

Rethinking Sonata Form in Beethoven's Lyricism

by Peng Liu

The University of Texas at Austin

liupeng@utexas.edu

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Tripartite divisions remain a commonplace in Beethoven reception, although there exists controversy among scholars about it. Of these three periods, the middle period (ca. 1803-1814) often has been more discussed and valued than the other two periods, and certain selected 'heroic' pieces written roughly between 1803 and 1809, such as the "Eroica" symphony (1803), the Fifth Symphony (1807-08), the opera *Fidelio* (1805), the "Emperor" Piano Concerto (1809), and such Piano Sonatas as the "Tempest (1802)," "Waldstein (1803-04)," and "Appassionata (1804-05)," have been widely accepted as symbols of Beethoven's musical style. This heroic reading, or the narrative of "the overcoming self," as Scott Burnham calls it in his book, has become a "powerful underlying force in the way we have come to construct not only Beethoven's music but all of Western tonal music."¹

Various biographical, philosophical, political, and cultural reasons might explain why the 'heroic' or 'masculine' image prevails in Beethoven reception. Although the heroic style plays a significant role in Beethoven's music, it cannot be regarded as the entirety of his output. Some scholars have attempted to turn their attention to Beethoven's "other" side—to "non-heroic" aspects.² One of the most intriguing facets of his "non-heroic" style, as I shall explore in this paper, appears in a group of lyrical sonata-form pieces written between 1809 and 1814.

After Heroism: Lyricism in Beethoven's Middle Period

In the wake of the heroic style, there arises an intense fascination with lyrical style in Beethoven's sonata-form movements.³ His preference for more intimate genres, such as solo

¹ Scott Burnham, *Beethoven Hero* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 153.

² Both Knittel and Burnham involve this issue. Besides, Matthew Head's article "Beethoven Heroine: A Female Allegory of Music and Authorship in *Egmont*" talks about a female hero in Beethoven's *Egmont*, and argues that "heroines" in *Egmont* is the symbol of freedom as well as the transcendence in the aesthetic sphere. Daniel Chua's lengthy article "Beethoven's Other Humanism" attempts to find a set of values that challenge the ethical force of the hero reinforced by recent scholarship. Nicholas Cook in his "The Other Beethoven: Heroism, the Canon, and the Works of 1813-14" discusses two works of Beethoven marginalized by "Beethoven Hero" paradigm, he argues that reading both works in different aesthetic basis give access to aspects of Beethoven's music that the "Beethoven Hero" paradigm suppressed. Elaine Sisman in her article "After the Heroic Style: Fantasia and the 'Characteristic' Sonatas of 1809" talks about three piano sonatas written after heroic style which reflect Beethoven's rhetorical integration of *fantasia* and the "characteristic," of image and invention, of tale, topic, and poetic idea.

³ One can certainly also find antecedents of this lyrical style in Beethoven's earlier career, for instance in the G major Piano Sonata, op. 14, no.2, the Violin Sonata, op. 24, the Cello Sonata, op. 69, or in Pastoral pieces as op. 28, both of which place a premium on smoothness rather than dramatic contrasts. And this lyrical impulse is also prominent in late Beethoven, especially his piano sonatas such as op. 101, op. 110, and op. 127. But in this period 1809-1814, lyrical style becomes more concentrated in Beethoven's music. One might also suggest that the lyrical

piano music and chamber music, also corresponds with this new trend. From 1809 to 1814, Beethoven composed seventeen instrumental works that he published with opus numbers. While a few pieces still remain in the heroic style, such as the “Emperor” Piano Concerto, op. 73, and the “Egmont” Overture, op. 84 (1809-10), a more lyrical character occupies almost half of the works, including the “Harp” String Quartet, op. 74 (1809), the Piano Sonatas, op. 78 (1809), op. 81a (1809-10), and op. 90 (1814), the Violin Sonata, op. 96 (1812), and the “Archduke” Piano Trio, Op. 97 (1810-11).

Several Beethoven biographers acknowledge this stylistic tendency. Maynard Solomon notes that after finishing the “Pastoral” Symphony (1808), Beethoven turned to chamber music and piano sonata, and states that “a sense of inner repose” imbues many of Beethoven’s works, in which “a new, lyrical strain enters his music.”⁴ Lewis Lockwood remarks that “a group of three piano sonatas...move in a new direction different from heroic style,” and discusses several lyrical chamber pieces such as the Cello Sonata, op. 69 (1807-08), the Piano Trios, op. 70 (1808) and op. 97, and the Violin Sonata op. 96.⁵ William Kinderman even suggests that “a spacious, lyrical serenity characterizes several of Beethoven’s works” around 1806 such as the Fourth Piano Concerto, op. 58 (1804-06/07); in view of the central importance of the “Eroica” Symphony and *Fidelio* and their connection to other compositions such as the “Emperor” Piano Concerto, however, Kinderman prefers to speak of the period between 1806 and 1809 as heroic style.⁶ He then points out that a strongly lyrical style permeates works like op. 96 and op. 97. Aside from these biographies, Elaine Sisman in her article “After the Heroic Style” also posits a new turn to lyricism and a tendency to write smaller-scale works in 1809. But one of the most definite and detailed clarifications on Beethoven’s lyricism after 1809 appears in Stephen Rumph’s book offering political readings of Beethoven. In a chapter entitled “1809,” Rumph suggests that both political turbulence and ensuing economic crisis account for new trends in Beethoven’s music. He identifies four principal directions emerging in Beethoven’s music of 1809 that also prefigure his late style: historicism, counterpoint, lyricism, and written-out cadenzas. As for lyricism, Rumph ascertains that works written in 1809 show “an intimate tone that departs from the monumental, hortatory temper of his heroic manner,” which opens “a new space for leisurely melody, and shows a genuinely Romantic shift from drama to lyrical reflection.”⁷ Rumph attributes this stylistic change to Beethoven’s response to the trauma in the outer, disordered world. He also suggests that Beethoven’s use of lyricism offers resistance to the monumental style of French neoclassicism. Apparently, for Rumph this lyricism is closely tied to the political background around 1809. Rumph further notes the de-emphasis of obvious motivic work in favor of alternative concepts of thematic development. In his analysis of the first movement of the “Harp” String Quartet, for example, Rumph points out that a listener might fail to trace the “harp” motive throughout the work for “Beethoven is not developing so much a motive as the idea of ‘arpeggiation’.”⁸ To explain this phenomenon, Rumph borrows the notion

approach used in this period prefigures Beethoven’s late music, such as Dahlhaus’s “subthematicism” and Rumph’s four directions as I will discuss soon.

⁴ Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven* (New York: Schener Books, 1998), 269.

⁵ Lewis Lockwood, *Beethoven: the Music and the Life* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2005), 299 and 303.

⁶ William Kinderman, *Beethoven* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 135.

⁷ Stephen C. Rumph, *Beethoven after Napoleon: Political Romanticism in the Late Works* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 100.

⁸ Rumph, 103.

of “subthematicism,” from Carl Dahlhaus, who also applies it to Beethoven’s works from 1809 onward.

Dahlhaus’s view on Beethoven's lyrical tendencies around 1809 are important to understand. As early as his 1980 book *Nineteenth-Century Music*, Dahlhaus asserts that a “new tone” appears in Beethoven's works between Op. 74 to Op. 97: the rigor and consistency of Beethoven’s thematic and motivic manipulation in many works relaxed to “make room for a lyricism that infringed against the spirit of sonata form by permeating whole movements rather than remaining confined to their second themes.”⁹ He discusses this new approach in greater detail in his article “Cantabile und thematischer Prozeß: der Übergang zum Spätwerk in Beethovens Klaviersonaten” published in the same year.¹⁰ He labels the period between the middle “heroic” style and the late “esoteric” style as a “transitional” period, suggesting that traditional tripartite divisions of Beethoven's career disguise, or at least obscure, the individual nature and the historical significance of the works between op. 74 and op. 97.

For Dahlhaus, the lyrical style posed a significant compositional challenge to Beethoven because of traits that set these work apart from the so-called "heroic style." The most palpable feature is the use of a lyrical main theme in sonata form rather than the motivic type of theme found in Beethoven’s “heroic” pieces such as the Fifth Symphony and “Tempest” piano sonata. In addition, the lack of sharp character contrast between main theme and subordinate theme is another salient factor. For instance, two themes in both op. 74 (mm. 27-35 and 58-65) and op. 97 (mm. 1-8 and 60-72) present a lyrical and long-breathed character. According to Dahlhaus, such lyricism infringes against the spirit of sonata form. For Dahlhaus, Beethoven’s sonata form, especially in his heroic style, presents an urgent, processual, and goal-directed activity by means of the so-called “thematic-motivic working,” a concept borrowed from Hugo Riemann. In the lyrical sonata-form movements, however, the cantabile principal theme prevents, or at least inhibits such a discourse due to its lack of the dynamism that is characteristic of the energetic motives in the heroic style. Dahlhaus presumes, however, that Beethoven would not simply have allowed this lyricism to go its own sweet way: its paradoxical relationship to thematic process was interpreted as a challenge that had to be met. Accordingly, Dahlhaus argues that an abstract and latent “subthematic” structure was the way that Beethoven met the challenge.

Dahlhaus defines the “subthematic,” on the one hand, as an abstract, interior, and latent structure as opposed to its conventional counterpart—the concrete, exterior, and manifest “thematic.” On the other hand, the “subthematic” can also be understood as a special form of the “thematic” from which the “subthematic” derives and detaches. The “subthematic” becomes the metaphor of form as a network through which the parts of the composition can be united. For example, in his discussion of Beethoven’s String Quartet, op. 132, Dahlhaus constructs a “subthematic” formula, which is less a “theme” or a “motive” and more an intervallic structure, independent of rhythm and meter, such as “the configuration of two rising or falling semitone (G#-A-F-E) steps with a variable interval between them.”¹¹

⁹ Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, translated by J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 81.

¹⁰ Carl Dahlhaus, “Cantabile und thematischer Prozeß: Der Übergang zum Spätwerk in Beethovens Klaviersonaten.” *Archiv für Musikwissenschaft* 37. Jahrg., H. 2(1980): 81-98. Seven years later, Dahlhaus made a little revision and included this article in his Beethoven monograph.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 203.

Instead of problematizing Dahlhaus’s theory of “subthematicism” here, I will mainly deal in the following with two related issues, focusing my analysis on the development sections of four sonata-form movements characterized by lyrical main themes (op. 74, 78, 81a, and 97): 1) how stylistic oppositions characteristic of the heroic style are still present in Beethoven’s lyrical style; and 2) how such oppositions nevertheless are used to different effect. As my analysis will show, the “motivic” working in Beethoven’s lyrical pieces is still present, but the way in which they are used, especially in development section, does create a different character, a less goal-directed process consistent with the non-heroic rhetoric of the lyrical style.

Rethinking Beethoven’s Lyrical Approach in Sonata Form

The lyrical theme in the “Harp” String Quartet, op. 74 (see example 1), is composed of a four-measure melody in the first violin and its repetition in viola. This lyrical melody can also be divided into two motives—they are labeled respectively as “x” (a melodic motive in the box) and “y” (a dotted-rhythmic motive in the circle, which is in effect derived from the initial Adagio section). It is these two motives that become the main developmental material that Beethoven uses to make the piece progress urgently. At the beginning of the development, the motive “x” is presented in the two violins in a canonic way, and then it is gradually shortened to a two-beat unit that still retains its original melodic direction. This fragmented version increases in dynamics. However, Beethoven does not allow the dynamics to continue to develop in straightforward fashion; rather, he introduces the complete theme twice successively in cello and violin keeping at the highest level of dynamics—*sforzando*—until afterwards a new element, motive “y,” enters to complete the evolving process. The music continues to develop in similar fashion, by gradually reducing the length of the motive to achieve a kind of restless energy and to move continually, but the dynamics gradually decrease until the forte arpeggio shows up marking the beginning of the recapitulation. By breaking the lyrical theme down into two different motives, each subjected to developmental processes, Beethoven achieves a kind of unity and also creates a sense of urgent motion; at the same time, the appearance of the complete lyrical theme twice in the development somewhat impedes its goal-directed impetus, allowing the movement to retain its lyrical character even in the most “unstable” realm.

Example 1 Beethoven, “Harp” String Quartet, op. 74 - I: Lyrical theme, mm. 27-31.

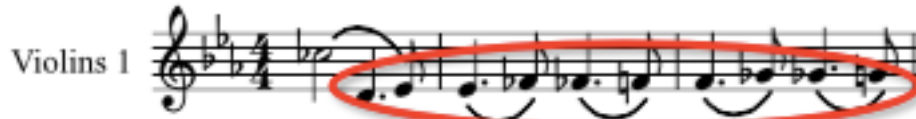


Example 2 Beethoven, “Harp” String Quartet, op. 74 - I: Poco Adagio, mm. 1-4, 18-20.

2a)



2b)



Example 3 Beethoven, “Harp” String Quartet, op. 74 - I: Development, mm. 80-89, 96-106, 109-110.

3a)



3b)



3c)



The first movement of the Piano Sonata, op. 78 also has two motives: melodic motive “x” and rhythmic motive “y” (which can also be regarded as a derivation from the Adagio introduction). But the difference with Op. 74 is that motive “y” is simultaneously contained within motive “x.” In the first six measures of the development, Beethoven works with motive “x,” choosing the dotted-rhythm figure as the dynamic element to develop sequentially in different registers. This approach conforms to the nature of a development section, which requires the music to move energetically. But we should be aware that after this comparatively short development, a repeat sign appears at the end of the recapitulation. If the performer plays the whole movement with all indicated repetitions, the resultant A-A-B-A-B-A pattern might remind us of rondo form, which actually weakens the teleological trajectory and intense dynamic characteristic of the typical heroic sonata form. Notably, there is also no coda in this piece to serve as the final goal of a “goal-directed” sonata form.

Example 4 Beethoven, Piano Sonata, op. 78 - I: Lyrical Theme, mm. 5-8.



Example 5 Beethoven, Piano Sonata, op. 78 - I: Adagio cantabile, mm. 1-2.



Example 6 Beethoven, Piano Sonata, op. 78 - I: Development, mm. 38-40, 43-48.



Similarly, a lyrical motive and rhythmic motive also occur in the first movement of the Piano Sonata, op. 81a, but these are developed in a different way. The famous diatonic third-progression (“Le-be-wohl”) can be regarded as a lyrical theme with a sentimental air through which Beethoven expresses his farewell to Archduke. The rhythmic motive “y”, from the Allegro theme, primarily comprises two eighth notes and a following quarter note. How does Beethoven arrange these two motives in the development in this piece? The answer is that the

two contrasting motives progress alternatively, with the original quarter-note “Lebewohl” motive now extended into three whole notes, so as to preserve the character of the slow version at the beginning of the movement; however, the changed direction of the last whole note, (instead of descending, it ascends) makes the original stable motive more uneasy. The frequent interruption of the short and energetic motive “y”, by the extended and lyrical motive “x”, creates a sense of deceleration that decreases the typical instability in a development to a certain degree.

Example 7 Beethoven, Piano Sonata, op. 81a - I: Adagio, mm. 1-2.

Adagio.
Lebewohl
p espressivo

Example 8 Beethoven, Piano Sonata, op. 81a - I: Main theme, mm. 17-21.

Piano

Example 9 Beethoven, Piano Sonata, op. 81a - I: Development, mm. 70-83.

Piano

Pno.

The last piece, the *Archduke* Piano Trio, op. 97, also has a very simple but intimate lyrical theme; the rhythmic difference between the first two measures “x” and the following two measures “y” is simply the added upbeat dotted rhythm in the latter one. The structure of the development is similar to that of op. 74. After the short introduction, the cello and violin successively play the five-note “x” melody, then gradually reduce the melody to the middle three notes, which breaks the original melodic and metric regularity and achieves a sense of instability by accenting the second beat. After a long passage of *sforzando*, the music surprisingly goes into the *pianissimo* realm in which the “y” phrase appears. The alternative occurrence of “y” in cello and violin by *pizzicato*, accompanied by the regular trill in the piano, builds a sense of humor until the consistent eighth-note scale and increasing dynamic appear, then leading to the appearance of motive “x” and eventually entering the recapitulation. The development in this piece is longer than the others but less energetic. The unexpected witty and soft passage again makes this sonata form distinct from those typical agitated and goal-directed development sections in Beethoven’s heroic period.

Example 10 Beethoven, “Archduke” Piano Trio, op. 97 - I: Lyrical theme, mm. 1-4.



Example 11 Beethoven, “Archduke” Piano Trio, op. 97 - I: Development, mm. 115-118.



Example 12 Beethoven, “Archduke” Piano Trio, op. 97 - I: Development, mm. 150-158.



By analyzing Beethoven’s four lyrical movements, we are now able to ascertain how the lyrical theme functions in the development sections. Both principles of sonata form—unity and dynamic progress—can still be spotted here but in a different way than in heroic works. Beethoven extracts different elements from the lyrical theme—which is usually a lyrical melodic “x” and an energetic and rhythmic one “y” (especially a dotted rhythm); then he arranges these two elements differently in the development. On the one hand, this manner facilitates the coherence of the whole movement; on the other hand, Beethoven seems to differentiate his lyrical pieces from heroic pieces by lessening the degree of goal-directed process in sonata form. As we have seen, Beethoven uses various means to achieve this goal: bringing back the complete lyrical melody in the development like op. 74 and op. 97; shortening the length of development and making the sonata form more rondo-like by adding a repetition sign like op. 78; extending the duration of lyrical motive for slowing rates of the progress in the development like op. 81a;

or inserting a pianissimo passage as opposed to the intense dynamics like op. 97. All these ways help Beethoven make the sonata form in lyrical pieces unique and characteristic.

Conclusion

It is apparent that traditional techniques of fragmentation and liquidation are still operative in Beethoven's lyrical sonata-form movements, but that developments are less goal-directed and dramatic than those of the "heroic style." Dahlhaus's "dialectical" reading of sonata form seems to be of less importance for these lyrical movements, in which Beethoven uses different techniques to decrease the momentum in the development and lessen contrasts between two themes. "Tension," which is typical of heroic style, is mitigated, thus taking away some of the urgency of the lyrical pieces.

In the end, I would like to take our topic back to the reception of Beethoven. Heroism has firmly dominated Beethoven reception for many decades, and it might still prevail in the following several decades. I am not trying to overshadow Beethoven's heroic style, which would be impossible, given its centrality to Beethoven's reputation. What I need to stress here, however, is that we should not pay all our attention to this one particular respect of Beethoven, and consciously or unconsciously neglect all others. Beethoven's lyricism, as an important element of style throughout his life, deserves more of our attention. Only if we distribute our energy to various styles and forms reflected in all Beethoven's music, rather than just profound and heroic ones, can Beethoven, as a real great historical figure, be alive and wholly present to us.

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