

OPEN FORUM

On the String Quartet, Op.95

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I am pleased to know that my date of 1810 for the op.95 autograph sits well with William Drabkin. As for his skepticism about Beethoven's claim, which appeared in a letter of May 1813 to Zmeskall, the Quartet's dedicatee, that the composer had "forgotten to have [the autograph] copied" for him, even though the music had been completed a few years earlier, I should clarify that there is, again, reason to take the composer at his word. In that letter, Beethoven had asked Zmeskall to have a copy of the score made at his expense, and the manuscript now cataloged as Bk 5/17 in the Beethoven-Archiv is most likely that copy, despite the fact that the manuscript is not in the hand of a hired copyist (as one would expect) but Zmeskall himself (see Hans Schmidt, "Die Beethovenhandschriften des Beethovenhauses in Bonn," BJ 7 [1971], item 725 on pp.724–25). I have examined Bk 5/17 firsthand. The name "F RITSCHHEL" (not "F RITSCHER" as given by Schmidt) and the other features of the watermark indicate a date of no earlier than 1811 for the paper (see Georg Eineder, *The Ancient Paper-Mills of the Former Austro-Hungarian Empire and Their Watermarks* [Hilversum: Paper Publications Society, 1960], p. 130), two years before Beethoven's letter to Zmeskall. Indeed, there is evidence to suggest that Zmeskall's score was probably copied straight from the composer's autograph. The question is: if Bk 5/17 was made at Beethoven's request, why did Zmeskall write out the score himself and not hire a copyist to perform the task? Did he do so because he wanted a tangible personal connection with the music from a dear friend who was also Europe's most celebrated composer, or because he could not find a copyist? Or was there another reason that is now lost to us?

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Drabkin also wondered why the publication of the Quartet, which took place in September 1816, was delayed for so long (about six years). The delay seems to have been partly a consequence of the protracted premiere of the work, which, according to Schindler, took place only in May 1814, well over three years after the work's completion (we need not always mistrust Schindler in what he says, particularly when there is no evidence to contradict him). That delay in turn may be explained by Beethoven's palpable unease over how the general public would receive the work—an unease that he indicated to George Smart in his letter of c. 7 October 1816 when he offered the work for publication for the first time: “NB. The Quartet is written for a small circle of connoisseurs and is never to be performed in public.” This highly unusual cautionary note to Smart is well known to scholars; but the composer's underscoring of the depth of his concern over the matter in that same letter, by offering to compose other quartets for Smart as a way of appeasing or compensating him vis-à-vis op.95, is seldom mentioned: “Should you wish for some Quartetts for public performance, I would compose them to this purpose occasionally” (Brandenburg, no. 983, III, 306). The irony, of course, was that neither Smart nor Beethoven would have had any say over where and for whom op.95 should be performed once it was published and sold.

Why did Beethoven not want op.95 to be more widely known, a personal stance that must have been responsible to some degree for the multiple delays he imposed upon the work—the delays in having a copy of the score made for its dedicatee, having it performed in public, and having it published, not to mention that extraordinary cautionary note to Smart? Composed without a commission, op.95 is, in Kerman's trenchant description, “not a pretty piece, but it is terribly strong—and perhaps rather terrible.” Beethoven might have felt that its highly abrupt, laconic, and severe character would have befuddled, if not displeased and alienated, an ordinary listener. “Quartetto serio” was how he described the work's character, in an unusual instance of supplying a descriptive title for one of his works.

With regard to my calling D major the submediant of F minor, Drabkin was of course right to point out the error. Regrettably, I did not call it “the sharpened submediant major.”