoven introduced the movement with a phrase, "Der schwer gefasste Entschluss," which is commonly translated as "the difficult resolution."

Unlike Parmenides, Beethoven apparently viewed weight as something positive. Since the German word *schwer* means both "difficult" and "heavy," Beethoven's "difficult resolution" may also be construed as a "heavy" or "weighty resolution." The weighty resolution is at one with the voice of Fate ("Es muss sein!"); necessity, weight, and value are the three concepts inextricably bound: only necessity is heavy, and only what is heavy has value.

This is a conviction born of Beethoven's music, and although we cannot ignore the possibility (or even probability) that it owes its origins more to Beethoven's commentators than to Beethoven himself, we all more or less share it: we believe that the greatness of man stems from the fact that he bears his fate as Atlas bore the heavens on his shoulders. Beethoven's hero is a lifter of metaphysical weights.<sup>28</sup>

With this interpretation of Beethoven, Kundera claims op. 135 for heaviness, a moral heaviness, the capacity to bear fate common to Eastern-block Europeans

27 Martin Williams, "Jazz at the Movies," in *Film Music: From Violins to Video*, ed. James Limbacher (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow, 1974), p. 42.

28 Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, trans. Michael Henry Heim (New York, 1984), pp. 32–33; this passage is quoted in Knittel, *From Chaos to History*, p. 270.

who know suffering at the hands of the Communists, as opposed to capitalist Westerners who lead a less exalted existence of Unbearable Lightness. Kundera lets op. 135 stand as an emblem of Czechs who had endured the Russian invasion of spring 1968 just at the moment they were on the verge of political freedom. He also deals with the often told tale of Beethoven conceiving the idea of the finale as a joke, a humorous remark on the unavoidable necessity of paying a bill, concluding, "So Beethoven turned a frivolous inspiration into a serious quartet, a joke into a metaphysical truth."<sup>29</sup>

It is no surprise that one film director who is drawn to the late quartets is as much a philosopher as director. Jean-Luc Godard has recognized in Beethoven's late quartets a musical imagery that at times accords well with contemporary critical commentary, particularly feminist readings of sexual aggression. He has twice included op. 135 in his films: first in his account of middle-class prostitution in Paris, *Deux ou trois choses que je sais d'elle* (Two or Three Things I Know About Her) from 1966, and more recently in *Prénom Carmen* (First Name Carmen) from 1984. Two related scenes from the latter film are representative and particularly powerful: the first makes use of the slow movement from op. 132, and the second the scherzo from op. 135. *Prénom Carmen* parodies Bizet's *Carmen* in a modern-day French context, with Carmen as a beautiful terrorist who seduces a policeman in the middle of robbing a bank. This romantic duo fares no better than the operatic pairing of Bizet, with a violent death awaiting Carmen at the end. Rather than drawing on Bizet's music, however, Godard turned to Beethoven's late quartets played by a young string quartet ensemble that is heard and seen rehearsing throughout the film.

In the first of the two scenes, Carmen and Joseph finally consummate their passion, although the actual moment of lovemaking is given over to shots of the quartet rehearsing. During this rehearsal of the *Heiliger Dankgesang*, one member of the quartet recites quotations about the power of fate in a way that seems purposefully reminiscent of the "Es muss sein" question and answer in op. 135. Claire concludes, "What has been determined must be. So be it." The choice of this particular slow movement is highly ironic, because, far from celebrating a recovery, this moment marks the beginning of the degenerative slide Carmen and Joseph embark on, the music of thanks to the divinity accompanies an interaction built far more on power and violence than on love. As Joseph wryly observes at the end of this scene ("Now I know why prison is called 'The Hole'"), Carmen's sexual embrace is a passion

29 Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness*, p. 196; Knittel, *From Chaos to History*, p. 274

that imprisons rather than a love that liberates.<sup>30</sup> Godard presumably would have appreciated Aldous Huxley's use of this movement to accompany a suicide in *Point Counter Point*.

This scene is in several ways paired with that which depicts Joseph's final futile attempt to have sex with Carmen. The crude sexuality of the scene is accompanied by the middle section of the scherzo of op. 135, the trio with the incessant ostinato in the lower three instruments. Godard uses this motoric, obsessive music to depict Joseph's futile attempt to arouse himself; having accosted and trapped an unwilling Carmen in the shower, Joseph tries unsuccessfully to bring himself to an erection, each stroke of his hand on his uncooperative penis accompanied by an iteration of the ostinato. (But it was the first movement of op. 135 that A. B. Marx described as "the unwilling dragging along of the burden of a wilted life"<sup>31</sup>) This scene leads to the dénouement, a conclusion fittingly accompanied by music from op. 135. What must be—the violent fated death—must be. Here and elsewhere, Godard seems fundamentally indebted to the story of Beethoven deriving the op. 135 finale from a joke. He treats the inevitability of Carmen's murder humorously; indeed, the surrealism of much of the violence throughout *Prénom Carmen* is intentionally comical.

The political and national backgrounds of Godard and the writers I have discussed doubtless influence the impulses to find meaning in Beethoven's music (as well as the nature of that meaning). From the political Left, Beethoven is either an apt expression of chaos or of beauty recognized in the real world; from the Right, he is a means out of chaos into order. Thus David Gelernter claims the late quartets for coolness, for the agent that brings order to a chaotic world, for a beauty that is beautiful precisely because it transcends the real world. This view contrasts starkly with Godard's vision, which finds in ops 131, 132, and 135 suitable vehicles for his surreal tale of terrorist robbery and love, for desperation, for the unraveling of a desired outcome that is nevertheless paradoxically the fulfillment of a destiny. The beauty Godard sees derives in part from his ability to find in Beethoven an expression of real-world events. Marcuse similarly finds beauty in the music of late Beethoven because it "expresses reality and joy in reality."<sup>32</sup> The views from

30 For a feminist analysis of *Prénom Carmen*, see Laura Mulvey, "The Hole and the Zero: The Janus Face of the Femme in Godard," in *Jean-Luc Godard: Son + Image, 1974-1991*, ed. Raymond Bellour with Mary Lea Bandy (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1992), pp. 75-88.

31 A. B. Marx's review of op. 135 appeared in the *Beilmer allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 6 (1829), 169-70. I quote from Knittel, *From Chaos to History*, p. 100.

32 Herbert Marcuse, *Negations: Essays in Critical History*, trans. Jeremy J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon Press, 1968), p. 131.



both ends of the political spectrum thus give new life to long-standing critical reactions to Beethoven's late quartets: chaos or order are in the ears and souls of the beholders.

Somewhere in the middle is Kundera, who imposes a spiritual heaviness on op. 135 that befits his Cold War, anti-Communist political agenda. Like the other Europeans I have discussed, Kundera recognizes meaning in the quartets. Kundera and Godard (and Kubrick for the Ninth) incorporate the musical meaning, or their understanding of it, into the fabric of the story. Such meanings are nussed by many American audiences, thus the easy transformation of Beethoven into a symbol of violence and little more; and Gelernter, the man who complains that our culture has taken religion out of religion, takes emotions out of music and hears the late quartets as the epitome of coolness, ordered but emotionally blank. But this division between American and European sensibilities is too simple even if it expresses the cultural vulnerability of Beethoven.

Adorno has offered the most cogent explanation of this vulnerability (which he sees in its historical dimension) and of how it is that Beethoven can speak to opposing ends of political and cultural spectrums, how the music can contain the seeds of contradictory readings:

It is by the anti-ideological resolution of conflicts, by a cognitive behavior without an inkling of the object of its cognition, that great music takes a stand in social struggles: by enlightenment, not by aligning itself, as one likes to call that, with an ideology. The very content of its manifest ideological positions is historically vulnerable; Beethoven's pathos of humanity, meant critically on the spot, can be debased into a ritual celebration of the status quo.<sup>33</sup>

The ironic readings of Beethoven evident in films of the past generation draw power from Beethoven's "pathos of humanity" even as they rescue the music from mere celebrations of the status quo.

Whatever it is that Beethoven's quartets are perceived to be about, or to communicate, the reason they continue to generate artistic responses is because audiences continue to derive joy, passion, and insight from the quartets well beyond the power of words to convey or poetic images to reconstruct. At the moment Gelernter rediscovers the late quartets, there is something particularly Beethovenian about his personal situation: physical isolation, convalescence, personal struggle. He describes days that "have a slow oscillating rhythm imposed by drugs and pain, like

33. Theodor W. Adorno, *Introduction to the Sociology of Music*, trans. F. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury, 1976), p. 69.

a buoy's rise and fall in a rolling sea. . . . If I am saddest when I contemplate the things I can't do with my boys, and my old paintings, I am bitterest when I struggle to type."<sup>34</sup> If one believes with Wagner and J. W. N. Sullivan that Beethoven's suffering helped create the beauties of the late quartets, then it is fair to conclude that Gelernter's own bitter experiences cannot be overlooked in assessing his way of hearing the quartets. It is nevertheless ironic that of all those discussed, Gelernter, who has suffered greatly from violence, is the one to offer an interpretation that excludes violence.

My principal aim has been to identify the role that movies have in fostering a metaphorical way of hearing related to that which flourished in the nineteenth century. Indeed film, with its operalike dependence on music to convey, create, or comment on aspects of the drama, is the most active heir to a metaphorical mode of expression and hearing that once linked composition and criticism. Although philosophical discussions of musical meaning and descriptive analyses have not disappeared, critics and composers in the twentieth century have by and large eschewed image-full modes of description in favor of formalist analysis of one sort or another; and composers have contributed to the unpopularity of metaphoric description, either by their complicitous silence about meanings that are pejoratively described as "nonmusical" or "extramusical," or by limiting their own discussions of their works to technical aspects of structure. Whether for Berlioz and Wagner or Kubrick and Godard, artistic reuse of canonical works takes part in defining the reception of those works, no less than more obvious forms of criticism.

34. Gelernter, *Drawing Life*, pp.81–82