***ALTO / Musical Concepts intends to publish via YouTube a video of this longer essay below.***

***As and when that happens during 2023, wherever you see (demo) below that will refer to a point in the video talk. However, the essay below alone is still a very valuable in-depth read!***

What is it that still fascinates us about Beethoven's Symphonies two hundred years after they were written? What is it that makes them still so special today? Each Symphony certainly has a tremendous emotional impact on the listener and from *Symphony No.1* to *No. 9* their musical logic and clarity involve us deeply into musical processes. But what are these effects based on? Beautiful melodies? Here's an example from his *Second Symphony* (**demo**). Without doubt a wonderfully shaped melodic line. But Beethoven is certainly not just a composer of lovely tunes — many as there are in his works, beautiful melodies were not his prime interest.

So let's take a look at another musical element: harmony. How does Beethoven use chords and their relation to each other? A highly interesting question indeed, because in Beethoven's works we find both extremes: total simplicity but also a high degree of complexity. Here is an example of Beethoven's simple harmonic writing. You certainly know his setting of Schiller's ‘Ode to Joy’ from the *Ninth Symphony*. When this famous tune is played for the first time by the full orchestra, Beethoven's harmonization is very simple. He uses only two chords really (**demo**). Beethoven uses simple harmonic means here because he does not want to detract from the powerful tune. So his harmonization serves to highlight the melodic line.

By the way, chords related like this (**demo**) are the most direct way to establish a key. If one says a piece of music is written in a key, this means that all the harmonies in it are grouped around one central harmony, the so-called tonic. All harmonies have an individual relation to this tonic. And a key always appears in two colourings or modes, as one says: major (**demo**) or minor (**demo)**. In contrast to what we have just heard from the *Ninth Symphony*, here is an example of great harmonic complexity, this comes again from his *Second Symphony*. Its main key is D major (**demo**) but towards the end of the first movement there is a brief shift to the key of G minor (**demo**), which means a modulation has taken place.

And now listen to the sequence of chords with which Beethoven moves back to the original key (**demo**). A dramatic return, touching various other keys and finally reaching the main key again.

so, we have looked at examples of Beethoven's melodic invention and his harmonic writing. But there is another characteristic aspect **(demo**). This famous beginning from his *Fifth Symphony* is melodically not spectacular and it is harmonically rather ambiguous. So what is it that makes these few notes stand for Beethoven for so many people today?

Of course, it is the striking rhythm! Beethoven himself stated on various occasions how vitally important rhythm was for him. A speciality of his is the energetic forward-surging up-beat. What does this mean exactly? Basically, musical rhythm means the division of time into short and long sounds. But, as soon as we divide time into parts, we also get the feeling of strong and weak beats (**demo**). Once such a pattern is established, any length of time is subject to the feeling of strong or weak (**demo**). And in certain constellations the weak beat appears as an up-beat because it leans towards the next strong beat, the down-beat: this happens at the beginning of a piece (**demo**) or within a phrase (**demo**). In both cases the group of short notes, before the long note, functions as an up-beat. Of course, every composer uses this principle; but in Beethoven's works it plays a leading role. It gives them their irresistible drive and pulsating energy.

So after these general remarks about Beethoven's music, let's now take a look at this:

***Beethoven: Symphony No.1*** *First Movement: Adagio molto - Allegro con brio*

Vienna — 1800: a new century and also a new chapter in Beethoven's life as a composer. He had already made quite a name for himself as a pianist and as a composer of piano works and chamber music. But he still had to prove himself as a composer of symphonies. However, for a young composer the historical situation was not exactly easy. There was this vast musical heritage: Joseph Haydn, Beethoven's teacher for some time, had just concluded his symphonic oeuvre with re-sounding success. Mozart's last three symphonic masterpieces dated back only 12 years. What then can a young, aspiring composer do to get attention for his first symphony? Well, he can, for instance, irritate the public! (**demo**). This opening of Beethoven's *First Symphony* has often been commented on. It has been said that the public in 1800, when this was first performed, must have been shocked by the dissonance right at the beginning of a symphony (**demo**). Well, that may have been the case then. But today? Today's listener is certainly used to much sharper dissonances. No, it is something else in this beginning which still creates a certain disorientation. The reason is that Beethoven hides for quite some time the main key of the symphony, C major.

You remember, I said earlier on that two chords can establish a key. Here they are again (**demo**). This is how Beethoven opens his C major symphony, but this is F major, the wrong key, so to speak. Second bar (demo). Now with the second go, Beethoven seemingly steers towards C major, the main key. But he does not fulfill our expectation because he turns to an unexpected harmony (**demo**). Third try (**demo**) he turns to yet another 'wrong key', G major. And only in the sixth bar does he establish C major. He really goes round the houses quite a bit! To do so at the very beginning of a symphony, where the listener expects the main key to be firmly stated - this is really new and very puzzling indeed! After this short but teasingly eventful slow introduction, the fast part, the allegro movement, begins. It is written in sonata form.

This is one of the most important and fruitful musical forms from the 18th century right up to the 20th century. Its overall structure is relatively easy to describe: there is sometimes a slow introduction and then a change to a fast tempo takes us into the so-called exposition. What is being exposed here? Basically two musical ideas. We call them the first and second subject, or theme. According to the text book the first subject has an extroverted character, has a certain drive, whilst the second subject, in a different key, is more relaxed, more gentle in character.

After the exposition a so-called development section follows. Here both subjects, or parts of them, are elaborated; that means the composer looks at their innate potential to re-model and transform them or to put them into contrast with each other. After this the recapitulation follows, in which both subjects appear again, this time in the same key. So the recapitulation is the counterpart to the exposition. Then a final section, the coda, rounds off the musical proceedings. So: sonata form means a musical process: ideas are stated, developed and re-stated. When they appear that second time they have a history, so to speak.

But the scheme of sonata form is only an abstract idea from the textbook. In reality there is hardly any symphony which follows this scheme in a completely academic way.

Here is just one example to show this: the first subject of the *Second Symphony* you know already (**demo**). And now the supposedly contrasting second subject (**demo**). This second subject certainly does not have the contrasting character which the textbook asks for. On the contrary, the subjects are rather similar to each other in character and also have similar rhythmic features. On the other hand, it's not wrong to keep the overall formal scheme of sonata form, as I described it, in mind. But, only an analysis of each individual work can tell you something about its structure.

So: back to the **First Symphony**.

The first subject of the first movement is a good example of how Beethoven captivates the listener with rhythmic energy and once again it comes from the impulse of the up-beats (**demo**). But there is another rhythmic phenomenon which gives this subject its special drive. The rhythmic germ-cell is (**demo**). Beethoven transforms this into (**demo**) that means it is reduced to exactly half the length. In this way, the rhythmic energy is tightened and this rhythmic intensification seemingly also influences the melodic line. Because first of all, the melodic line is limited in its range. Then it gains the energy to jump-up an octave, it "takes off', so to speak (**demo**). The listener may not be aware consciously of this process but he will certainly feel this increase of energy which is so typical of Beethoven.

The second subject is much more relaxed in character. It is introduced by the woodwind, alternating between oboe and flute (**demo**). There are hints to the ascending notes from the first subject in the accompaniment (**demo**). The development section crashes in with an unexpected change of key and then quotes the first subject (**demo**). After this, Beethoven uses a characteristic rhythmic formula from the second subject (**demo**). In context it sounds like this (**demo**). Here we have a perfect example of development technique: the new juxtaposition of thematic material which makes it appear in a totally different light.

At this point, just a few words about Beethoven's use of dynamics. His dynamic markings rarely exceed those of Haydn or Mozart. In general, they range from pianissimo (very soft) to fortissimo (very strong). But, whilst Haydn and Mozart use dynamic markings very sparingly, Beethoven's scores are littered with them! They are crowded with forte, piano, crescendo, decrescendo and — a favourite of his — sforzato, which means a sharply accentuated single note or chord. Another speciality of Beethoven is his use of subito forte and subito piano. That means the very sudden change from soft to loud or vice versa. The beginning of the development section, for instance, is full of these (**demo**).

These extremely contrasting and sometimes rather abrupt dynamics, increase the impression of continuous movement and tension in Beethoven's music. So, one can say, his dynamics go hand-in-hand with inner-musical processes. And it is with a gigantic crescendo that he takes us into the recapitulation section of this movement (**demo**). Now something very special happens: Beethoven separates this up-beat (**demo**); the strings continue with this, whilst the woodwinds at the same time play an ascending line in crescendo (**demo**). Do you remember? Yes, it is a subtle reminiscence of the slow introduction (**demo**). Here, in the recapitulation, the transition through various keys is greatly expanded and intensified dramatically by the crescendo (**demo**). A really exciting compositional device. After this, the recapitulation section follows in the footsteps of the exposition. The coda, the final section, is a classical example of its rounding-up function: the ascending line of the first subject is extended here to two octaves, from (**demo**) to (**demo**). In this way, a great feeling of affirmation is achieved, bringing this first movement to an almost triumphant close (**demo**).

*Second Movement: Andante cantabile con moto*

After this bundled energy, the listener could expect a relaxed, predominantly lyrical slow movement just as he is accustomed to from Mozart's symphonies, for instance.

And how does Beethoven fulfil this expectation? Well, really, not at all! First of all, there is Beethoven's tempo indication. He does not ask for the traditional slow tempo adagio or largo but for an andante con moto, which means a relatively fast walking pace. Then there is the way he opens this movement (**demo**). This is really a rather unusual start for a second movement. Technically speaking this is a so-called fugato, which means the single parts enter with the same subject one after another and they are handled independently for some time. And there is something else notable: The subject has a decidedly graceful dance-like character (**demo**).

Also the second subject of the movement — written in sonata form again — confirms this impression (**demo**). The character of both subjects point to a specific type of dance, the minuet. A minuet is a formal, courtly dance which was very popular in the 17thand centuries. It has a slowish triple beat (**demo**). Now you may ask: a minuet as part of a symphony? Actually, yes, this is quite normal for early classical symphonies. The symphony itself emerged from the suite, which was a set of dances and the minuet was the only one of these dances to be taken over into what became the 'symphony'

Already in symphonies by Haydn and Mozart we find a slight increase in the tempo of the minuet. Eventually this led to a really fast tempo, from I - 2 - 3 to I, 2, 3 (**demo**) and this way the scherzo was born, this capricious, vivacious movement, which then became the standard.

The minuet was traditionally placed after the slow movement as the third movement in a symphony. So, when the second movement begins like a minuet in Beethoven's *First Symphony*, many a listener on a first hearing may have asked himself: "Oh dear, where was the slow movement?"

*Third Movement: Menuetto. Allegro molto e vivace*

But Beethoven's game of puzzling the listener goes on: he calls the third movement 'Menuetto' (minuet) but in actual fact this movement is a very fast, eccentric scherzo, its tempo marking being allegro molto e vivace (**demo**). It would be rather difficult to dance a minuet to this music so why did Beethoven call this movement a minuet when it is clearly a scherzo? As I said, the minuet was a fashionable courtly dance. Now, Beethoven had little sympathy for aristocratic fashions. On the contrary, he believed strongly in emancipation and freedom of the individual. So, maybe he wanted to make a special point here, saying: "This, the third movement, was the traditional place for the minuet, but as you can hear, I'm doing away with it - times have changed!"

A real minuet we find only once in his symphonies: it is in the *Eighth Symphony,* written in 1812. Here he quotes this type of dance with subtle irony as something belonging to the past. This movement is called "Tempo di Minuetto" and it starts with two introductory bars (**demo**).

There is a striking similarity here to the opening of the second movement of the *First Symphony* (**demo**). As you can hear, the tempo is the same, the notes are exactly the same and in both cases the key is F major (**demo**). Of course I cannot prove this but perhaps in 1812 when writing his *Eighth Symphony* Beethoven remembered the fun he had playing with tradition and with the listener's expectations by writing a second movement which started like a minuet in his *First Symphony*.

So, back to this symphony and its third movement. The only conventional feature of it is its form: main part — middle part (the so-called trio) — and repeat of the main part. Everything else in it is unusual, if not revolutionary. Its subject goes up like a rocket, first with a range of an octave plus a fifth (**demo**) and, when it appears a second time, even two octaves (**demo**). In the middle part Beethoven uses the rhythm of the opening but melodically he creates here the absolute opposite of the exuberant ascent there. Because here, at the beginning of the middle part, he indulges almost exclusively in repeated notes played by the woodwind. Apart from a short interjection by the violins, we hear one and the same note played 17 times (**demo**).

*Fourth Movement: Finale. Adagio — Allegro molto e vivace* The fourth movement begins with a big bang, a fortissimo attack played by the whole orchestra (**demo**) and then - as if intimidated by this - the first violins begin to play piano. And what they play is nothing more than fragments of a scale (**demo**). It is as if Beethoven is giving us an elementary music lesson: "Look! Here! This is the range of a third: (**demo**), a fourth: (**demo**), a fifth: (**demo**), a sixth: (**demo**), a seventh" (**demo**) - and when the octave (**demo**) is finally reached we are suddenly in the first subject of this movement (**demo**). So, in this introduction Beethoven proves himself as a master of subtle musical humour. Having set a humorous tone there, Beethoven sticks to it almost throughout the movement. Once again, it is written in sonata form and both main subjects have the same light-hearted touch (**demo**).

For the development section Beethoven applies the same technique as in the first movement: he combines fragments of the two subjects. Dominating is the characteristic run from the first subject (**demo**) mostly leading upwards but sometimes in the other direction (**demo**). With this he combines, for instance, a characteristic rhythmic motif from the second subject (**demo**). In the development section the combination of this and the run sounds like this (**demo**). Scintillating humour also in the coda. Here Beethoven repeats the first subject for the last time but then suddenly, in the middle of the phrase, the orchestra interrupts itself with a brusque forte, as if to say: "it's enough now!" (**demo**). I must say, whenever I conduct this symphony, this place makes me smile inside!

**Beethoven; Symphony No.2**

After the positive reaction to his *First Symphony*, Beethoven entered a phase of great productivity. He wrote several important *piano sonatas* in 1801 and 1802 and in all of them he explored new directions. Amongst them is the famous *Moonlight Sonata*, which - quite unusually — begins with a slow movement. So, it was an experimental time. However, it is often said that the *Second Symphony*, written in 1802, follows very much in the footsteps of the *First*. But I think this is only half the truth. Certainly, the *Second Symphony* shares to a large extent a feeling of vitality and optimism with the *First*. But there are differences. To name but two: the richness of ideas gives the introduction and the slow movement of the *Second Symphony* more weight and length. And the finale is much more ambitious than the lightweight last movement of the *First Symphony*.

*First Movement: Adagio - Allegro con brio*

The introduction begins with an up-beat call scored for the whole orchestra (**demo**). I mentioned earlier on how important the up-beat principle is in Beethoven's music. In this movement it is even a sort of motto. It is a rhythmic leitmotiv which helps to create unity throughout the movement. It is interesting to know that the idea of unity, also on the melodic level, already existed in Beethoven's first sketches. How do we know this? Beethoven left a large number of sketchbooks in which he noted down his ideas. Ideas which he changed or adapted very often, or sometimes even discarded. These sketchbooks give us a fascinating insight into his way of composing. Fortunately the sketches for the *Second Symphony* are preserved.

So let's take a quick look into the composer's workshop: Today we know the beginning of the *Second Symphony* like this (**demo**). Now let's hear Beethoven's very first melodic idea for the introduction: it is totally different music (**demo**). The allegro was meant to start like this (**demo**). As you can hear, the intended unity between introduction and allegro existed. But the motif itself had no profile and therefore no potential for development. In fact, it cost Beethoven a lot of trouble until he found the final solution. All in all, he wrote about ten different versions.

Unlike the beginning, the second subject already existed at an early stage more or less in the version we know today (**demo**). In the exposition, this subject moves towards a dramatic climax in which the two predominant rhythmic motifs of this movement (**demo**) are juxtaposed directly (**demo**). As you heard, the opening call is repeated several times in fortissimo, then there is a sudden pause, after which, in pianissimo, the rhythmic motif of the first subject creeps in.

Also in a moment like this the *First* and *Second Symphonies* really differ from each other: in the second, Beethoven sharpens the contrasts, he goes to extremes with his thematic material.

This occurs also in the development section. Here again he extracts the rhythmic motif of the first subject (**demo**) and he gets quite obsessed with it at some point (**demo**). After this, the first four bars of the second subject are something of a restful contrast (**demo**). And here again Beethoven takes a fragment of the subject, the third bar, makes it an independent unit and enables it to develop the following section (**demo**). The recapitulation section does not differ very much from the exposition. It is followed by a weighty coda. In this it comes to the dramatic climax, which I had mentioned earlier on as an example of Beethoven's complex harmonic writing. Right at the end of this movement the two rhythmic motifs appear for the first time simultaneously. It has a powerful effect (**demo**).

*Second Movement: Larghetto*

The second movement is a haven of serenity and peace; nevertheless, there are a few moments of disquiet in it. I had already quoted the first subject as an example of great melodic invention (**demo**). Strings only play this first part of the subject, then the clarinets and bassoons reply, repeating it note for note. In this way, one of the main characteristics of this movement is introduced: the dialogue between different instrumental groups. An impression of give-and-take, of harmonious partnership, arises from this.

One may wonder whether that perfect melodic line was ready in Beethoven's mind right from the beginning. Well, let's have another quick look into his sketchbook. And there we see: no it wasn't. The first version was like this (**demo**). It's fascinating how Beethoven achieves greater expressivity by making only a few changes: he alters the first interval (**demo**), builds in a trill in the third bar and, above all, he heightens the melodic line (**demo**). Once again the movement is written in sonata form. The second subject begins like this (demo). As this subject unfolds, it comes to another intensive dialogue between woodwind and strings. Beethoven bases this on a very simple motif, a descending fourth (**demo**).

The development section leads us right from the beginning into darker regions. The first subject appears in a minor variant (**demo**). Shortly afterwards the music comes to a standstill, so to speak, the violins repeating one and the same note for seven bars. In this static, disquieting sphere Beethoven begins a dialogue between lower strings and woodwind (**demo**). He repeats it, this time bassoon, oboe and flute are involved in the dialogue (**demo**). This seems to be a completely new idea but, in actual fact, it is not. Because, in general, whatever happens in a development section by Beethoven — it has its 'history', it is derived from somewhere: And this motif is derived from the minor variant of the first subject (**demo**). The remainder of the development section is marked by two dramatic climaxes and turning-points, the last of which brings us back into the recapitulation.

*Third Movement: Scherzo. Allegro*

The First and Second Symphonies come nearest to each Other in their third movements. They have the same length and also the scherzo of the *Second Symphony* has an eccentric, even bizarre, trait. Beethoven's contemporaries were highly irritated by this, as we know from many a review of the time. In fact, the impetuousness of this movement is still perceptible today (**demo**). This is not a subject in the classical sense of the word but the repetition of a three-note motif which is tossed about from one instrumental group to another (**demo**). The dynamics change abruptly nine times within sixteen short bars and like this contribute to produce the impression of boisterous high-spirits. In the trio a gentle oboe melody creates a short moment of calm (**demo**) but the strings interrupt this brusquely and so remind us that this scherzo has a fundamentally impetuous character (**demo**).

*Fourth Movement: Allegro molto*

The very opening of the finale displays another example of bizarre humour (**demo**). But don't be deceived by this burlesque opening! This movement is by no means the sort of light-weight finale that Beethoven wrote to end his *First Symphony*. On the contrary, this final movement of the *Second* is Beethoven's first approach to a problem which was to occupy him right up to the *Ninth Symphony*: how can one make the last movement the culmination, the high spot, of the total symphonic process? The first decision to be made in connection with this concerns the overall form. As we know from Beethoven's sketches, he struggled for a long time with this question. He finally made up his mind to use the so-called sonata-rondo form. This means that the first subject does not only re-appear at the beginning of the recapitulation but also before the development section and before the coda. The coda itself Beethoven expanded enormously, giving it in part the character of a second development section.

And last but not least he extended the links between the sections, the bridge passages. Here is an example: after the first subject there comes a substantial bridge passage which prepares the entry of the second subject (**demo**). The second subject is really a strong contrast to the first one: long melodic lines played by the woodwinds are accompanied by very light, short notes played by the strings. Then there is a dramatic development section: the first subject turns to minor, then two intervals are extracted and set against each other. This makes a wild, even violent, effect (**demo**). We find a similar place in the coda, which, as I've mentioned already, has developmental traits (**demo**).

All in all this coda has something of the finale of an opera. In an opera finale very often all the characters are brought together a last time to bring the plot to an end. Similarly here: for a last time Beethoven hints at all the material of this final movement. In this rounding-up process playfulness and dramatic outbursts interchange in a flash. And it all ends with the triumphant reappearance of the first subject.

It has often been said that Beethoven's *First* and *Second Symphonies* follow very much in the footsteps of Haydn and Mozart. This implies that the 'real Beethoven', the musical revolutionary, begins with the *Third Symphony*, the "Eroica". But in my opinion this does not do the first two full justice. Of course, Beethoven employs in them to a large extent the same musical vocabulary as Haydn and Mozart. However, when we look at Beethoven's usage of rhythm and dynamics, when we experience how he indulges in the contrast of musical ideas in these two symphonies - then we realize just how individual and innovative he is. And as he makes all his statements with the utmost clarity, these symphonies still fascinate us today with their musical logic, expressive power and exciting drive.

The fact that Beethoven, building on these qualities, once again breaks new ground with his *Third Symphony* written just one year later in 1803 ... well, that's another chapter!

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