

17. Beethoven

Septet in E flat, Op. 20: movement I

(for Unit 3: Developing Musical Understanding)

Background information and performance circumstances

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) spent most of his life in Vienna and studied for a time with Haydn, and possibly with Mozart as well, although there is some uncertainty about this. At first he was known principally as a virtuoso pianist, but eventually devoted himself to composition, especially after the onset of deafness.

He wrote the Septet in 1799 and it was first performed with great success a year later at a concert in the Court Theatre in Vienna, together with his First Symphony. By this time he was already aware of hearing problems, though it was not until twenty years later that he became so profoundly deaf that normal conversation became impossible.

Arguably Beethoven's contribution to the development of music lay mainly in his symphonies and piano sonatas, but he was also an outstanding composer of chamber music, and his string quartets are especially admired. Septets are rare, and in fact this piece is one of the few important examples by any composer.

Beethoven was one of the three principal composers of the Classical period (together with Haydn and Mozart), though his music also acted as a bridge to the early Romantic composers. Some of the characteristics of the Classical period as represented by this piece are:

- Keyboard-less chamber music. The harpsichord had been almost obligatory in Baroque chamber music. Though the piano was found in Classical chamber music, there were many works in which it was not used at all. Strings, as in the Baroque, were the basis of all ensemble instrumental music. This piece is unusual as it does not have a 2nd violin part
- Use of a clarinet. The instrument was hardly used before the Classical era, and Haydn only used it in his last works. Mozart was the first composer to make large-scale use of the instrument and by the time of Beethoven, it was considered an essential wind instrument
- Most first movements of the time, including this one, were written in Sonata Form, with Exposition, Development, Recapitulation and Coda
- Dynamic contrast was very important for Beethoven, and this can be heard immediately with the *forte* – *piano* contrasts in the first two bars

- Melody-dominated homophony is the main texture, though there is considerable variety in the ways it is applied in this piece.

Instrumentation

- A septet is an unusual grouping. This piece has four string instruments, a clarinet, bassoon and horn.
- The string grouping is unusual – it is not a conventional string quartet (two violins, viola and cello) but features (one) violin, viola, cello, and a double bass (an instrument that did not normally feature in Classical-period chamber music)
- The violin and viola occasionally use double stopping (e.g. in bar 1)
- The clarinet is 'in B flat' (that is, it sounds a tone lower than written)
- The horn in E flat is also a transposing instrument – it sounds a major 6th lower than written. It sometimes plays very low notes, e.g. the written Gs in bars 9–10, which sound as B flat a 9th below middle C
- The Septet is completed by the bassoon, a member of the same family of double-reed instruments as the oboe.

Texture

- The slow introduction includes a number of *tutti* homophonic chords, e.g. bar 1
- There is monophony in bar 2 (with the violin alone)
- The texture for much of the piece is melody-dominated homophony, e.g. at the beginning of the *Allegro con brio*, when a broken-chord accompaniment in the viola supports the melody in the violin
- Sometimes the clarinet and bassoon play in octaves, e.g. bar 128, or in 6ths, e.g. bar 140
- The texture at the end of the coda becomes more complex, with imitation between the lower strings and woodwind (bars 258–264).
- Notice how Beethoven effectively varies the number of instruments playing, e.g. with the *tutti* at bars 90–92 which contrasts with the three-part passage immediately preceding it.

Structure

This extract is the first movement of a six-movement piece in the style of a Serenade. The movement is in sonata form with a slow introduction. The coda is much longer than earlier composers of the Classical era would have written.

Here is an outline of the movement's structure.

1-18	18-52	53-111	111-153	154-187	188-233	233-
Introduction	Exposition		Development	Recapitulation		Coda
	1st subject	2nd subject		1st subject	2nd subject	
E flat (tonic), ending on chord V (see 'Harmony' below)	E flat (tonic)	B flat (dominant)	Various related keys (see 'Tonality' below)	E flat (tonic)	E flat (tonic)	E flat (tonic)

It is possible also to identify a bridge passage between the 1st and 2nd subjects (from bar 40): it is during this that the modulation takes place, the 1st subject having ended with a clear perfect cadence in E flat major. The 2nd subject group with includes more than one melodic idea, and a closing passage (or 'codetta'), but it not necessary to identify these at this level of study.

Tonality

The piece uses standard functional major-minor tonality, with modulations to related keys. The first subject is in the tonic key of E flat major. The music then modulates to the dominant key, B flat major, for the 2nd subject. The development moves to various keys, including the relative minor (C minor) soon after the beginning of the section. Other keys include A flat major (subdominant – bar 124) and F minor (relative of subdominant – bar 132), all established by perfect cadences.

Harmony

- The piece uses functional harmony with clear perfect cadences (e.g. bars 28-29 in E flat)
- Most of the music has diatonic root and first inversion chords, with occasional 2nd inversions (notably Ic before V or V⁷ in a perfect cadence, as at the beginning of bar 38)
- There are occasional chromatic chords, including a German augmented sixth on the flat sixth degree (C flat) of the E flat major scale in bar 7
- The introduction ends with a dominant 7th chord, which leads effectively into the tonic chord of the beginning of the Exposition.

- The harmonic rhythm (rate of chord change) is often relatively slow (e.g. the tonic chord of E flat (I) at the beginning of the Exposition lasts for four bars) but it speeds up towards cadences (e.g. bar 27 has two chords, Ib and IIb, before the Ic and V⁷ in bar 28).

Melody

- Melodies are mainly diatonic, e.g. the first melody from the 2nd subject (bar 53), though they do often contain brief chromaticisms:
 - The second note of the first subject (bar 18) is a chromatic lower auxiliary
 - There is a chromatic scale in bar 26 of the 1st subject
- Melodies have much conjunct (stepwise) movement, including many scalar passages.
- Leaps are usually small. The first melody from the 2nd subject features 3rds (in a triadic pattern, in bar 56) and 4ths in bars 53 and 54. The melody begins, however, with a rather larger interval – the rising major 6th from F to D
- The 1st subject begins with a rising sequence based on a four-note motif.
- The staccato theme from the second subject group (bar 86 onwards) has a descending sequence.
- Melodies are often repeated – for example, the 10-bar 1st subject theme (starting at bar 19³) is immediately played again with fuller instrumentation. The clarinet takes the melody previously given to the violin
- Some themes contain ornaments, like the turn at the end of the 1st subject tune (bar 28).

Rhythm

- The slow introduction is more complex and varied rhythmically than the Allegro. Towards the end it includes demisemiquavers, and also sextuplet semiquavers
- The accompaniment to the 1st subject theme has a distinctive continuous repeated quaver pattern in the viola. When the tune is repeated (bar 29), this is replaced by a more restless syncopated idea in the violin and viola, over constant (staccato) crotchets in the cello
- Many themes begin with an anacrusis. The 1st subject theme has three upbeat quavers, while the first theme of the 2nd subject has a single upbeat quaver.