

17. Beethoven

Septet in E flat, Op. 20: movement I

(For Unit 6: Further Musical understanding)

Background information

Ludwig van Beethoven was born in 1770 in Bonn, but spent most of his life in Vienna and studied for a time with Haydn. At first he was known principally as a virtuoso pianist, but eventually devoted himself to composition and became the crucial figure in the transition from the Classical to the Romantic era. Around 1800, his hearing began to deteriorate, and by the last decade of his life he was completely deaf. He died in 1827, at the age of 56, following months of severe illness.

His compositional output was large, and includes nine symphonies, overtures, several concertos, sonatas for various instruments, numerous chamber works, the opera *Fidelio* and two masses. A prolific composer of chamber music, he composed sixteen string quartets, in addition to string trios, string quintets and piano trios. He also wrote for wind instruments, for example the Sextet for clarinets, horns and bassoons and the Octet for oboes, clarinets, bassoons and horns, both works interestingly also in the key of E flat major. There are trios for fascinating combinations of instruments and a quintet for piano and winds also in the key of E flat major. The Septet in E Flat Major was well regarded in Beethoven's lifetime, and c.1803 he arranged it as a Trio for clarinet (or violin), cello and piano.

The Septet was written in 1799 and first performed with great success a year later at a concert in the Court Theatre in Vienna, together with the First Symphony. It was published in 1802 and dedicated to the Empress Maria Theresa. The septet grouping is rare and this piece is one of the few important examples by any composer. There is, incidentally, no standard instrumentation for a septet.

The Septet is in six movements.

1. Adagio; Allegro con brio.
2. Adagio cantabile.
3. Tempo di minuetto.
4. Tema con variazioni; Andante.
5. Scherzo; Allegro molto e vivace.
6. Andante con moto alla marcia; Presto.

Performing forces and their handling

- A septet is an unusual chamber music combination. This piece has four string instruments (including a double bass to add textural weight and depth of pitch), a clarinet, bassoon and horn.
- The piece includes a clarinet, an instrument that was hardly used before the Classical era. Indeed, Mozart was the first composer to make large-scale use of the instrument

(writing both a concerto and clarinet quintet for the new instrument) and Haydn only used it in his last works. By Beethoven's time, it was an established wind instrument, and here it has an unusually prominent role, equalling the violin in importance. A transposing instrument, the clarinet in B flat sounds a tone lower than written.

- The violin and clarinet generally carry the main melodic interest. The bassoon and horn usually work together to provide wind sonority harmony, although occasionally the bassoon works in a solo capacity in conjunction with the clarinet, bars 69-73. The viola generally accompanies with arpeggio figures, bar 61. The cello and double bass provide a strong harmonic foundation.
- The horn in E flat is a transposing instrument sounding a major 6th lower than written. It is sometimes used to play some very low notes, e.g. the written Gs in bar 9 which sound at B flat a 9th below middle C.
- The violin and viola use multiple stopping for emphasis and to increase the textural density. There is double stopping in the first bar, for example, and elsewhere throughout. In the penultimate bar of the piece there is quadruple stopping in the violin and triple stopping in the viola, making for an emphatic close.
- The violin writing is not extensively high in tessitura, except for bars 217-218. There are some wide leaps in bars 216 and 218.
- Articulation is detailed in all instruments. There is no pizzicato writing in the strings but frequent staccato to give lightness.
- Dynamic contrast was very important for Beethoven, and this can be heard immediately with the *forte*–*piano* contrasts in the first two bars. Use of *fp* (bar 12) and *sf* (bar 18) provide attack to convey the *con brio* mood.

Texture

- Beethoven uses a wide variety of textures.
- The slow introduction begins with tutti homophonic chords, e.g. bar 1.
- There is monophony in bar 2 (solo violin).
- Typical of the Classical period, the texture for much of the piece is melody-dominated homophony, e.g. at the beginning of the Exposition, where the string trio texture consists of a broken chord accompaniment in the viola and a strong harmonic foundation in the cello to support the melody in the violin. At bar 28 this melody is repeated but in a full tutti format with the melody in the clarinet, sustained harmony in the bassoon and French horn, double stopped syncopated accompaniment in the upper strings and arpeggio walking bass in the lower strings.
- There are antiphonal exchanges with dialogue between the clarinet/bassoon and the violin, bars 47-50.
- Homophonic/homorhythmic writing occurs at bars 50-53 and 86-97.
- There is octave writing between the clarinet and bassoon (bar 128), or 6ths (bar 140). There are octaves between five instruments at the start of the Development, bar 113.
- Pedal notes add stability to the texture, bars 140-153.

Structure

- This extract is the first movement of a six-movement piece in the style of a serenade.
- The movement is in sonata form preceded by a slow Introduction.
- The Coda is much longer than earlier composers of the Classical era would have written.
- The structure is defined by tonality and conforms to the conventions dictated by sonata form.

Bars 1-18	Bars 18-52	Bars 53-111	Bars 111-154	Bars 154-187	Bars 188-233	Bars 233-288
Introduction	Exposition		Development	Recapitulation		Coda
	1 st subject	2 nd subject and codetta		1 st subject	2 nd subject	
E flat (tonic)	E flat (tonic)	B flat (dominant)	Modulates through various keys (see tonality section below)	E flat (tonic)	E flat (tonic)	E flat (tonic)

- The second subject, announced in the Exposition, includes three short melodic ideas, as well as a codetta to round off the section (bars 98-111).

	Bars	Description
Introduction	1-18	Grand homophonic chords alternating with semiquavers of ascending arpeggio and descending scalic figures. A four-note motif (bar 8) is followed by an answering phrase in fuller scoring, repeated in the tonic minor. Gradual build up through <i>crescendo</i> and repetition for emphasis leading to a descending dominant 7 th clarinet flourish and pausing in anticipation on a chord V ⁷ .
	1st subject 19-28 28-39	1 st subject – sequential ascent through an E flat major triad with chromatic lower auxiliary note, in string trio scoring with the melody in the violin, overlapping with... 1 st subject in full tutti scoring, the melody in the clarinet.
Exposition	Transition passage 40-52	Monophonic melody with grace notes, descending scalic melody followed by 3 loud chords. Antiphonal exchanges between clarinet/bassoon and violin. Alternating chords I and V.

	<p>2nd subject</p> <p>53-56</p>	Homorhythmic, semi-staccato minims in string trio texture, in the dominant, Bb major, with quaver anacrusis.
	57-60	The initial anacrusis is extended and the theme is re-scored for 7 part texture.
	61-74	Descending octave scale on violin with paired slurs, in dialogue with clarinet and bassoon in octaves, accompanied by broken chords.
	86-98	A march-like staccato theme, in a descending sequence. First heard as a string trio texture. Alternates between trio and full tutti texture.
	<p>Codetta</p> <p>99-111</p>	Codetta theme also makes use of the 1 st subject anacrusis with lower chromatic auxiliary note. It appears as a descending sequence. After several perfect cadences and lively triplet descending scales, the section closes with emphatic chords.
Development	111-116	1 st subject in octaves, moving into C minor.
	117-124	Codetta idea in descending sequence passed from clarinet to horn with accompaniment of broken chords and strong bass line.
	125-14	Alternating between transition passage material of grace notes followed by descending scale and the codetta theme.
	141-148	Codetta idea combined with minim rhythms from the beginning of the 2 nd subject over dominant pedal.
	149-153	Fragment of the opening of the 1 st subject rising sequentially in 3 rd 's. The pedal continues, leading into the Recapitulation.

Recapitulation	154-181	1 st subject in tonic, Eb major. At bar 172 this theme is developed by the lower strings.
	182-187	Shortened transition passage.
	188-233	2 nd subject presented in the tonic rather than dominant.
Coda	233-245	Codetta theme followed by triplets.
	245-265	Opening of the 1 st subject combined with coda theme, then modulation to B flat major and then E flat and A flat.
	266-276	Transition passage theme.
	277-288	Concluding figure with trill in octaves in upper strings. Rhythmic diminution from bar 285.

Tonality

- The piece uses functional tonality, largely dictated by the conventions of sonata form, with modulations to closely related keys.
- The slow Introduction is in the tonic key of E flat major throughout with just a brief tonal excursion to the tonic minor at bar 10.
- Typical of sonata form, the first subject is in the tonic key of E flat major. As expected, the music then modulates to the dominant key, B flat major, for the 2nd subject in bar 53.
- The Development starts dramatically with a sudden switch to C minor, leading briefly to A flat major (bar 124) then F minor (relative of subdominant – bar 132), all established by perfect cadences.
- A dominant pedal starts at bar 140, and continues to the beginning of the Recapitulation.
- As expected, the second subject is heard in the tonic, E flat major, in the Recapitulation.
- Perfect cadences are used to confirm the key and establish modulations.

Harmony

- The piece uses functional harmony with clear perfect cadences (e.g. bars 28-29 in E flat).
- An imperfect cadence appears at bars 7-8.
- Most of the music draws on root and first inversion chords with occasional 2nd inversion harmony.
- The typically Classical cadential Ic-V progression is used, e.g. bars 38 and 97.

- There are occasional chromatic chords, including a German augmented 6th in bar 7.
- Pedal notes are used, for example a reiterated tonic pedal passed from the French horn to the lower strings, bars 98-106. Long tonic reiterated Bb pedal bars 140-153, passed between different instruments and heard as an inverted pedal for three bars in the violin.
- The Introduction ends with a dominant 7th chord, which leads effectively into the tonic chord of the beginning of the Exposition. It is also used in bar 80.
- Harmonic rhythm (rate of chord change) is often relatively slow, for example, 4 bars of tonic E flat chord at the beginning of the Exposition, but speeds up towards cadences (e.g. bars 27-28).

Melody

- Melodies are mainly diatonic, although they do often contain brief chromaticism. There is, for example, a chromatic scale in bars 25-26 of the 1st subject.
- Chromatic scales are sometimes used to form a lead into a melody, e.g. bar 69.
- The 1st subject theme begins with a rising sequence based on a four-note motif derived from bar 8 of the Introduction which utilises a chromatic lower auxiliary note. It moves sequentially up a 3rd each time with the longer note forming an E flat major arpeggio (Eb – G – Bb). It revolves around the E flat major arpeggio in a similar way to that of the 3rd ('Eroica') Symphony, which appeared five years later. After scalar passages, the theme comes to a close with a characteristic turn (bar 28), preceding the perfect cadence.



- Melodies are often repeated, so the 1st subject theme is immediately repeated with fuller instrumentation.
- The second subject theme at bar 53 is based upon intervals of a 4th played semi-staccato before adopting conjunct movement.



- It continues at bar 61 with descending quavers, spanning an octave and slurred in pairs.



- The final motif of the second subject group, bar 86, has a staccato march-like melody which uses a descending sequence.



- The codetta is based upon a combination of two motifs, the anacrusis to the first subject which uses the chromatic lower auxiliary note and conjunct descending figures from the second subject. It is presented as a descending sequence.

- Typical of the Classical period, phrasing is usually periodic and balanced.
- Ornamentation is used widely throughout. As noted above, there is a characteristically Classical turn at bar 28. Dramatic appoggiaturas decorate the three stately crotchets at the start of the Introduction, bars 2, 4, 6. Grace notes embellish the monophonic violin scalar solos in bars 40, 42, 44. Acciaccaturas enliven the high violin melody in bar 217.

Rhythm and metre

- The Introduction is in a slow, simple triple time, whilst the main section is at a lively tempo with vigour (*Allegro con brio*) and in cut common time, simple duple.
- The slow Introduction is rhythmically more complex than the main section, including demisemiquavers, sextuplets and double dotted rhythms.
- The first subject theme is characterised by three quavers leading to a longer minim tied to a quaver.
- The accompaniment to the first subject theme has a distinctive continuous repeated quaver pattern in the viola. This is replaced by a syncopated rhythm in violin and viola, over on beat crotchets in the cello when the theme is repeated (bar 29).
- The opening of the second makes an effective contrast with the preceding passage with its sustained minim rhythms.
- There are some sections of continuous triplet rhythms, bars 76-79, 211-214.
- Many themes begin with an anacrusis. The first theme has three upbeat quavers. The first theme of the 2nd subject has a single upbeat quaver.
- Syncopation is again prominent in bars 45-46.
- There is some rhythmic diminution at the end with crotchets being halved to quavers, compare bars 284- 285. This gives a sense of increased pace and excitement as the music rushes to its conclusion.