One Curtis, One

Beethoven Quartet

Opus 95 across the curriculum

BY LAURA C. KELLEY

Allegro con brio

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello

THE SHORTEST OF BEETHOVEN'S string quartets became Curtis's largest curricular endeavor this year. All violin, viola, and violoncello students—sixteen quartets—received multiple coachings of Quartet No. 11 in F minor, Op. 95 ("Quartetto serioso"). This spring a musical studies class analyzes Op. 95, while three liberal arts classes provide context from Beethoven's letters. In December composer and guest lecturer Bruce Adolphe examined it through a psychological metaphor, with musical examples performed by students. A quartet of orchestra principals performed it on Beethoven's birthday, at the end of a weeklong Beethoven festival that included vocal and brass works. And in February, the Curtis Symphony Orchestra and conductor Alan Gilbert performed the string orchestra version, transcribed by Mahler, in Verizon and Carnegie halls.

Allegro con brio

A frantic melody bursts forth in unison. Then, silence. The fleeting, intense music in a minor key has a character sometimes doleful, sometimes scowling, only occasionally smiling.

In his public lecture in Field Concert Hall on December 11, Mr. Adolphe wants his listeners to relate a piece of music to real life. So he explains Quartet No. 11, Op. 95, in psychological terms, discovering the symptoms of Tourette's syndrome among its lashing out, cello tics, viola mutterings, and inverted intervals of dreamlike associations.

As a student quartet performs examples, he works through much of the first movement, describing the first bars as a stranger cursing him out on the subway and creating tension, then compulsively muttering before becoming nonchalant. The music, he says, is full of anxiety and accurately portrays suffering.

The performers absorb his explanation, which offers a key to interpreting abrupt shifts—a particular challenge in such a short, dense piece of music. "It sort of became easier to play," cellist Abraham Feder later says, "because we understood what to do from one transition to the next."

Allegretto ma non troppo

Allegretto ma non troppo

The cello line descends deliberately. The voices exchange sorrowful lines, then the viola introduces a lament-like fugue. This is a private piece, indeed, an exchange among sympathetic friends.

Faculty member Virginia Allen discovers context for the quartet in Beethoven's writings and life story for her liberal arts class, More Than Words: Composers' Lives Revealed through Letters. The attic classroom in the main building holds more than a quartet—pianists and a horn student join a violinist (who would soon after perform the quartet in recital) and a violist. They will leave class with a biographical sketch, and the composer's own words, to accompany the music.

Beethoven called Op. 95 "Quartetto serioso," his only given title among seventeen string quartets. He composed it in 1810, about a year after the French invasion of Vienna, which prompted him to write, "What a disturbing life around me—drums, canons, men, misery of all sorts." Life was on hold, and he was ill. In spring 1810, he began a treasured friendship with Bettina Brentano, a writer and arts patroness who was close to Goethe. He courted the young Therese Malfatti—niece of the physician who would tend to Beethoven at the composer's death—and later proposed to her (she rejected him). In the summer Beethoven traveled from Vienna to Baden, where he wrote Op. 95. It was not commissioned, but rather appears to have been a more personal work. He dedicated the quartet to Nikolaus von Zmeskall of Domanovecz, an amateur cellist, promoter of Beethoven's music, and longtime friend.

The next year, despite failing health, Beethoven was more productive, composing the seventh and eighth symphonies, among other works. By the time Op. 95 was published, in 1816, his work had gained recognition, and his brother had passed away, leaving Beethoven the guardian of his nephew. On October 11, 1816, Beethoven wrote, "The Quartett is written for a small circle of connoisseurs and is never to be performed in public."

In a Curtis studio in late November, chamber music coordinator Steven Tenenbom coaches from the viola seat. The quartet plays through the first movement of Op. 95, then concentrates on the second. He encourages the students to emphasize both the dark and light aspects. "Play the right sound for the harmony," he says. He focuses on bow speed, vibrato, intensity, harmony, and sound quality. Sometimes there's a word for the effect he wants; sometimes, a gesture; sometimes, music.

They proceed, working out parts separately, then combining them. He advises to not play too pretty, to make the sforzandos "rather wrenching in terms of emotion." On to the third movement, briefly, with its loud, accented frolicking—"frenetic," as Mr. Tenenbom describes it.

As time runs out on their session, he talks about the enormous challenge of performing Beethoven. "You spend your whole life," he tells the students, "trying to reach this pinnacle that he achieved, that bar that he set, knowing you'll never get there. It's sad, but you keep trying. His values are so high." Yet somehow, striving for that is fun, he adds. Next week: the third and fourth movements.

Allegro assai vivace ma serioso

Allegro assai vivace ma serioso

Without hesitation, the second movement pushes into the third with a vigorous rhythmic motif, emanating dark energy. The rhythm is passed around the quartet with a sense of purposeful pursuit. A second violin solo is decorated with light, gentle arpeggios from the first violin. The opening rhythm returns, tightly wound, notes skittering from the instrument. Hairs fly as bows dig into strings.

"It's a rhy-thm," sings faculty member Pamela Frank, matching Beethoven's pattern. She's coaching four students on the third movement, which they play through before she picks it apart.

"Experiment with what direction things go in," she says. The idea is to generate excitement by shifting which note is emphasized on repeats. "Make it less predictable rhythmically."

The quartet tries it, holding back a bit here or pushing forward there. Ms. Frank urges the first violin to show the rest of the players how it will change, without telling them or cuing the audience—surprise the listener.

When the second violin solo sings out, she calls it "a glorious hymn-like tune in the middle of violence." They can make the melodies more sentimental, Ms. Frank says, and emphasize the dance-like qualities of the rhythm.

Each coach has his or her own approach to the music and to working with the students. They all draw on performance experience. In addition to Ms. Frank and Mr. Tenenbom, the Op. 95 coaches included faculty members Shmuel Ashkenasi, Ida Kavafian, Joseph Silverstein, Arnold Steinhardt, Michael Tree, and Peter Wiley, as well as visiting artists Yumi Kendall and Hai-Ye Ni.

The students, meanwhile, were keeping the string orchestra version in mind. Mahler added parts for double bass, moving the

Listening excerpts from each movement are posted on www.curtis.edu.

Lecturer Bruce Adolphe with students Sylvia Kim and Shanshan Yao, violin; Abraham Feder, cello; and Philip Kramp, viola ~ PHOTO: PETE CHECCHIA

violoncello lines up an octave at those sections. Otherwise, Mahler's transcription is essentially the quartet—only played with seven to sixteen on a part instead of just one, and with a conductor determining the interpretation. (The orchestra prepared Op. 95 with visiting artist Joel Smirnoff, faculty member David Hayes, and recent alumnus Andrew Hauze, prior to the arrival of Mr. Gilbert to rehearse for the February concerts.) So the experience is entirely different, and knowing the notes doesn't make it any easier.

Or, as principal viola Philip Kramp says, "It's a very difficult part for each instrument so the ensemble is tricky. However, I think that it is rewarding playing the piece in both settings and we get to know the piece extremely well."

The shift from intimate group to large ensemble reveals the distinctive demands of chamber and orchestral playing. What works in quartet may not work for an entire section. "After the recap in the second movement," says Mr. Feder, the principal cello, "there's a little cello solo that goes up pretty high. [In the chamber version] I would play it so that I would have enough time to comfortably play the notes and make it sound good. When we played it in the orchestra version, I did that and I was completely off. Everyone else played it exactly straight."

Larghetto espressivo

Violin I

Violin II

Viola

Cello

Larghetto espressivo—Allegretto agitato

The first violin sighs and the viola answers. Their melancholy yet lilting phrases grow frantic as the movement shifts to a faster tempo. The first violin's solo scale races up to a full chord. Silence. A very quiet chord, then another wind-up with persistent rhythms. The performers lean in. … Beethoven's biggest surprise comes at the end, as the unrelentingly serious quartet playfully and rapidly concludes with a rush of major scales.

Mr. Silverstein hopes he's teaching more than how to play a piece. Sure, his quartet students are marking their parts for bowings and the like. But he also shows them how to run an efficient rehearsal. He wants the quartet to improve its unified sixteenth notes. "May I make a suggestion to you?" he offers—then has them play and listen in different combinations, trying to match their bow strokes. For two minutes they listen to each other without being critical, and they improve. The lesson: Play it just once quietly and slowly to hear what's going on, saving time to then play it at tempo together.

In the fourth movement, they find the right tempo for the slow start by considering the faster section later in the movement. Mr. Silverstein says, "It's always best to put your mind in the middle of the movement before you start the beginning."

The quartet focuses on dynamics. "In Beethoven, when there is no dynamic change, don't make one," he says. "Because in not making one, you're making a statement and something is about to happen." After the growing and fading volume of crescendos and diminuendos, the music steadies for a few bars before shifting again, this time with notes attacked by repeated sforzandos. The dynamics, he points out, are part of the emotion of the music.

Mr. Silverstein conducts from the center of the group for a couple of measures, then paces and sings along, picking out a wrong note, a skip, an imbalance. He often uses solfège as he sings a sample line. When asked about a fingering, he tells what he would do—he last performed Op. 95 with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center—and then recommends that the student ask Mr. Steinhardt, faculty member and first violin of the Guarneri String Quartet. "He's a great source," Mr. Silverstein says.

He believes that the opportunity to work with multiple teachers is a benefit of the Curtis system. It may take until a few years after graduation, but today's students will know what to do themselves when they approach works like Op. 95 in professional settings. He knew little chamber music when he graduated from Curtis in 1950. Enrollment had been reduced because of World War II, and opportunities to play or study chamber music were slim. One Christmas break, he played with esteemed faculty members William Primrose and Gregor Piatigorsky, amazed at the volume of repertoire they knew.

Today's quartet finishes the fourth movement, then plays through the entire twenty-minute piece from the top, pausing to polish balance and phrasing. After the first movement, Mr. Silverstein says, "Not bad. It's coming along."