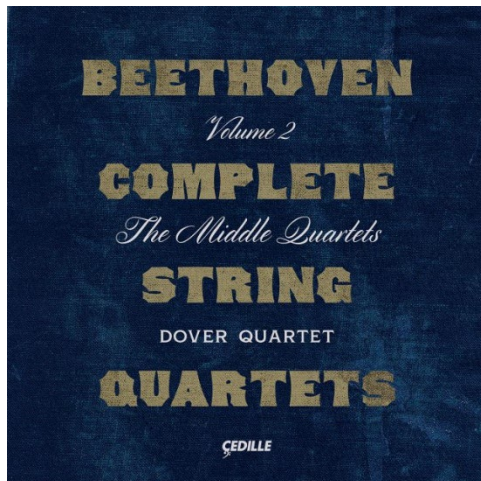


Fanfare Magazine

Review: Beethoven Complete String Quartets, Volume 2 — The Middle Quartets

Jerry Dubins | January 2022



Consider this review a prelude and fugue. As prelude, I wish to make some observations about how objectivity vs. subjectivity affects our reactions to and judgments of musical performances. As fugue, I follow a tortured path to arrive at my conclusion that these are the most profoundly penetrating performances of Beethoven's middle string quartets in the annals of recorded history, and I don't need to have heard them all to say that.

I've been following with interest the point-counterpoint articles authored by Raymond Tuttle and Steven Kruger in prior editions of the magazine, for they raise some of the very issues I wish to elaborate on. Their thoughts and insights have inspired me. Equally intriguing to me was a question Raymond posed in a Critics' Corner entry in 45:1. He asked, "Do our subjective reactions to a piece of music or to a recording mean anything at all?"

I would pose the inverse to that question by asking, "Do our objective reactions to a piece of music or to a recording mean anything at all?" After listening to, learning about, and playing music all my life, not to mention reviewing for Fanfare for a good number of years, I'm leaning in the direction of saying that it's the objective that's meaningless, while the subjective is everything. We are a meaning-seeking species, yet the meaning we seek in music is not to be found in tempo or timing. The meaning is in the subjective, in the heartache and the ecstasy we experience, a heartache and ecstasy so palpable it can be unbearable. But there's the rub. Ironically, tragically really, it's the subjective—those very personal feelings—that we're not able to communicate in any meaningful way. Or, perish the thought, perhaps music really is without meaning at all, which could be the answer to Kruger's speculation as to why there are no Requiems written by cats. Our pets may know something we don't. Why waste precious time in meaningless pursuits when we could be chasing a laser pointer up and down the hall?

Take our reviews. We spend chapter and verse picking apart performances based on objective details of tempo and timings, of technique and tone, of repeats observed or not, of dynamics and intonation, and whether a fermata is held too long or not long enough. Yet, in the end, no matter how convincing an argument we think we've made in favor of or against the performance at hand, someone will disagree with our conclusions. And that individual—granting him or her a rational mind—will almost surely base his or her point of contention on a reasonable and logical refutation of what the reviewer has concluded.

To do otherwise would be to argue that $2 + 2$ doesn't equal 4, because we're dealing here with objective facts, not subjective feelings. If the performer does or doesn't observe a repeat, that is an objective fact. The listener may like or not like that the performer has or hasn't taken the repeat—that falls within the

realm of the subjective—but the listener cannot argue that it is what it isn't or that it isn't what it is, unless of course, he or she is a follower of QAnon or a member of the Flat Earth Society, the two not being mutually exclusive.

Now, I take it as an article of faith that all serious music lovers are intelligent and sentient human beings. Therefore, I've wracked my brain trying to understand how a personal acquaintance of mine can listen to an originally made electrical recording of a Beethoven piano sonata, performed by a once famous, now long dead, artist, and claim to hear the most exquisite details and subtleties of the performance and be profoundly moved by it, when the recording sounds like it was made in a broom closet. Not even the magic of modern technology can restore the highs and lows, eliminate the distortion, and set the wrong notes right.

So, what is one to conclude? That the listener is hearing-impaired, overcome by nostalgia for a bygone era, or just a sentimental old fool? Or, none of the above? This is where subjectivity enters into the discussion. As I take myself and all serious music lovers to be intelligent and sentient human beings, I believe that we all have subjective, unshakable convictions as to how pieces of music we know well and love ought to go. On an even deeper level—so deep within our psyches and souls that we can't really find words for it—we experience an intuitive sense of what the music means and what its composer is trying to communicate to us. It's a bit like attending a séance, where we believe we hear the composer speak to us from the beyond.

The thing about this, though, is that not everyone who listens to the voice from the beyond receives the same message, for in every case, the message is very personal and made to order for the individual receiving it. It is not transferrable from one person to another. A given piece of music speaks to each of us, stirs us, resonates within us, and reveals its truths to us on different levels and in different ways. We hear what we want to hear and what we believe the music means.

On this point, I believe John Donne was wrong when he wrote *No man is an Island*. We are all islands, for these feelings are unique to each of us. They cannot be put into words or conveyed precisely by one individual to another. Ultimately, in the words of Hunter S. Thompson, we are all on this journey alone: "We are born alone, die alone, and we shall all someday look back on our lives and see that, in spite of our company, we were alone the whole way."

I am able to tell you in a review how an ensemble plays a particular Beethoven quartet. I can describe the objective aspects of the performance—the tempos and timings, the tonal balance and sound that the players project, their intonation, dynamics, observance of repeats, and so on—but I cannot truly communicate to you my subjective reactions—how the performance makes me feel, the emotional chords it strikes in me, the ways in which it moves me to tears or to smile, the states of rapture and regret and the mystery and awe of otherworldliness I experience. Words are inadequate to convey to you what I believe the music means, what its message is, what the composer is telling me about himself, his emotions, and his worldview, because those things are filtered through my own emotions and worldview; they're what I choose and want to believe.

Ask yourselves this: If objective analysis of a performance concludes that the reading of a work achieves the ideal, then why would you have need for 20 versions of the same work and still want more? Is acquisition for its own sake a way of fending off the Grim Reaper?

A review may tell you, objectively, as many do, that this or that recording of a given work represents the ideal, the perfect, the best the reviewer has ever heard and can ever hope to hear. But “ideal,” “best,” and “perfect” are superlatives. The performance cannot be bettered. Objectively, where technique and execution are concerned, perfection has been achieved. We’ve all experienced it in any number of recent recordings. String playing, in particular, has reached a zenith it may well be humanly impossible to exceed.

The objective analysis, however, cannot tell you the one thing you want to know because the reviewer cannot communicate subjectively what it is about the performance that moves him to the core of his being; and even if he could, you cannot experience it in the same way, for the experience is personal and unique to the individual. And thus, I would submit to you that the very thing it’s impossible for me to elucidate—my subjective response to a piece of music and its performance—is the only thing in the end that really matters; for what we seek in each new recording of the same work is the inexpressible, the ineffable, the revelation; and in that quest, we will go on purchasing new versions of it over and over again.

Reviewing the Dover Quartet’s set of Beethoven’s op. 18 string quartets in 44:3, I mentioned that I had seen and heard the ensemble live two or three years earlier at a Chamber Music Northwest concert in Portland, Oregon. It was the first time I’d heard this relatively new-to-the scene ensemble, and at its concert that night, the Dover Quartet performed all three of Beethoven’s op. 59, “Razumovsky” Quartets. I was electrified. Never had I heard playing like that. And it wasn’t just the objective aspects of executional skill that left me limp in my seat—the hair-trigger reactions of the players to their entrances and dynamic markings, their pitch-perfect intonation, their dexterity of fingering and bowing, and their ability to listen to each other, anticipate each other’s moves, and know exactly when and how to respond.

In this second installment of the Dover’s Beethoven cycle, we have here the “Razumovsky” Quartets in new recordings (not taken from the CMNW concert), plus the two additional quartets, the “Harp,” op. 74, and the “Serioso,” op. 95, that are usually (though not always) compartmentalized under the heading of Beethoven’s “middle quartets.” The “Serioso,” in particular, has always struck me as problematic in that regard, but I’m not of a mind to dive once again into the deep well of where Beethoven’s string quartets come from. I’ve done that before in previous reviews.

I am prepared, however, to state objectively, and unequivocally, that the Dover Quartet is now the preeminent string quartet ensemble on the world stage. Full stop. Subjectively, and unequivocally, I am also prepared to state that the Dover’s players understand this music as I understand it and wish it to be. That’s the subjective, and that makes their readings, realizations, interpretations, or whatever one calls them, speak to me in ways and of things I feel and know to be true at the core of my being, things I can express only in the clumsiest and most inadequate of analogies.

The objective cannot be argued. The Dover Quartet in its technical command and executional exactitude is perfect. But as surely as I write this, someone—likely a colleague submitting a parallel review—will find cause for a cooler reception. What shall I say? “You don’t know this music the way I do.” That may

sound condescending, contemptuous even, of another's opinion, but the most heated quarrels are over just such subjective judgments. We tend not to become inflamed over objective quibbles: You say that pianissimo wasn't soft enough; I say, if it were any softer it would take a bat to hear it. You shake your head and tell me I'm going deaf. And then we both agree to disagree. The real wars are fought over the subjective, for it is only within the subjective that we find meaning.

To say, "You don't know this music the way I do," is not really condescending or contemptuous at all, if you take it to mean "the way in which I know this music is different from the way in which you know it." As Kruger correctly observes in his article in 45:1, "Listeners brought up playing instruments and studying scores from the inside will probably hear differently...." As a violinist who has played Beethoven's quartets (or at least tried to), I am bound to hear them from a different perspective than the listener who hasn't studied and played them (or at least tried to).

This is the great mystery of music. It's the only art form, indeed the only means of human communication we know of, that enters the ears and instantly bypasses the part of the brain that's responsible for the cognitive functions of speech recognition and reasoning. Music is at once more primitive and more powerful, for it goes immediately to the part of the "lizard brain," if you will (the limbic system), that's responsible for instinctive actions and emotional reactions. This is why music is not cognate to spoken language; it cannot be translated into words. And yet, in every issue of *Fanfare*, we try, vainly, to make those connections.

All music, including so-called "program" music, is fundamentally abstract. Would we know when we heard it for the first time what any tone poem was about if the music appreciation teacher or program note author wasn't eager to spoon-feed it to us? Would we know that Strauss's "Dance of the Seven Veils" was a striptease? Only through the power of associative imagining do we form the mental picture. Neither Salome's veils nor the Apprentice's pails of water is spelled out by the letters of the musical notes: "Listen, there's a slithering downward glissando. That's Salome's veil slipping seductively to the floor."

The more one really thinks about it, the more absurd the idea becomes. Music is not a language in the definitional sense of the term. It's not like translating French into English, both of which are actual languages spoken by human beings, albeit of different cultures. Languages have dictionaries made up of words. Music has scales made up of vibrating tones. There is no connection between them in the ways they communicate to us. They exist in different space-time continuums. Attempting to describe the essence of music through the medium of words is the ultimate Tower of Babel.

Kruger is right to wonder why music exists at all. Visitors to Earth from another planet might well marvel at how and why the human race ever came up with such a concept to begin with. What was it for? Did early cave dwellers, out on the hunt, lullaby the animals they were about to spear? It's no wonder we can't explain how and why we react subjectively to a piece of music the way we do; we can't even explain why it exists in the first place or what meaning it might have for us. Thus, we fall back on the objective in our reviews to substitute for the subjective, hoping the reader will glean the meaning of the music as it's perceived by the reviewer.

I said at the very outset that these are the most profoundly penetrating performances of Beethoven's middle string quartets in the annals of recorded history, and I don't need to have heard them all to say that. I can say that, not just because the Dover Quartet's technique and execution are perfect, which

they are—others are too—but because the vision they project of these works is the vision—emotionally, philosophically, spiritually, and in terms of world outlook and otherworldliness—that I believe Beethoven wished to reveal to us about himself and his understanding of Man’s place in the Universe. Often testy, even rancorous, in his relationships, and tempestuous in his music, in the end, he came to accept his fate and to understand his place in the cosmos.

I know this in the depths of my being when I hear this music and listen to these performances of it. But unlike a surgeon who might give you a new heart, I cannot transplant into you what I experience by describing the way in which the players execute a crescendo, make subtle changes in bow pressure, or add a portamento. The mechanics of musical notation are quite basic; they don’t provide for calibrations on a nanoscopic level.

A crescendo, for example, may span several bars, the implication being that the volume is meant to increase steadily but gradually. There is no way, however, for the notation to indicate to the players the exact volume level that should be attained at each bar. Thus, all players will grow louder over the length of the crescendo, but no two players will be at the same loudness level in each bar. And yet, something like that can make a difference in how those bars of crescendo affect our emotional response to the performance. None is right or wrong, for there is no way to make that determination objectively, given the limitations of musical notation. So, we can only try to describe the effect it has on us subjectively.

J. W. N. Sullivan, author of *Beethoven, His Spiritual Development*, described the haunting Andante of the Quartet in C Major, op. 59/3, as follows: “It is as if some racial memory had stirred in him, referring to some forgotten and alien despair. There is here a remote and frozen anguish, wailing over some implacable destiny. This is hardly human suffering; it is more like a memory from some ancient and starless night of the soul.” A description that could hardly be more subjective; and yet, it tells us far more about the music—and about Beethoven by extension—than could any objective account of how the long the cellist’s pizzicatos linger after they’re plucked.

What Sullivan misses is the moment in mm. 20–24, where the primeval wailing is interrupted by a gentle rocking figure that takes us in its arms, reassures us, and comforts us. We can know from how the movement ends that this musical gesture was pregnant with meaning for Beethoven; he tells us so. As expected, we hear it again at the corresponding point in the recapitulation—mm. 176–180, at which point, formally, the movement could have concluded. But suddenly, Beethoven wrenches us into a final tortured cry that passes chromatically through remote key regions, and to what purpose? So, he can return one last time to repeat and extend that rocking figure.

Beethoven is perhaps unique in all of music history in that his music is often implicit rather than explicit. He gestures and suggests, sometimes leaving the conclusion of a phrase or idea up in the air, inviting the listener to complete it in his or her imagination. This makes the music extremely powerful, for it is highly susceptible to subjective and personal interpretations. Is it Professor Plum with the wrench in the bedroom, or Miss Scarlet with the candlestick in the dining room? In the popular who-did-it board game, there’s always an objective answer at the end. In Beethoven, not necessarily. The music means whatever it means, subjectively, to you and to you and to you.

I can think of no other composer in music history who dared to bare his soul and make himself vulnerable in the way Beethoven did. I would like to believe he did so to try to reach across the void and

make that human connection we all do, to tell us who he was and why he was here, in so doing, maybe, just maybe, to tell us that we're not alone after all.

Let me end this very lengthy review—if that's what it is—by quoting a brief passage from the Prologue to Bertrand Russell's *Autobiography*, for he says something in this paragraph that I think is very illuminating. "I have sought love, first, because it brings ecstasy—ecstasy so great that I would often have sacrificed all the rest of life for a few hours of this joy. I have sought it, next, because it relieves loneliness—that terrible loneliness in which one shivering consciousness looks over the rim of the world into the cold unfathomable lifeless abyss. I have sought it finally, because in the union of love I have seen, in a mystic miniature, the prefiguring vision of the heaven that saints and poets have imagined."

Russell's allusion to "saints and poets" especially caught my attention. Sullivan, in his book, is saying something quite similar. He maintains that the realms of science and art each reveals to us different dimensions of reality and truth about the Universe we live in. Science deals with the objective, that which we can observe, measure, and quantify. Art deals with the subjective, that which we cannot observe, measure, and quantify, yet which we intuit to exist and know to be true. The two realms—science and art—are equally valid, yet mutually exclusive. Science can prove that gravity exists; it cannot prove or disprove the existence of God. Art cannot confirm the existence of gravity, but music can reassure us of God's presence.

Russell puts forward the same idea in invoking the allusion to "saints and poets." They, and they alone—the anointed prophets of the spiritual domain and those that sing the Holy Song of Thanksgiving—are the ones permitted to draw back the curtain and allow us to behold, however fleetingly, the revelation and the rapture.

Without resorting to the technical tools of objective analysis, I have told you everything I know about Beethoven's quartets and everything you need to know about the Dover Quartet's performances of them and why they are essential to your lives.