

MUSICMAP NOTES

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Beethoven's Piano Trio in E-Flat Major, Op. 70, No. 2 – 1808

“Compared to its Op. 70 companion, the intense Ghost Trio, the Trio in E-flat major is overwhelmingly genial and warmhearted: a yin-and-yang dyad. Listeners who gravitate toward the defiant Beethoven will have to make an adjustment for Op. 70, No. 2. At least on an emotional plane it seems more connected to the Archduke Trio, which lay a bit more than two years in the future, or, for that matter, to the style of the composer's younger years, although the harmonic subtlety of this trio surpasses anything Beethoven had achieved a decade earlier.” (James M. Keller)

“...quite unjustly one of Beethoven's more neglected middle-period masterpieces. Perhaps, that is also due to its unusually sunny nature, with expansive themes – and many of them – and apparent lack of drama. Nonetheless it is characteristic of Beethoven's gentle side and no less tightly composed.” (Denis Arnold)

“...Beethoven in an amiable, almost placid mood...a work of great freshness and high appeal. Few moments are pervaded by morbid gloom or infused with ecstatic joy; instead there is an overall gemütlichkeit, a kind of cozy comfortableness expressed in muted colors and subdued emotion.” (Melvin Berger)

“In contrast [to the ‘Ghost’], the E-flat trio is a more private work that has little of the heroic aggression associated with Beethoven's use of that key.” (David Wyn Jones)

“...luminous...conspicuously lacking in the tension produced by contrasts...” (Hans Christopher Worbs)

“Emotions are restrained and there is an overall ease that pervades the work.” (J.Y. Song)

Beethoven generally revels in strong contrasts between movements, but here the opposite almost seems to be the case. There is no truly slow movement, and instead, all the tempo indications are quite closely related: Allegro ma non troppo, Allegretto, Allegretto ma non troppo, Allegro.

Movement I – Sonata form, Poco sostenuto; Allegro ma non troppo, Common-time; then 6/8, E-flat major

Slow Introduction:

“...the work opens with a ruminative paragraph, as if the players were discovering their way forward: an increasing idiomatic feature of Beethoven's art.” (Jones) “An elegant, if not entirely

unruffled, introduction... Its carefully plotted, stepwise lines in slow but flowing counterpoint, canonic at the outset, invest this opening with a searching quality.” (Keller) “Delicately scored, [it] starts with the cello alone...and proceeds in four-part imitative counterpoint involving all three instruments, before breaking into pianistic flourishes, over dominant harmony, which presage the coming Allegro.” (Basil Smallman) Only towards the end do we encounter some of the typical dotted rhythm gestures evocative of French overture. These are found in lyrical phrases that gently anticipate the coming main theme. After the effect of almost a tease...

Exposition:

The music switches to the faster allegro ma non troppo tempo and to 6/8 meter.

“Intimate and profound, [it] avoids the customary conflict of themes that is the purview of many Beethovenian first movements. The density of sound is used instead towards a more romantically expressive goal.” (Song) “...a lyrical effusion if ever one was, though its songfulness is infused with an aristocratic bearing.” (Keller)

Main theme: An octave leap launches long, lyrical melody, with freely evolving phrase structure – 20 bars (4+4+12). Opening 4-bar phrase sung by strings in octaves, then harmonizing. This phrase constitutes an important motive that will receive much attention throughout the movement. Phrase then repeated up an octave by the R.H., with livelier accompaniment. The following twelve bars are more free in style, evolving organically from small sighing phrases traded between strings and piano.

Bridge: Begins with actual bridge theme, 8 bars (4+4). First part has vigorous melody presented by the cello over pounding repeated chord accompaniment. 4-bar consequent in treble range gives same material to piano and violin in octaves, but is cut short by brief modulating passagework that effects the actual bridge function.

Subordinate theme: Intro – the music seems to slow down (though no actual tempo change) for a clear reminiscence of the slow introduction. We are not yet in the expected key of the dominant (B-flat major)...instead, this is one example of the “strange harmonic adventures” referred to by Basil Smallman as occurring throughout this movement.

Then, lively string accompaniment signals the arrival of the sub-theme itself (and the dominant key finally), an engaging tune sung initially by the R.H. in a 4-bar antecedent. What follows sounds like a parallel consequent (in the strings), but shortly seems to break down into free alternations.

Closing material: Part I is an actual 8-bar (4+4) contrasting period theme. Lyrical violin phrases in antecedent give way to consequent of bustling 16th-note runs. Counterstatement gives lyrical antecedent to R.H. octaves. This time the busy consequent is much extended in the style of a transition, which finally arrives at a closing rhythmic gesture and solo R.H. cadenza. This heralds the concluding cadence material, based on the opening phrase of the main theme, which in the first ending seamlessly leads us to the exposition repeat.

Development:

Part I is a fluid continuation of the cadence material, further manipulating the opening phrase of the main theme. A long, upwardly-modulating passage, dolce at first, eventually reaches a *ff* climax on this motive.

Part II: Almost stealthily, the violin introduces the sub-theme, which is then traded from voice to voice in a free exploration. Soon the octave leap that initiates the main theme is grafted onto the start of this sub-theme motive, creating sort of a composite of the two lyrical elements. As the development has progressed, the music has led us into more and more daringly remote harmonic terrain. How will we ever get back to E-flat major?

Part III: Retransition. “Beethoven’s way out of the apparent impasse he has created involves a notable piece of musical sleight of hand, described by Tovey as ‘perhaps the most unexpected return in all music.’ In a remarkable three-bar passage he piles up overlapping versions of the principal thematic idea in three different, and necessarily conflicting, keys...” (Smallman)

Recapitulation:

Main theme: The first 4 bars of the actual main theme in the proper tonic key emerge from this on piano, but it is a little hard to know for sure if we are really home yet. The main theme lasts as many bars as before, but Beethoven recomposes it significantly within that span. The second 4 bars sound regular at first, but then drift into new material which continues and takes the place of the original beginning of the freer 12-bar portion of the theme. Eventually, however, this gives way to the familiar later section of those 12 bars in slightly compressed form.

Bridge: After all of this, the vigorous bridge theme sounds reassuringly familiar, though Beethoven adjusts the scoring while re-writing and extending the central part of it, so that it now continues an extra 2 bars.

Sub-theme: The canonic introduction is as before, except that it sounds higher in a new key, while the sub-theme itself also sounds sparkingly high in the upper octave that Beethoven chooses. This material is presented very regularly, though some new triplets are added to enrich the accompaniment in the consequent.

Closing theme: Nothing new here except the key.

Coda:

Part I: Starts with a slightly-varied take on the original cadence material, thus providing continuity with the start of the development. But Beethoven takes this main theme motive in yet another direction here, culminating in a newly forceful presentation.

Part II: Shifts now to the bustling runs of the closing theme’s consequent, which then give way to a cadenza-like R.H. solo that is clearly preparing us for something important.

Part III: Tempo I (poco sostenuto), common-time. We are pleased and surprised by a return to the slow introduction. However, “...Beethoven takes the somewhat unusual step of altering the original scoring and aiming towards a rather fuller texture. This he achieves partly by a

reordering of the parts – involving the transfer of the solo cello opening to the piano and the original bass-line to the cello an octave lower – and partly by adding a new chordal enrichment from the end of the third bar.” (Smallman)

Part IV: Back to 6/8 and *allegro ma non troppo*. After two bars of chirping R.H. excitement, Beethoven gives a joyful and buoyant final rendition of the main theme motive before settling into a mellow conclusion.

Movement II – Double Theme & Variations, Allegretto, 2/4, C major/minor (relative minor)

“In place of a true slow movement, which Beethoven so often invests with great emotional feeling... a graceful, gavotte-like *Allegretto*. There are two main musical ideas, the first elegant and delicate, the second loud and blustery with strong offbeat accents. Beethoven varies the themes in alternation until the coda, where he combines the two melodies.” (Berger)

“...stands resolutely aside from...modulatory adventures...following the ‘double variation’ pattern favoured by Hadyn, and at the same time remains contentedly within the tiny orbit of keys closely related to each tonic. The resultant tonal stability, coupled with a pervading air of gentle whimsicality, imparts a classical serenity to the movement and renders it a perfect foil to its more unbridled neighbor.” (Smallman)

“...sounds resolutely old-fashioned, beginning with a neo-Baroque gavotte, though modernized with a wry sort of figuration beloved by Beethovenians, beginning with the raised eyebrows of the opening motif.” (Keller)

Theme I:

C major. Two-part theme has very regular phrase structure with each part 8 bars (4+4), parallel period. Part II offers a mildly contrasting take on the gavotte material of Part I. With both parts, the piano has the lead in the antecedent and then the cello takes over for the consequent while the violin provides active counterpoint. The piano’s first antecedent has very subdued string contributions, but in Part II there is more prominent participation accompanying the piano’s lead. A crescendo gives a sense of culmination to Part II.

Theme II:

C minor. “...this too has a neo-Baroque cast, being uncannily reminiscent of the sort of blustery, pared-down variations one might encounter toward the end of a Baroque chaconne or passacaglia.” (Keller) 14 bars (4+4+4+2), plus a 4-bar transition/tease. Phrase structure is more unpredictable. After the regularity of the first three 4-bar units, the foreshortened 2 bars is an effective surprise. The ensuing transition has quite a strong sense of a rondo’s tease, as it uses the opening motive of Theme I to summon back C major.

Theme I, Variation 1:

Rather than just varying the theme once here, Beethoven creates a more expanded episode by further elaborations of Part II. The first 16 bars reproduce the original structure of the theme, still very recognizable in melodic contour, but attractively rescored and decorated. The piano

now has the lead throughout, freeing the strings to contribute appropriately dancy commentary. As this variation progresses, the R.H. moves into an attractively tinkly high register that gives a special quality to the scoring. What follows are two more traversals of just Part II of the theme. This time the melodic lead is shared back and forth evenly between the two strings, while the piano provides a new rippling, 32nd-note pulse.

Theme II, Variation 1:

This material returns with phrase structure unchanged, and is much in the same character as before. The presentation is enhanced by somewhat richer scoring and new rhythmic interest from triplets. Also, before the triplet rhythm takes hold, 32nd notes in the first 4 bars provide continuity with the prior C-major material.

Theme I, Variation 2:

After the expansive treatment last time, this is a radically telescoped version with 4 bars of Part I completed by 4 bars of Part II, thus creating a new amalgamated 8-bar contrasting period. Beethoven doesn't use any fancy variation techniques here...again we have piano lead with mellifluous string polyphony. The initial 8 bars are followed by a free extension based on the theme, but soon becoming a teasing, minor-key lead-in to...

Theme II, Variation 2:

After earlier expanding and luxuriating in the major theme, Beethoven here gives C minor its due with a freely exploded and climactic presentation of its material. This still works in 4-bar units, but now the sequence is 4 bars of violin lead, answered by 4 bars for cello. This 8-bar process is then repeated, after which yet another 4-bar unit for violin leads to the climactic 2-bar bit, only now lengthened into an 8-bar gradual decrescendo. Following this, we get the expected transition/tease, this time delivering us to...

Coda:

This brief and affecting coda begins with a short reminiscence of the start of Theme I in C major. However, this is immediately repeated in minor, and then shortened to just its opening gestures as the music becomes increasingly soft, spare and tentative. This turns out to be a setup for loud, concluding chords, somewhat surprisingly in uncompromising C minor.

Movement III – Song & Trio design, but expanded through repetitions to form ABABA, Allegretto ma non troppo, 3/4, A-flat major (sub-dominant)

“The marking *Allegretto* already represents a moderate tempo. Adding *ma non troppo* (“but not too much”)...seems not particularly helpful: does he mean that players should shade the *Allegretto* to the fast or the slow side? Perhaps the former, as this spot in a composition would most characteristically have been the place for a triple-meter minuet – or rather, at this point in Beethoven’s career, a scherzo... The spirit is Apollonian rather than Dionysian, and the phrases are studiously symmetrical, again displaying something of an antique character.” (Keller)

“Though the third movement has the formal pattern of the scherzo and trio (with the trio section played twice), in deference to its melodic material, which is of Schubertian eloquence, these customary titles are omitted.” (Jones)

Principal song:

“The cantabile main theme, borrowed from Beethoven’s earlier Piano Sonata, Op. 26 [in A-flat Major, 1800-1801], has a folk-like purity, with perfectly symmetrical phrases and a simple setting.” (Berger) In the piano sonata, the theme opens the work as the basis for a theme and variations movement. Though recognizable, the theme is markedly altered here.

“...with its attractively lyrical theme, has the air somewhat of a ‘contrasting trio’ section to a preceding – but in this case non-existent – scherzo.” (Smallman)

Beethoven gives us a free interpretation of the expected rounded binary form phrase structure. Part I is an 8-bar (4+4) parallel period, violin melody with murmuring 8th-note piano accompaniment. Instead of a literal repeat, this is then rescored for a somewhat richer sound. We continue with Part II (still violin lead), but the first part of this is a melody that feels very linked to Part I, and in fact later follows the *a'* in the same way, thus it doesn’t really function as a typical contrasting *b*. That role is instead filled by the ensuing more freely modulating and developmental-sounding passage. This concludes with a 4-bar piano solo that serves as the transition back to the home key, but “what might well, in the context, have been a straightforward diatonic progression is transformed...into a curiously enigmatic phrase, part humorous and part mysterious.” (Smallman) *a'* presents the original melody unchanged except now R.H. lead with birdlike violin ornamentation and, as noted above, with its second part continuation. This segues directly into the literal repeat.

Trio:

“...four-bar phrases are set antiphonally between the string and the piano, the former briefly simulating a string trio by the use of consistent double stops in the violin part. Also, there is a charmingly Schubertian passage with modulations which pass rapidly through G-sharp minor to F-flat major, as a Neapolitan chord in E-flat, in a manner which closely, and possibly intentionally, recalls the harmonic events in the first movement development...” (Smallman) Berger describes this material as “...hint of pain or suffering as we hear repeated musical sighs.” Eventually, these “sighs” are enhanced by very high triplet ornamentation from the piano, and these triplets eventually form a segue back to the...

Principal song return, etc:

Part I is slightly re-written with the repeat now given to the piano in a significantly decorated form. However, all of Part II is unchanged, and Beethoven again calls for it to be repeated. The return of the Trio is also unchanged, followed up by the final helping of the principal song. The beginning of this is identical, with the new version from the first return, but this time Part II is not repeated.

Coda:

A brief coda combines elements of both the trio and the principal song. Following the harmonic sighs and tinkling triplets from the end of the trio, we are given a final reminiscence and free exploration of the principal song’s opening phrase.

Movement IV – Sonata form, Finale: Allegro, 2/4, E-flat major

“It is a continuous, ever mounting bustle and commotion – ideas, images chase by in a restless flight, and sparkle and disappear like flashes of lightning – it is a free play of the most highly aroused imagination.” (E.T.A. Hoffman, 1813)

“Finale...is given over purely to running figures, careering off almost without check.” (Worbs)

“...brisk movement whose keyboard virtuosity caused Beethoven to include helpful fingering marks in the printed edition; by now his musical and technical demands not only stretched the accomplished amateur but also posed problems for the most gifted professional.” (Jones)

“The finale opens with a mixture of moto perpetuo and dramatic rhythm and drama is never far away... The abiding impression is nevertheless of several real tunes wending their way unhurriedly and happily.” (Arnold)

“The Finale, though vivacious and rhythmically incisive, is still somewhat reserved in its brilliance, ending with a broad, philosophical coda.” (Song)

“Expansion of tonality is carried to even further limits in the finale, a sonata-form movement of outstanding liveliness and originality...it is the third-related...key-areas which are explored, and not simply as localized patches of ‘colour,’ but as principal tonalities for entire sections.” (Smallman)

Exposition:

Main theme I: 6 bars. “The violent piano runs at the opening...are interrupted by string interjections that appear to be derived from the first movement introduction.” (Berger) This bold, short-long rhythm will crop up repeatedly throughout the movement.

Main theme II: After the piano’s toccata-like opening passage, it now embarks on a warmly lyrical 4-bar phrase that is then matched by 4 bars from the violin. This forms an 8-bar antecedent to the following, mildly-contrasting consequent, also 8 bars (4+4), with the violin maintaining lead at first before passing it back to the piano. Then with cello lead, the theme is more freely extended another 8 bars, the last part of which is clearly a transition to the...

Bridge: 18 bars (6+6+6). This transitional music shifts freely between main theme I material, including the short-long rhythmic figure, and new 8th-note triplets which have the effect of slowing things down in a slightly off-kilter way. Each 6-bar segment gives prominence to one of the instruments as this pattern repeats.

Subordinate theme group:

Sub-theme I: Cello sings this gentle, freely-structured 10-bar theme that passes through minor to effectively set the stage for the more important...

Sub-theme II: “Beethoven’s pupil Carl Czerny maintained that in the G-major section in the middle of this finale Beethoven drew on Croatian melodies that were popular in Hungary, which would have been an appropriate nod from the composer to the Countess, who belonged to a

family of Hungarian aristocrats. [Countess Maria von Erdödy was Beethoven's hostess during the composition of both Opus 70 trios.]” (Keller)

“Against the background of E flat, the major mediant (G major) sounds bright and joyous, and to match this Beethoven provides a second subject group of notable energy and exuberance in which the extremes of register of all three instruments are fully exploited. The corresponding passage in the recapitulation biases the overall tonality so heavily in favor of C major that the composer takes the unusual step of repeating the entire second subject group once again, this time in the original tonic key. And even then it takes a further twenty-three bars over a tonic pedal at the end fully to restore the tonal balance of the movement.” (Smallman)

“...second theme, forceful and incisive...” (Berger)

Statement – Piano lead, 12 bars without clear subdivision. Leaping beginning launches wide exploration of range as piano evokes sound of Eastern European *cimbalom*.

Counter-statement – Matching 12 bars gives violin's interpretation of the same material.

Closing theme: “...rhythmically vivacious third theme...” (Berger) This is presumably the second “Croatian”-inspired theme. 12-bar parallel period (6+6). Ringingly-scored long-held notes are followed by vivacious rhythm. Sonorous theme shared jointly by all three instruments with colorful changes in the consequent.

Cadence material: Main theme I *moto perpetuo* returns, this time shared by piano with strings, leading to first ending that seamlessly sets up exposition repeat.

Development:

Now the *moto perpetuo* closing material continues into a second ending that marks the start of...

Part I: Solo R.H. virtuostic expansion of theme.

Part II is gloomy, slowed version of closing theme, so drained of animation it's almost unrecognizable.

Part III: Returning to main theme I *moto perpetuo* once again, this long section is an exciting and extended exploration of both its running 16th notes and the short-long rhythmic interjections. This builds powerfully with classic Beethoven fervor until we reach...

Part IV: Retransition. More gentle passage continues to play with the same main theme material while effecting the necessary modulation for the...

Recapitulation:

Main theme I emerges bright and clear high in the R.H., but this presentation proves still very “development-like” as the *moto perpetuo* and the lyrical main theme II are now freely intertwined and alternated. Music continues to modulate, including an ominous excursion into minor, before we finally reach the...

Bridge: After such a freely rewritten and expanded main theme group, the regular recapitulation of the bridge here is reassuring.

Sub-theme group & Closing theme: This is the passage previously referenced in the Smallman quote, where Beethoven recapitulates all this material in C major rather than the expected tonic.

Coda:

Part I: Now, as Smallman has prepared us to expect, here is the very regular reiteration of these themes, finally in the tonic E-flat. Unconventional though he may be, Beethoven ultimately can't flout the expectation of grounding all this material with a final presentation in the home key. Fortunately, he keeps this all interesting and rewarding by inventive new scorings that give an effective sense of culmination.

Part II: Launched, as expected, by the moto perpetuo cadence material, this section further explores main theme I in juxtaposition with main theme II (following the lead of the recapitulation), extracting gentle new poetry from each before a few rousing closing chords. As noted by Smallman, long tonic pedal completes the job of unambiguously affirming the home key, so the movement can end on solid harmonic ground.

“This trio occupies a unique place in Beethoven's oeuvre. While many of its details are those of middle-period Beethoven, they seem to some extent overlain on an older template, almost as if Beethoven were rewriting a composition from his earlier years – which to some extent he did by resurrecting a pre-existing theme in the third movement. The distinguished commentator Donald Francis Tovey rightly viewed this as a work ‘where Beethoven discovers new meanings for Mozart's phrases and Haydn's formulas.’ But when all is said and done it is in no way a retrograde composition. In its relaxed character (both in its moderate tempo markings and in the behavior of the instruments within the movements), the unfussy forthrightness of its technique, the distinctive contour of certain modulations, and its overall spirit of scarcely impeded *joie de vivre*, this piano trio brings us surprisingly close to the sound of another great composer who would not emerge until a decade later: Franz Schubert.” (Keller)