

Beethoven blog

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I'm writing this (25-27.7.16) almost like a blog. I'm putting forward ideas without first researching them and thus risking making a fool of myself with statements and assertions which the smallest amount of Googling would refute. I've been listening to Beethoven's late quartets, and a couple of considerations came up. A few days of mulling things over have not settled my mind at all, on two specific points.

Point 1

I was listening to op 131 and at the start of the second section this grabbed me by the ears:



Again a modulation to the dominant, as in the *Waldstein*, this time at the end of a very long (for Beethoven) melodic tract. Also this is a solo line, unaccompanied: a bold step in those days for a cello sonata.

Or take the opening of the piano sonata op 31 No.3:

This feels almost as if Beethoven wanted us to imagine this might be an introductory passage (it isn't of course, except in its recitative-like hesitancy). But Beethoven has again taken a revolutionary step: he's started an E-flat major piece in F minor. We can't easily imagine today how shocking that would have been. Take the opening of op 111, a highly chromatic, shifting-sands beginning which quickly ends up in remote keys and has to be gradually wheedled back and, when it gets back, it's to the effing dominant! But this doesn't contradict Beethoven's method – this is an introductory passage, not a first theme. In introductory passages he allowed himself to be wayward, setting up uncertainty or false expectations which could be resolved by the appearance of the theme proper. This is exactly what happens in op 111, where the first subject, when it arrives, is diatonic in the extreme.²

This distinction between introductions and first subjects is taken to and beyond the extreme in the first movement of the op 130 quartet. The slow opening – the introduction – has a chromatic melody while the *allegro* first theme, when it arrives, is completely diatonic – off the wall rhythmically³ but completely diatonic: indeed it uses up every note in the B-flat major scale. But then the old bugger (truly old by now – in his fifties!) stops the *allegro* and introduces the intro all over again, this time in F, the dominant. And the *allegro* comes back again – in F. The second subject, when it finally arrives, is in G-flat major! – making us think of the *Hammerklavier* which went from the same B-flat major as here to G for its second subject. Then, lo and behold, the intro keeps returning as if it's part of the first subject. More and more as the movement continues and concludes, the slow intro is combined and merged with the *allegro* first subject. And more and more, as this progresses, *the intro becomes diatonic*.

So, to recap, Beethoven seems to have made it the business of his themes (first and second subjects both) to establish the home (or away) key very definitely by using diatonic notes⁴ for long

² Note that the theme of the first movement of op 111 is in the minor. Beethoven seems when writing minor-key themes to have allowed either the dominant seventh or the major seventh, or both, to count as diatonic for melodic purposes.

³ – as many times elsewhere in his oeuvre, and as taken even further, later in the century, by Brahms.

⁴ Mozart set himself no such 'rule'. Even if we dismiss the opening of the K491 C minor piano concerto as an extreme example, there are dozens of his themes that include chromatic notes. So Beethoven's 'rule', if I am right, was a personal one independent of the progress of musical history.

enough for there to be no doubt. The extreme example of this is *Rasumovsky* No. 1. The exception, as we saw above, is op 31 No.3.

So what's he doing in op 131 (first example above)? We've had a long, intricately-worked fugue in C# minor which winds down to a hushed close full of tragedy: then – ray of sunshine and hope – an unprepared shift to D major and a lovely, lilting melody. *Which contains the chromatic note.* Ok, not a very strong note, on a weak part of the bar, and resolving before we even really hear it onto a diatonic note: but this is Beethoven, who doesn't do that kind of thing. Remember he's not modulating to the dominant as he did in the *Waldstein* and the cello sonata; he's not compounding a deliberate rule-break, as in op 31, preparatory to the relief of a homecoming – this in op 131 is seemingly without justification, a trivial offence, a breaking of a personal rule *for no reason.* I'd love to be contradicted but I believe this may be the first and only instance of Beethoven trivially putting a chromatic note into a first or second subject. Please someone disabuse me. As I stated at the beginning I'm not researching this. I'm just digging into my knowledge and memory of Beethoven's works and assessing them.

I've just thought of the obvious exception: *Für Elise*. Somehow I'm not inclined to ditch my theory for this coffee-table piece. More of a threat is the opening of the op 14 No. 2 piano sonata:



– but note that this, the *Waldstein* and op 31 No. 1 are the *only three piano sonatas* (out of 32) that have a chromatic melody note within their first two bars, and two of these (obviously not the *Waldstein*) could be claimed to be adopting an 'old-fashioned' tone. OK, I did some research.⁵

Perhaps this points to a sort of 'exceptional circumstances' rule Beethoven might have adopted (or used unconsciously). When he does introduce a chromatic note, as in op 14 No. 2 above, he's deliberately being 'antique'. That would certainly be an appropriate conclusion in relationship to the second section of op 131: after the extreme rigour of the C# minor fugue Beethoven relaxes the tension with a nostalgic Mozartian curlicue.

(There is an interesting moment in op 131's companion piece, op 135. At the opening of the last movement something strange happens. We again find ourselves thrown into an extremely chromatic passage where the home key is nowhere evident – like the introduction to op 111. This 'muss es sein?' section is of course another introduction, so (my assertion of) Beethoven's rule of

⁵ While preparing this piece for publication I did some further research, a quick trawl of Beethoven's major instrumental works, and found my theory largely confirmed. When he does introduce a chromatic note it's generally a 'pre-emptive' modulation to the dominant that prompts it: that or, especially in early works, the insertion of a written-out turn or grace note. In the cello sonatas op 69 is the only example of a chromatic note occurring at the beginning of a movement. In the violin sonatas there are several examples – five in all (in ten sonatas) but only one of these occurs after op 30. In the quartets there are five or six, according to how you judge it, two of them attached to op 130 (both of its finales, in fact!) In the symphonies we find a paltry four.

diatonic themes doesn't apply. The theme when it comes, the true first subject, sees the light-hearted adoption of F major and a fast tempo at 'es muss sein'. This is wholly diatonic. But wait. The second phrase, G, B-flat, F, is harmonised to an unbending F major accompaniment. What's wrong? By the standards of Beethoven's day a B-flat over an F major harmony (complete with major third) was a staring discord!

Even today we hear it as slightly jarring. (At later recurrences of this theme Beethoven mitigates the effect with more conventional harmonisations.)

Point 2

Talking of op 135 (which I was, somewhere) I think it's a really problematic work. I don't think it quite comes off. I actually think, apart from the major stylistic problem that I'm going to discuss below in detail, there is – wait for it, I'm talking about the incomparable Beethoven here – some poor writing in places. I'm not going to assert that the reason Beethoven was off form was because he was ill and dying, because there's some sublime stuff here as well, and, additionally, the next thing he wrote, the new finale for op 130, is transcendently wonderful.⁶ To be specific about op 135, I have three criticisms in addition to the major stylistic problem I'll go into next. 1) The scherzo is not the greatest or funniest he ever wrote – that's in op 131 – and here he shows a definite falling off. Of the jokes, only the grinding ostinato in the trio works for me. 2) The slow movement seems to me actually second rate. The theme – and yes, I know, Beethoven specialised in taking deliberately banal tunes and apotheosing them – is here so undistinguished it can't be transformed: and anyway the variations seem to me timid and ordinary: and (contrariwise) not to be sufficiently reminiscent of the theme to be easily recognised as variations. 3) The finale, that Janus-faced entity, peters out oddly at the end as if Beethoven couldn't bring himself to plump decisively for either tragedy or joy.

But the major problem with op 135 is stylistic. The highly contrapuntal, often chromatic, deliberately tough manner Beethoven increasingly adopted through the late quartets works

⁶ This movement was his last completed piece of music, and I believe Schubert must have seen it before he wrote the finale of his last piano sonata, also in B-flat, whose theme starts with the same disembodied G-natural upbeat and then follows the same chord sequence as Beethoven's.

magnificently for tightly-argued, highly serious passages but breaks down when, here, he tries to lighten up.⁷ Strange, in the following piece, the new op 130 finale, he gets it dead right. Comedy, good temper, a wink, a smile, a false clue, a never-ending ending, all combine in a triumphant, energetic, laughing farewell. But here in op 135 he cocks it up.

Rosen, I think it is, says of the classical style that its exponents were lucky to be on the scene at the exact moment when the musical language arrived at a place where it was both attractive (readily understood by the listener) and capable of the widest range of emotional expression, from the lightest comedy, through the most voluptuous melodies, to the deepest tragedy music can express, allied to a formal precision (the sonata principle) which, added to all of the above, gave the music intellectual rigour *en plus*. After Beethoven the language moved on – by the time of Wagner it was progressing towards chromaticism and formal looseness – and the moment was lost. Composers working in the last hundred years cannot hope to achieve the classical style's immediacy-with-depth (unless your name happens to be Duke Ellington – but that's genius at its highest for you).

My argument about op 135 is that Beethoven had already taken the musical language beyond the classical optimum. His extreme contrapuntalism negated the simplicity of Haydn's and Mozart's largely homophonic textures, and his chromaticism and dislike, later in life, of unaltered repeats and recapitulations, together with his formal experimentation and his dizzying changes of mood, made his music, first, *difficult*, but also, I assert, capable of a narrower band of expression. Coming to op 135 he attempted a lighter, more elegant, more valedictory⁸ touch, and fell short.

⁷ Scherzos are different. In his scherzos Beethoven is trying to tell you a joke by hitting you in the face with a boxing glove. 'Light' they are not.

⁸ This is the second time I've used a term (the first was 'farewell') that implies Beethoven knew he was dying and was expressing it musically. Neither assumption is justified (as it might have been in the case of Schubert). You can assert, however, that Beethoven was bidding farewell to the string quartet, at least for the moment.