

Beethoven Op. 131 in Visual Media

Mass media in modern society is commonly associated with the Internet, Social Media, and Television. With modern electronic media prevailing in all sources of media, remediation is inevitable for development. Film, amongst others, serves as a voice-based media of mass communication that transmits messages. The process of broadcasting that message serves as a form of media that connects people who are either close or distant through a common source. Ludwig van Beethoven's Op. 131 string quartet No. 14 in C# minor sets out to disperse distinct messages with its presence in the film *A Late Quartet* (2012). The role of music in visual media continues to signify more importance and meaning behind each selection. I will explore the role of Beethoven's music as a narrative guide. The focus of my research is on the linkage of the psychological and musical role of Beethoven's Op. 131 string quartet in visual media.

The film *A Late Quartet*, was released in 2012 accompanied by positive reviews. The whole movie is structured around Beethoven's Op. 131 with each movement presented chronologically in strategic points; the music supports the atmosphere and emotions of the characters. The basic plot follows the story of the renowned Fugue String Quartet (fictional) in the movie, with the cellist (Christopher Walken) diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease. The illness forces the quartet to reevaluate their relationships, both musical and personal. There are many complications and affairs that add drama to the film, but the overall structure is a unique narration of Beethoven's quartet in film form. An integration of entertainment with music appreciation through the embodiment of the whole Op. 131 as the foundation of the plot was an innovative method of remediating the association of audio and visual components.

The first movement is *Adagio*, opening with a fugue in C#-minor. The first movement's counterpart is presented diegetically in the opening scene where the first violinist, Daniel (Mark Ivanir), practices the opening of the Op. 131 quartet. Mark Steinberg, first violinist of the Brentano Quartet, describes the opening motive as a "soul reaching toward heaven but forcefully pulled back down with suffocating heaviness". The fugue motive is synonymous to Beethoven's suffering as he nears death. Shortly after, there is another scene with the whole Fugue Quartet rehearsing the opening of the first movement where the cellist struggles with his entrance. The analogy described by Steinberg resembles the cellist's struggle with his movements and his fight against Parkinson's Disease. The second movement, in D-major, is a duple-meter *Allegro* in compact sonata form that is dance-like. This music is presented non-diegetically in the background at the home of the second violinist and violist who are married. The brief movement resembles the care-free and happy relationship that they have at the moment. The third movement takes an emotional turn in the context of harmony both in the music and amongst the characters. The music is a recitative that is played in the background. Right when the viola line modulates from B-minor to F#-minor, the camera is angled at the cellist foreboding what he is about to share with his quartet mates: that he has Parkinson's Disease and is planning on retiring from the quartet. The unsteadiness of the situation is exemplified in the music as well with each inconclusive tonal center (see *Figure 1*), from B-minor to F#-minor that lasts under a minute and finally transitions into A-major for the fourth movement, the heart of the quartet. The *Andante* presents a theme in seven variations, corresponding with the seven-movement structure of the whole work. Beethoven was very adamant about structure, with J.S. Bach as a major influence. The opening of the movement is presented non-diegetically when the first violinist (Mark Ivanir) and violist (Catherine Keener) meet in Central Park and reminisce about their past in school. The music presents a dialogue between the violins which is a fitting choice for when the violinist and violist are discussing the future of the quartet together. Subsequently, the fifth movement is a scherzo in E-major that is presented diegetically as the quartet is rehearsing the movement. The energy of this scherzo is very high and frantic which foreshadows the arguments and screaming that occur immediately following the rehearsal. In a way, the music sets up the energy of the argument to follow.

Figure 1



The sixth movement follows in a slow and somber introduction in G#-minor. The two movements that preceded were both composed in major keys that were unsteady in the context of the tonal center for the piece. The unsteady detours with each movement returns to reality with the dominant, G#-minor, of C#-minor. The movement is presented non-diegetically as the cellist and violist are walking through a museum. The cellist tells her that he plans to officially retire; the somber music is a fitting representation for the scene. Encompassing a bar form structure, the movement exhibits the musical form of AAB with a coda section. This structure came from the medieval period which often resembled an artful song. In the context of the scene, the music resembles a song of mourning from the cellist. The addition of a coda leads to an ominous transition into the seventh movement.

Lastly, the final movement is in sonata form with a return to the opening key of C#-minor. The music is presented diegetically in the final scene of the movie with the quartet's last concert together where the cellist plans to announce his retirement. The film includes short excerpts of each movement that are presented chronologically throughout the performance, ending with the seventh movement which is stopped prematurely because the cellist cannot keep up. It is a very emotional scene in which the Op. 131 represents the quartet's farewell to their long relationship together as they start their own journeys elsewhere. Each succeeding movement begins in a new tonal key, exemplifying the unsteadiness as the whole plot unfolds. Interestingly, the presence of each movement always starts from the beginning of each movement, never in the middle or end. This trend exemplifies that each movement and corresponding scene constitutes the start of something new. The Op. 131 metaphorically represents life and guides the story telling of the movie with each series of events.

According to John Durham Peters, media consists of three dimensions: message, means, and agents. In the film *A Late Quartet*, one could analyze the visual media's message as the emotional situation of the quartet which is exemplified through Beethoven's music. This message is delivered through the filming of the movie for viewing by the agents: the public. *A Late Quartet* utilizes the dense impact of emotions from Beethoven's Op. 131 quartet in portraying different classifications of pain: a struggle towards change and pain from interpersonal conflicts for the movie. Typically, there is a lack of association between author and viewer, however the role of critics, reviewers, and social media platforms continue to allow for various forms of communication. Although it changes the basic face-to-face communication concept, it continues to be remediated into varying outlets.

The adaptation of Beethoven's Op. 131 in visual media comes with positive outcomes but also negative ones. Arguably, the additional interpersonal drama can deter an audience from the emotions of Beethoven's music alone, however the symbolization of the relationships with the progression of the structural foundation of the piece adds a new level of understanding to the music within the film. Music speaks louder than words. In many cases, music should be left as is in terms of the message, means, and agents, in the simplest form: live performances. However, the remediation of music into visual media adds a whole new level of understanding and expands the depth of awareness by aligning it side-by-side with dialogue and visual components. The music serves as media through its ability to add emotional clarification; it's mix with present day technology allowed for a biographical representation of Beethoven's Op. 131 through the plot of the quartet as well as the journey and struggles in life from a sociological perspective. The remediation of classical music with the growing field of technology continues to pair music with innovative modern situations that allow the music to live on. After all, as long as the soul of the music subsists, remediation will continue to support it.

References

Johnson, J. H. (2008). The Musical Experience of Romanticism. In *Listening in Paris: A cultural*

- history* (pp. 270-280). Berkeley, California: Univ. of California Press.
- Kerman, J. (2020). Opus 131 and the Uncanny. In W. Kinderman (Ed.), *The String Quartets of Beethoven* (pp. 262-278). S.l., Illinois: Univ of Illinois Press.
- Peters, J. D. (2010). Mass Media. In W. J. Mitchell & M. B. Hansen (Authors), *Critical terms for media studies* (pp. 266-278). Chicago, Illinois: The University of Chicago Press.
- Salinas, E. (2019). Beyond the Candelabra: *The Liberace Show* and the Remediation of Beethoven. In *Journal of the Society for American Music* (pp. 27-50). New York, New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Van Beethoven, L. (1970). Complete string quartets from the Breitkopf & Härtel complete works edition (p. 148). New York, New York: Dover Publications.
- Watson, A. (2010). 1825–6: String Quartet in C sharp minor, op. 131. In *Beethoven's Chamber Music in Context* (pp. 262-273). Woodbridge, Suffolk; Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer. doi:10.7722/j.ctt14brt70.34