

Beethoven's Symphony no. 3 in E-flat Major: Thematic Analysis

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Widely acknowledged as one of the most pivotal symphonic compositions in western music, third symphony of Ludwig van Beethoven is, in substance, rarely agreed upon. Beethoven's semi-programmatic title, "Eroica," the extreme size, unique formal organization, and developmental history of the work collectively open up too many variables to allow a singular analytical approach to this work that is mutually agreed upon by the musical community plausible, as evidenced by over 200 years of serious efforts to do exactly that. This discourse seeks to give one possible analysis, the focus being primarily upon the organization of thematic elements that give the work a cyclical or "symphonic" quality.

The instrumentation of the work yields a valuable departure point in that it carries but a single innovation for the era in its employment of an additional horn player, bringing the total to three. The large-scale organization of the symphony is characteristic of the era only in that the first movement carries the greatest weight, in length, character, and density. A heavy, French-inspired *Marcia funebre* serves as second movement, a relatively uncommon form for this context compared to the works of Beethoven's contemporaries. The work concludes with an unexpectedly dense theme-and-variations form with a robust scherzo that is sandwiched in between.

Beethoven begins ambitiously with one of the longest opening movement of any symphony written to date and also dispenses with the practice of opening the movement with a slow section; the total performing time is approximately sixteen to seventeen

minutes.¹ The movement is analyzable as an expanded sonata form with some rondo elements. Rather than the more tidy, foursquare variety of first theme, which often manages to pack itself up at the appointed time and stand aside for the next event, Beethoven's sonata uses a thematic group in which the same material takes on several distinct personalities. Hopkins states that, "It is as futile to try to reduce the structure to the textbook props of First and Second Subjects as it would be to reduce *Hamlet* to a play with only the two characters, Hamlet and Ophelia. *Romeo and Juliet* gives us a more fruitful analogy since the protagonists at least belong to opposing *families*...."²

Table 1a. Phrase Analysis of Movement One (Exposition-Development)

Section	M. No.	Material	Structure	Total
Exposition	1	Signal	2	2
	3	1 st Theme Group	(4 x 3) + (4 x 2)	20
	23		(4 + 6 + 2) + 2	14
	37		4 x 2	8
	45	2 nd Theme Group	(4 x 3) + (4 x 2)	20
	65		(2 x 3) 4 + 8	18
	83		(4 x 3) + 4 + 4 + 6	26
	109	Development	(4 x 2) + 6 + 5 + 4	23
	132	Closing Group	4 + 4 + 4 + 4	16
	148	Bridge	4 + 2	6
	156	2 nd ending	2	2
Totals:	(w/ repeat)	151+4 +(153)		308
Development	158	Bridge	7 + 5	12
	170	Section I (2a)	4 x 3	12
	182	Transition (1)	4 x 2	8
	190	Section II (2b/1,3)	(8+4) + (8+8) +(4+2)	34
	224	2a	4 x 3 + 4	16
	240	Fugato on 2a	4 x 2	8
	248	Free	4 + (6 x 4) + (4 x 3)	40
	288	Rondo Theme	4 x 4	16
	304	Free on 1	4 x 5 + 2	22
	326	Special Theme	4 x 4	16
	342	Free on 1	4 x 7	28
	370	Bridge to 1	(4 x 2) + (4 x 3) + 4	32
Totals:				254

¹This assumes that the conductor observes Beethoven's repeat of the exposition.

² Antony Hopkins, *The Nine Symphonies of Beethoven* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 67.

However, before the first of these theme groups, Beethoven sets out with a “signal.”³ This pair of identical exclamatory triads boldly serves to introduce the symphony, a gesture powerful enough to seem nearly axiomatic, by virtue of the key and of the musical material upon which the entire symphony will be based. The first theme group is merely that same E-flat tonic triad turned on its side. Beethoven’s sketchbook indicates that he experimented with many other ideas, including some dominant harmonies, before choosing the double triad which clearly, “stresses the importance of the fundamental tonality,” just as Mr. Hopkins suggests.⁴ Other examples of the opening signal concept include the Allegretto of Symphony no. 7, and the Scherzo of no. 9.⁵ The first theme follows in a primitive, introductory form in the cellos and is only four measures long, but is immediately elaborated upon within the first three phrases.



Fig. 1. Signal and Beginning of 1st Theme (m. 1)

The first twelve measures form a phrase that immediately cadences back to E-flat for further development. The fragmented theme is passed through an orchestrated sequence leading to a tutti passage that begins in measure 23. In measure 28, the composer

³ Edwan Evans, *Beethoven's Nine Symphonies, Fully Described & Analysed*, vol. 1, (London: William Reeves, 1923), 27.

⁴ Antony Hopkins, *The Nine Symphonies of Beethoven* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1981), 65.

⁵ Evans, 128.

holds all harmonic and melodic interest in complete abeyance.⁶ Only the rhythm is important here, and it is used to build excitement and grab the attention of the listener at this climactic point in the first theme group. Here, we have the first presentation of the theme as an expression of the entire orchestra (including the trumpets who have rested



Fig 2. Rhythmic progression (m. 28)

since the second measure). Berlioz states that, “Contrary to custom, the composer, in commencing, has only allowed us a glimpse of his melodic idea; it does not present itself in its full effect until after an exordium of some bars.”⁷ Then, without warning, the texture simply evaporates into a second theme group without any time to really appreciate what has gone before.

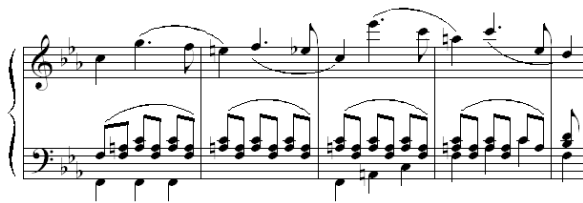


Fig. 3a. Second Theme Group (m. 45)



Fig. 3b. Second Theme Group (m. 65)

The first passage is a sequence much like the second phrase of the First Theme group, in that Beethoven uses a melodic sequence that unfolds throughout the winds and violins. This begets a second, more robust passage at measure-sixty five, the first phrase in a minor

⁶ Evans, 144.

⁷ Hector Berlioz, *A Critical Study of Beethoven's Nine Symphonies*, trans. Edwin Evans (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, n.d.), 41-42.

key. Note the rhythmic content of the melody in the first passage; Beethoven moves this into the accompaniment and extends it by virtue of interpolating three quarter rests. Also, the phrasing seems to change from a beat-two orientation, seen through his orchestration to a beat-one orientation with the eighth note serving as an antecedent. The contour of the second passage is actually identical, although it is much more disjunct.

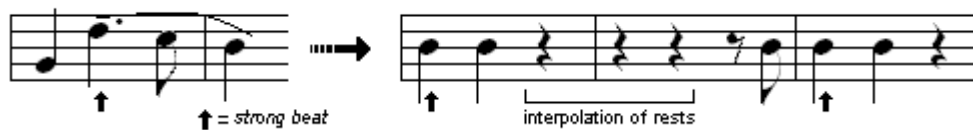


Fig. 4. Demonstration of Rhythmic Displacement

After some additional building, the listener arrives at a third theme, a characteristic found in many expanded sonata structures from this time forward; it becomes a welcome relief from the relentless drive of all that has come before. This passage is often exploited as an opportunity to inject some “interpretive license” via rubato. Wagner is known to have taken this section starting even as far back as measure forty-five at a distinctly slower tempo altogether, but this has not become common practice.⁸



Fig. 5. Third Theme (m. 83)

⁸ Eduard Hanslick, *Music Criticisms 1846-99* (Baltimore: Penguin Books, 1950), 104-106.

Some noted authors consider what this author labels the second theme to be the “first transition,” making this new theme the second theme proper.⁹ However, others have agreed that while this lyrical, almost pianistic passage constitutes the most clearly devised break in the action, its position in the movement comes in too little and too late to put the material at measure forty-five into such a weak position. In either case, this beautiful melody is only a brief calm before the dramatic closing to the exposition. The highly integrated closing group consists of ideas borrowed from all three groups of themes, and relies completely upon them. It begins to function as something of another pre-development.



Fig. 6. Rondo-like Theme (m. 288)

This rondo-like theme augments the sonata arch with some seemingly new material upon first hearing. Many authors apparently struggle with what could be taken as yet another borrowing from previous material. The accompaniment originates from measure seven in the violins and the rhythmic element used in the melody is merely a displacement of the rhythm used in the second theme group.

The first movement ends explosively in a coda as only Beethoven could have written, one nearly as long as the exposition itself. One cannot help but notice a special sense of proportion. The figure below demonstrates the importance of performing the piece with the

⁹Hopkins, 69

Table 1b. Phrase Analysis of Movement One (Recapitulation-Coda)

Section	M. No.	Material	Structure	M. Total
Recapitulation	402	1 st Theme	4 x 2 + 2	10
	412	“ ”	4 x 5 + 2	22
	434	“ ”	4 x 2 + 2	10
	444	“ ”	4 x 2	8
	452	1 st motive	(4 x 3) + (4 x 2)	20
	472	2 nd motive	4 x 4 + 2	18
	490	2 nd Theme	4 x 6 + 2	26
	516	Free (integral)	4 x 5 + 3	23
	539	Closing Group	4 x 4	16
	555	Bridge	4 + 2 + 4	10
Totals			88 + 49 + 22	159
Coda	565	1 st Theme	3 + 3 + 6 + 4 + 4	20
	585	Special Theme	4 x 3 + 2	14
	598	2 nd Motive	4 x 2	8
	606	Bridge	4 x 3	12
	618	1 st Theme	4 x 4	16
	650	“ ”	4 x 8	32
	682	Free	4 x 4 + 2	18
		Cadence	4 x 3 – 1	11
Totals				135

repeat of the exposition as Beethoven requested. It is known that Beethoven specifically requested that this repeat be observed for this very reason.¹⁰

Table 2. Sectional Proportions of Movement One

Exposition	Development	Recapitulation	Coda
308 (<i>153</i>)	254	159	135
36%	30%	18%	16%
(<i>22%</i>)	(<i>36%</i>)	(<i>23%</i>)	(<i>19%</i>)

Italics indicate performance without repeating the Exposition

The second movement grows naturally out of the first with regards to melodic content, but offers a complete change of direction in terms of style. It is not the first time Beethoven has taken listeners to this dark place; a perfect example being his Piano Sonata, Op. 26. While the solemnity of the work is timeless, the unique temperament of the French Overture could perhaps be lost on modern generations; the audiences of Beethoven's day however, would have no trouble recognizing this work for exactly what it is. The salient characteristics in that specific contest are the extremely slow tempo (*adagio assai*), minor

¹⁰Leon Plantinga, *Romantic Music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 1984), 41.



Fig. 7. Second Movement (m. 1-8)

the imitation of drum rolls as if in a procession, and the dotted rhythmic figures so central to the French style.¹¹ It is interesting to note that, rather than allow the timpani to play an actual drum roll, the timpanist is asked to strike only on the downbeats, allowing the strings to imitate its sound instead.

Table 3. Phrase Analysis of Movement Two

Section	Measure No.	Material	Structure	M. Total
A Section	1	1 st Theme (a)	2 x 4	8
	9	1 st Theme (a)	2 x 4	8
	17	1 st Theme (b)	2 x 7	14
	31	1 st Theme (a)	2 x 3	6
	37	1 st Theme (b)	2 x 7	14
	51	1 st Theme (a)	2 x 3 – 1	5
	56	Free and Cadence	2 x 6 + 1	13
Totals:			30 + 38	68
B Section	69	2 nd Theme (a)	(2 x 3 + 1) + (2 x 2)	11
	80	2 nd Theme (b)	2 x 8	10
	90	2 nd Theme (b)	2 x 6 – 1	11
	101	Bridge	4	4
	105	1 st Theme	2 x 5 – 1	9
	114	Fugato-I	2 + 1	3
	117	Fugato-II	9 x 2	18
	135	Fugato-III	2 x 2 + 1	5
	140	Fugato-IV	2 x 5	10
	150	Bridge	2 x 5	10
	160	Special Theme	2 x 6 + 1	13
Totals:			36 + 68	104
A Section	173	1 st Theme (a)	2 x 4	8
	181	1 st Theme (b)	2 x 7	14
	195	1 st Theme (a)	2 x 2 + 1	5
	200	Free	2 x 5	10
	210	Bridge	3	3
	213	Codetta on I	2 x 12 + 1	25
	238	1 st Theme	2 x 5	10
Totals:			40 + 35	75

The first theme is clearly based directly on the first theme of the first movement. This is laid out in an especially transparent way, as it happens without any introductions and

¹¹Plantinga., 41.

with a very dry accompaniment. The first 8 pitches (not counting the anacrusis) share an identical contour, although the Funeral March is more conjunct than triadic.

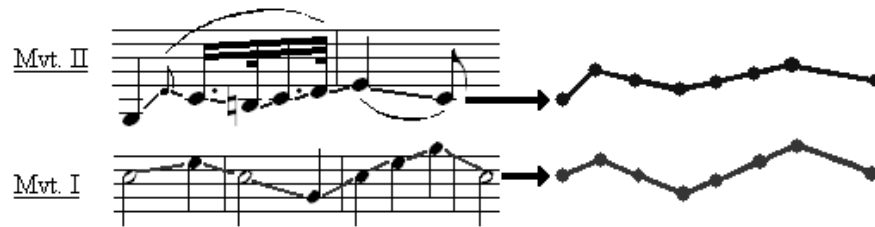


Fig. 8. Melodic Contour Comparison of First Themes

The second part of the first theme will be discussed later for its cyclic relation to another theme. The Second Theme (m.69) is unique in its abandonment of the minor key throughout a *Marcia Funebre*, and he actually changes modality without changing key signature. This *C Maggiore* (Major; he actually emphasizes the point by writing it in the score) section is very special as the compound quadruple feel of the accompaniment is superimposed upon by a melody in simple quadruple time. The melody and the accompaniment (not shown) use the arpeggio motive, pointing to a clear relationship, again, to all that has come before. It also reintroduces the actual motive for the first time in this movement, as the first theme was actually an alteration of the melodic content.

Another striking point is the forgotten accompanimental figure in the first movement, which now comes back in a slightly altered form late into the middle section of the movement. He then modifies the motive again for use at the end of the movement.



Fig. 9. Modification of Material through Inversion, Diminution, and Intervallic Expansion

Immediately following this point, Beethoven reaches what could be labeled the apotheosis, or ascension, for here we have the most rhythmically tense point in the movement as the duple and triple rhythms “clash,” juxtaposed against the most melodically and harmonically free point in the entire symphony. It is also worth mentioning that he also makes use of a little-remembered figure out of the opening movement, first appearing in the violins in measure 47. Now, we find it serving in a similar role only in double-diminution this time; it can be found first in measure 84 of the second movement, in both violin and flute. This, again, is often overlooked, but fairly easy to see and hear once attention is drawn to it.

Table 4. Phrase Analysis of Movement Three

Section	Measure No.	Material	Phrase Structure	M. Total
Scherzo	1	Theme (a)	$(6 + 2+5+1) \times 2$	28
	29	Development of (a)	$5+4+3+7 + (4+4+1+4)$	32
	61	Transition-recap	$4 \times 6 + (2 + 5 + 1)$	32
	93	Tutti	$2 + 5 \times 4$	22
	115	Theme (b)	$4 + 4 + 4$	12
	127	Conversation	$(2+2) \times 3 + 4$	16
	143	Closing Group	$8 + 8 + 8$	28
Totals:		<i>(w/o repeat = 166)</i>		302
Trio	171	Theme (c)-horn trio	$(8 + 8) \times 2$	32
	203	Theme (d)-tutti, minor	$8 + 10 + 4 + 4$	26
	229	(c')	$(8 + 7) + (4 \times 4) + 5$	36
Totals:		<i>(w/o repeat = 94)</i>		162
Scherzo (Recap)	265	1 Theme (a)	$4 + (6 + 2+5+1) \times 2$	32
	297	Development of (a)	$5+4+3+7 + (4+4+1+4)$	32
	329	Transition-recap	$4 \times 6 + (2+5+1)$	32
	361	Tutti	$2+5 \times 4$	22
	383	Theme (b) w/ cut-time	$(4+4+4) + (2+2) \times 3+4$	28
	411	Closing Group	$8 + 8 + 4 + 2$	22
Totals:				164
Codetta	433	Codetta	$(4 \times 2) + (4 + 4) + 4$	19

In the third movement, Beethoven introduces a scherzo unlike any other written to date, with its constant sway between triple and duple. The phrasing is naturally very asymmetrical here, just as it is throughout the entire symphony, rhythmic ambiguity being a

key trait of almost all Beethoven's music spanning all genres.¹² The trio is a place where Beethoven takes full advantage of his literal trio of heroic horns to, by their sheer presence, re-solidify in this movement, the heroic theme of the whole symphony.

Three major symphonic elements deserve comment in this movement. First, the movement shares in the opening movement's tendency to create duplet groupings in hemiola, as can be seen from the highly ambiguous opening phrases. This is similar to places such as measure 23 in the first movement. The third movement bears even more resemblance in places like measure 287 where interval changes occur within the hemiola, just as in the first movement. These other two elements seem to both take the form of a second scherzo theme. However, they are only cleverly disguised borrowings from the first and third themes of the first movement, as shown in figure 10.

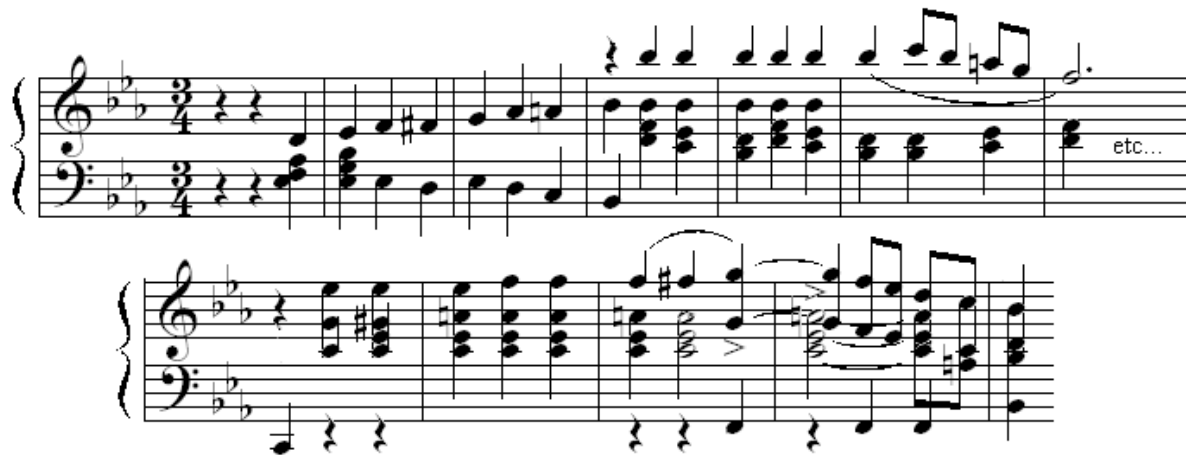


Fig. 10. Relationship between Main Scherzo Theme and Lyrical First Movement Theme

Hopkins believes that the rhythmically displaced similarities of measure 383 is an unintentional one by Beethoven.¹³ However, it is worth mentioning, especially in light of its

¹²This is in response to Mr. Plantinga's somewhat questionable statement that, "Four-measure phrases predominate strongly..." Plantinga, 39.

¹³Hopkins, 89.

book, that set of fantastic variations on a theme of Promethean character, so-to-speak, keeping in perfect accord with the larger theme of heroism.



Fig. 12. Bass theme combined with soprano melody

A more substantive correlation may be found in the content of the melody, as it is restated in the calm, reflective *Poco Andante* of measure 351. This melody actually bears a striking resemblance to the B section of the first theme of the Funeral March. This being the case, it is now easy to see the importance of the second movement because of its thematic linkage to the first as well as the last.



Fig. 13. Comparison of Themes

Clearly, one can see the relationship: the two themes are identical in contour, similar in chord outline, and even identical at times. The character expressed by each is, of course, a different matter, but the underlying relation is extremely important to the unity of the work. Many authors seemed to have overlooked this relationship; Berlioz states that the fourth movement is in fact, not thematically related to any other: “The outline of this melody does not enable one to perceive that it has, so to speak, been extracted from another one.”¹⁴

¹⁴Hector Berlioz, *A Critical study of Beethoven's Nine Symphonies*, trans. Edwin Evans. (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, n.d.), 45.

Table 5. Phrase Analysis of Movement Four

Section	M. No.	Material	Phrase Structure	M. Total
Introduction	1	Dominant Harmonies-Presto -“Conversational” element introduced-	5 6	11
Theme	12	Simple monophonic introduction of (a) as a pizzicato bass line	4 + 4	8
	20	“Conversation” between strings and woodwinds using (a) theme	4 + 4 + 4	12
	32	Hint of what will become the (b) theme in contrasting dynamics	4 + 4 + 4	12
Variation I	44	(a) With imitative countermelody (repeats)	4+4	8 (16)
	54	More developed (b) theme (repeats)	4 + 4	8 (16)
Variation II	62	Spicatto triplets under (a) theme (repeats)	4 + 4	8 (16)
	70	Alternating duple/triple (b) theme (repeats)	4 + 4	8 (16)
Variation III	78	Theme (a) in brass and contrabass	4 + 4	8
	86	Second variation of (a) theme	4 + 4	8
	94	Theme (b) with 16 th embellishments; begins next (b) statement	4 + 4 + 4	12
	106	Finishes another (b) theme -Elides into a transitional phrase to set up C-minor-	4 9	13
Variation IV	119	Fugue on bass fragment of (a) -Episode- -(All entrances originally occur in stretto.)- -Cadence-	(6+6) 2 (6+6) 3	29
	148	Development-Stretto, -Transition-	(6+6) 13 + 4	29
Variation V	177	Theme (a) in simple homophony with Flute solo; dance-like character	8 + 8	16
	193	Arpeggio-Embellished (b) theme, improvisatory sound -(b) restated tutti with conversational triplets- -Transition to G minor-	8 8 4	20
Variation VI	213	March-like melody over (a) fragment in bass	8 + 8	16
	229	All voices change figurations -(a) Fragment is in high strings and winds- -Increased harmonic rhythm; Relaxation-	8 + (4+3½+3½) (2+2) + (4x1) + 4	31
Variation VII	260	Begins similar to Variation V -Quickly becomes a modulatory passage utilizing a tonally inverted form of the (a) fragment in fughetto-	8 + (4+4) 10 + 8 + 11 + 12 (6+7)	70
	330	Transitional Passage	6 + 4 + 4 + 7	21
Variation VIII	351	Poco Andante variation-extremely lyrical	8 + 8	16
	367	Related to (b) theme	8 + 8	16
Variation IX	383	Heroic horn variation over 16 th note triplets in accompaniment -(rhythmic tension reminiscent of the “apotheosis” of Mvt. II)- -Elides into Transition-	8 7 (4+4)	23
Variation X	406	Offset (a) theme -Transitional Passage-	4 12 + 11	27
Coda	433	Introduction material, cadencing to Eb Major -Modified statement of (a) theme in Horns, etc.-	4 4 + 4 + 4	16
	449	Cadential repetition and building -Scale Passages under tonic pedals-	2 + 4 + 4 4	14
	463	“Conversation” revisited Final Scales push to release	4 + 4 (2+1)	11
	474	Tag- Return to the “Signal” of Movement One.	2	2

While Berlioz' words should not be taken lightly, it seems clear to this author upon repeated hearings that the relation is inescapable. Analyzing the score may simply help to determine to what extent these aural relationships exist. The final and most compelling cyclical treatment of this Homeric work comes in the form of a recall of the opening signal as a tag to the coda in the final two measures of the piece. Like the twin pillars on opposite ends of a magnificent suspension bridge, these chords link the first to the last in the brilliant final utterance from this masterpiece, tying it together from beginning to end with a degree of hitherto unknown unity. It is a unique flavor of compositional unity that will keep scholars active for another 200 years.

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