

## The Scherzo of Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony

“[Blank bars] are as necessary to the planning of good symphonies as parks are to the planning of good towns.” (Donald Francis Tovey 1944, p. 62)

The scherzo of Beethoven's 9<sup>th</sup> symphony has always captured my attention. As an inner movement in a composition that is monumental in both its musical and its historical significance, it understandably receives less attention than the opening movement and the Finale. The outer movements present us with numerous yet-unresolved questions about form, tonality and the state of the symphonic genre at the end of the classical period. The scherzo, on the other hand, does not seem to diverge very radically from established norms for its form and function in the symphony. It is long, for a scherzo, but its length is not unusual in relation to the symphony's other movements.

I find that the scherzo of the 9<sup>th</sup> symphony stands out in its unrelenting sense of thrust and forward drive. The feeling of perpetual momentum maintained through the scherzo – though momentarily alleviated during the trio section – stems not only from the movement's extremely fast *molto vivace* (♩=116) tempo, but also from several features in the musical material set to that tempo. The scherzo is set in triple meter but its basic rhythmic unit is the single measure. This in itself is not unusual for a Beethoven scherzo; many of his scherzi are written in this format<sup>1</sup>. I feel that in this particular movement the handling of the thematic material in terms of tonal and melodic phrasing creates a sense of continuity that works alongside the even, rapid

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<sup>1</sup> Tovey suggests that Beethoven writes all his scherzos with the shortest possible bars (Tovey, 1944 - p. 70).

pulse of the scherzo to create the experience of sustained energetic motion throughout the movement. The scherzo avoids very clear cadences within its body; the strong tonal caesuras appear only on primary section boundaries and coincide with long rests. I can only imagine that Tovey would agree that his statement that opens this paper applies to this particular scherzo no less than to symphonies in general. Although the thematic phrases and periods do not escape the ear, without clear tonal punctuation there is always a feeling of one musical element flowing into another. Cook addresses this phenomenon when he writes that “[t]he basic design of the Scherzo seems to be based more on patterns of entries, as in a fugue, than on large-scale cadential structure.”<sup>2</sup> I feel that Beethoven manages to achieve a sense of continuity akin to fugues or other polyphonic writing both on the larger scale and in the transitions between the phrases. As well as almost making his phrases and periods sound like a long, through-composed musical stream, he also presents the rhythmic details of his theme in a way that, at times, both subverts this sense of constant flow and promotes it.

Before proceeding to analyze the movement and to demonstrate how its handling of the musical material is unique, a brief glance at another movement set in the same form would be helpful. One obvious rhythmic element that permeates the 9<sup>th</sup> symphony scherzo (and the trio as well) is the quarter-note as the prevailing note duration for most of the musical material. One symphonic scherzo by Beethoven exhibiting a similar fundamental texture is the 3<sup>rd</sup> symphony scherzo<sup>3</sup>. It begins with the entire string section softly reciting the tonic chord in strict homophonic texture

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<sup>2</sup> Cook p. 31.

<sup>3</sup> It also bears the exact same metronome marking -  $\text{♩} = 116$  .

at the steady pace of the quarter-note. This consistent quarter-note foundation is maintained throughout the movement; it is used both to support the significant thematic material, and to sustain the lulls that fall between the appearances of the various subjects. Still, the scherzo of the *Eroica* symphony differs from that of the 9<sup>th</sup> symphony, among other things, in the way that it exhibits very clear punctuation in its presentation of thematic material. For example, the first appearance (in the dominant) of the first subject begins very clearly when the oboe enters in m. 7, and its 8-bar phrase ends with an unmistakable melodic and harmonic cadence at m. 14. Throughout the movement, clear phrases can be identified using punctuation devices native to the classical idiom and the formal significance of these devices comes across even in cases where the music does not actually stop, but continues its quarter-note flow. However, in the 9<sup>th</sup> symphony scherzo the quarter-note texture does not support any distinct melodic material nor does it serve as filler between separate thematic blocks; here this texture is the material itself, and strong thematic cadences –when they appear – are pronounced with full measure rests. The overview of the movement that follows will hopefully further clarify these distinctions.

The symphony's 2<sup>nd</sup> movement is set in traditional A-B-A form with a contrasting trio between two scherzo sections. The two scherzo sections, set in binary form<sup>4</sup>, are virtually identical except for the missing repeat mark on the second half of the second instance of the scherzo, and the added coda at the end, which is not very different from the segment leading into the trio at the end of the first scherzo section. The trio is in **D** major in contrast the **D** minor key of the entire movement, though

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<sup>4</sup> Cook relates to the scherzo as a complete sonata form in itself (Cook, p. 31), and Tovey also uses sonata-form terminology to describe its various parts (Tovey, 1936 pp. 23-25).

the parallel major appears in several other significant places in the movement, echoing the minor/major duality that was present in the opening movement.

The scherzo begins with open octaves reminiscent of the open fifths from the beginning of the previous movement. From the outset, rhythm is established as a central element, with these dropping octaves presented in a dotted figure. Some of

The image shows a musical score for the beginning of a scherzo. It consists of two staves: the upper staff is for Strings and the lower staff is for Timpani. The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 3/4. The score begins with a *ff* dynamic marking. The first measure shows a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note and a quarter note, with an open octave between the notes. This is followed by a *G.P.* (Grave Pause) in the second measure. The third measure shows a *sf* dynamic marking and a similar rhythmic figure. The fourth measure is another *G.P.*. The fifth measure shows a *ff* dynamic marking and a similar rhythmic figure. The sixth measure is another *G.P.*. The seventh measure is another *G.P.*. The score ends with a double bar line and repeat dots.

the devices that Beethoven uses to generate the feeling of motion in the scherzo can be found in the first 2 measures. They open with a dotted quarter note followed by an eighth note and a quarter-note. This dotted rhythmic figure in itself is not a pattern foreign to music set to triple meter; it would actually promote a dance-like swing were it to be set in the context of a longer phrase. In this case, however, the octave drop between the first dotted quarter-note and the following eighth-note serves to clearly break the bar into 2 equal-length beats. Within the single-stroke bar, the clear separation of pitches between its two halves renders the eighth-note as prominent second – weaker – beat, while the quarter note that follows it sound more like the trailing edge of the previous note at the same pitch, rather than a significant rhythmic element within the written triple subdivision of the bar. It is noteworthy to examine how this figure is manipulated later in the movement, in the transition into the trio<sup>5</sup>; the dotted figure appears hurriedly at single-bar entrances until it emerges in m. 412 in its clear duple-meter form, the octave drops dividing each alla-breve

<sup>5</sup> Tovey 1936, p. 25.

stroke in two, much like they do in the opening bars. Thus, the dotted-rhythm pattern, when followed by a bar of silence in the movement's introduction, functions as a musical "brake".<sup>6</sup>

The dropping octaves in each bar, not only affect the bars' inner division – resisting the natural motion prescribed by the  $\frac{3}{4}$  time signature – they also inherently evoke a sense of cadential finality. The ensuing pause, followed by the appearance of the same motif in the dominant, and then once again in the tonic would fit very well as a concluding cadence in any symphonic movement. This 8-bar introduction is divided into two 4-bar phrases (later in the movement designated by "*Ritmo di quattro battute*") and within this structure the final re-statement of the octave motif in the tonic is syncopated — delayed by a bar in which only the timpani accent the figure in F. Thus, the introductory passage at once both presents rhythmic irregularity on several levels, and communicates a very clear stop. In fact the rests marked "*G.P.*" in these first eight bars will recur later in the scherzo and will serve as the most forceful punctuation marks in this movement that, for the most part, does not greatly rely on clear tonal phrasing and the implicit and explicit punctuation that comes with it.

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<sup>6</sup> In contrast – a related device is used to forcefully restrain the forward motion in the scherzo of the 3<sup>rd</sup> symphony; there, on the first strong cadence on the tonic in m. 115, the bar accents are shifted to the second beat with *sforzandi*, and then further syncopated in m. 118. The considerable melodic leaps in that figure are similar to the octaves in this scherzo. Also, when the scherzo returns after the trio, the second instance of this disruptive rhythmic figure at the cadence (m. 381) is rhythmically altered to such an extent that it receives its own "alla breve" time signature for the duration of its 4 bars. It seems that in his 3<sup>rd</sup> symphony, Beethoven was very clear about where he wanted the forward motion to be halted.

Once the scherzo commences, it seems that such an arresting figure as the dotted-rhythm pattern would go against the movement's natural grain, but Beethoven actually uses it as the kernel for most of the musical material in the movement, in the sense that he transforms it into an element of forward motion that is totally organic to the prevailing rhythmic texture that it was originally foreign to. He manages to weave it into the continuous flow of the scherzo to such an extent that it becomes a propellant, rather than a restraining device.

The movement's first and primary theme seems rhythmic in nature – consisting entirely of quarter-notes, except for the opening dotted-rhythm bar. Beethoven begins the movement after the above introduction in what can only be described as a fugue. The fugue's subject is four bars long and the fugal plan consists of answers on the dominant that are for the most part real; while the answers are all set on **A** minor and transposed note-for-note a fifth above the subject, they open with the dotted octaves on **D** and not on **E** — the only tonal modification to the answers. The statements and answers appear in tight succession between the five string parts.

The use of the fugue at the beginning of the movement is yet another deceptive device. A fugue traditionally brings with it a polyphonic texture between its various voices; one voice usually proceeds at a faster or slower pace than the others at any given point, while all of the voices together maintain a single cohesive pulse. In the fugue that opens the scherzo, the five voices are not only adhering to a single pulse, but they are also uniform in their individual rhythms, except for the dotted opening bar when it appears in each voice. Beethoven transforms the fugue into a strictly homophonic texture moving quickly and steadily in quarter notes. In fact, after the exposition of the fugue, almost all other musical parameters become stagnant and

only the rhythmic thrust remains as the salient force supporting a slow and constant crescendo. Not only is the entire orchestra playing over a dominant pedal-point in mm. 33-55, rendering a harmonic stasis, but the carefully maintained contrary motion between the upper voices dissolves any sense of identifiable melodic material. At this point, it seems that Beethoven's theme is the constant quarter-note motion itself.

The first significant cadence on **D** minor occurs in m. 57 after this long dominant preparation. The tonal resolution coincides with a thematic one, when a consolidated theme emerges stringing together the fugue's subject and counter-subject in one line set in a strictly homophonic texture. The fugue is thus abandoned after being used merely as a generative device. Although the orchestral melodic motion is not as balanced at this point, with the theme's simple (almost simplistic) contour more clearly heard in the two violins and the 1<sup>st</sup> flute, the other instruments mostly alternate brief contrapuntal passages with longer passages that consist of a repeating single note, all in quarter-note rhythm. This accompaniment serves to reinforce the forward thrust of this section, carrying the theme along on a massive "wave" of sound.

The opening dotted figure plays an interesting part in the onset of this wave. While the cadence on **D** appears clearly in m. 57 with almost the entire orchestra playing the dotted figure in fortissimo as the beginning of the theme, the end of the dominant preparation in m. 56 is marked not only by a release of the pedal point in the basses, but also by the "premature" sounding of the dotted figure in the first violin and flutes while the rest of the orchestra are still maintaining the constant quarter-note motion. This early announcement of the theme serves as a pickup beat

to its full statement, making the downbeat on m. 57 all the more forceful, in line with the tonal resolution and the dynamic fortissimo climax at the end of the long crescendo of the dominant preparation<sup>7</sup>. It appears both in m. 56 and in m. 57 identically on **A** – the first time as a sort of ornament at the end of the dominant preparation, and the second time as part of the essential theme appearing in the tonic. This repetition almost seems like an adhesive — bridging the gap between dominant and tonic and wiping away any notion of punctuation that is traditionally associated with a strong cadence such as this one in the classical style. At a moment that is so forceful in its onward drive the dotted octave figure does nothing to disrupt the deluge, but rather compels the appearance of the theme ever more powerfully. This rhythmic ligature is not the only device Beethoven uses to circumvent the pause that a strong cadence would imply. In this case, the punctuation between the dominant pedal point and the ensuing statement of the aggregate theme in the tonic is also blurred in m. 56 by the very release of the pedal point just before the cadential landing on the tonic. After 23 bars of a steady low dominant **A** in the basses, they leap up a seventh to form the third, weakest, inversion of the dominant chord in the last bar before the cadence; they then approach the tonic **D** – going through the second inversion of the chord – in descending stepwise motion. This milder harmonic arrival at the cadence in the bass, along with the rhythmic bridge in the top

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<sup>7</sup> This premature sounding of the theme brings to mind the end of the development section of the first movement of the "*Eroica*" 3<sup>rd</sup> symphony, where the horns utter the theme once at the end of the dominant re-transition before the rest of the orchestra joins in with the onset of the recapitulation. These two instances do not function in the same manner, and further study and comparison between the two might prove to be enlightening.



voices effect a smooth transition from the dominant pedal point into the tonic and weaken the strong punctuation that would otherwise be the result of this cadence.

After the short modulation to C major the dotted figure appears again in m. 77 and serves as the only material played by the strings while the woodwinds sound long sustained notes. The phrase in mm. 77-84 does not bear any significant melodic substance but is harmonic in nature, serving to tonicize C major. It also does not continue in the quarter-note rhythmic drive that precedes it, but instead Beethoven manages to maintain thrust with the dotted figure alone. He does this through the use of a soft dynamic curve – crescendo followed by diminuendo – that will later recur as a motif in itself; the curve supports the fugue-like entrances of the 2<sup>nd</sup> violin, followed by the 1<sup>st</sup> violin and then the viola, and unifies their dotted rhythm with the contrapuntal long notes played in the winds. It starts at m. 77, but the *forte-piano* dynamic indication on that bar places its downbeat as the end of the preceding *forte* passage; in effect, m.77 is at once both an end and a beginning, and once again punctuation is avoided. The smooth change in dynamics that follows this uninterrupted transition from the previous phrase imbues the passage with a sense of continuity that overcomes the otherwise-disruptive effect of the dotted rhythmic figure and the clear difference between the musical characters of mm. 77-84 and the preceding theme. Set in this context, the rhythmic details are subordinated to the dynamic and harmonic motion and ultimately the single-bar pulse is maintained and flow continues.

The entire passage is repeated at m. 85 with its texture reinforced by the basses and celli and the closing diminuendo replaced by a continuation of the crescendo to

the fortissimo pedal point on **C** major in m. 93. Unlike the previous dominant<sup>8</sup> pedal point (mm. 33-56) where the entire orchestra was moving forward in steady quarter notes, in this instance the strings are playing the dotted-rhythm figure while the woodwinds and horns are accentuating the bar-pulse with a rhythmic variation of the post-fugue theme that eventually dissolves back to its original quarter-note pattern.

This is the section that both Tovey and Cook see as the scherzo's second subject area<sup>9</sup>. The thematic and tonal plan of a sonata-form movement hinges on the distinction between the first and second subject groups; it usually presents an opposition between them in the exposition that is ultimately reconciled in the recapitulation. Indeed, the section that starts in **C** major in m. 93 returns in the home tonality of **D** major in m. 330, as is customary for the second subject area in sonata-form tonal plan. However, I feel that in this movement, not only is the thematic material for this second subject not significantly contrasting in relation to the first subject<sup>10</sup>, but the choice for its key is also one that blurs classic dialectical tonal procedure; the flat-seventh **C** major is, at once, quite foreign to **D** minor – being the dominant of its relative major, and close enough in pitch – a single step down, that its appearance does not sound as a strong tonal opposition to the home key. In fact, it contributes the scherzo's even consistency by sounding like only a mild divergence from the previous thematic area.

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<sup>8</sup> This particular pedal point on **C** is also a dominant preparation, but a misleading one; the resolution to **F** major – an expected modality in a **d** minor movement – is a fleeting one in m. 111.

<sup>9</sup> Cook, p. 31 and Tovey 1936, p. 23.

<sup>10</sup> I actually think it is derived from it, but will leave this discussion to another paper.

In m. 109 the woodwinds and trumpets sound the dotted figure preparing the brief cadence on **F** – a cadence that instantaneously sheds new light on the preceding passage, turning its **C** major tonality from an independent tonal area into the dominant of the movement's relative major. Although **C** major will soon return as the final tonal environment before the repeat mark, this cadence transforms the preceding heavily tonicized area into a dominant preparation of **F**, deflating some of its tonal significance, and therefore dislodging its tonal foothold along with some of the clarity of punctuation that is one of the functions of tonal definition.

The following sequence in mm. 111 – 116 serves as the first significant punctuation mark since the introduction to the movement. In mm. 117 – 126 the dynamic *crescendo-diminuendo-crescendo* motif appears again, this time over new harmonic and melodic material. Much like m. 77 served in effecting a smooth transition into the first instance of the dynamic curve motif, m. 117 does the same in this one. At m. 109 the winds and the strings begin a sequence of entrances of the primary theme set 2 bars apart. The dynamic curve at m. 117 arrives in the place of a fifth entrance in the sequence and – like its previous instance at m. 77 – at once ends the preceding phrase and begins a new one. Although the dotted figure that previously provided a vessel for the dynamic curve is not present here, and the rhythmic material is mostly regular quarter-notes, the equivalence with the curve's previous instance is apparent; not only is the actual change in dynamics the same, but also the transition from the preceding material into the curve is carried out in a similar manner. After the short pause in mm. 109-116 the dynamic curve once again is the primary device evoking the feeling of continuous forward motion. The application of this dynamic motif to both types of rhythmic patterns from the

opening theme supports the sense of their unity; even though they are contrasting in their rhythmic nature, they both serve the forward drive of the scherzo. When the scherzo returns to its home key after some harmonic development in m. 298 the dynamic curve appears again, repeating 3 times before the closing crescendo leading to a strong pedal point on the tonic major key.

The most radical harmonic shift in the scherzo occurs in mm. 159 – 176. The dotted figure appears, moving down the cycle of fifths from the Neapolitan  $\flat$ II ( $E\flat$ ) all the way to A (through  $C\flat=B$ ) and then chromatically through  $A\#$  to B. The fermata on B in m. 176 turns out to be a dominant pause in preparation for the unexpected arrival at the key of **E** minor. The new key signature heralds the arrival of a new section that explores several neighboring tonalities before returning home to **D** minor in m. 268. Besides the harmonic excursion that it follows, it also presents a new handling of the rhythmic material. The double bar line is followed by the indication "*Ritmo di tre battute*" signifying the change of pulse from 4-bar phrases to 3-bar phrases. The same material from the opening of the scherzo — the dotted figure followed by a sequence ascending by a step — is presented again, only set in a shorter framework and primarily orchestrated in the woodwinds, rather than the strings. Beethoven chooses to apply imitation technique again, but does not go as far as constructing a full fugue, and allows successive statements of the shortened subject on the tonic. At first the dotted figure reappears as part of the polyphonic texture — sounding in one part while the others carry on the forward motion in

quarter notes<sup>11</sup> — but then it is stripped bare of all accompaniment and appears alone in the timpani in mm. 195-206. Even though the timpani are notated *forte*, the entire orchestra is playing *piano* and this clear articulation of the dotted figure sounds almost like a side-note<sup>12</sup>. It is consequently re-integrated into the symphonic texture through several utterances in *pianissimo* and then as the long dominant preparation goes through an orchestral crescendo in mm. 251-266 it emerges from the brass section and takes over the entire orchestra for the tonal resolution back in **D** minor in m. 268. This long unwinding occurs through a few tonal changes and also a rhythmic change in m. 234 when the 4-bar phrasing returns with the indication "*Ritmo di quattro battute*". Although the two phrasing indications essentially prescribe a change in meter from  $\frac{12}{8}$  to  $\frac{9}{8}$  and back, the change sounds almost seamless, because the pulse that actually carries the music forward is the quarter note. Tovey argues that, were Beethoven to actually prescribe the above changes in meter, he would have severely altered the actual flow of the music, and that its very uniqueness lies in its single-bar pulse<sup>13</sup>. He also points out that the unfettered transition from "*tre battute*" to "*quattro battute*" is very simply achieved by the stretto-like orchestration of the entrances of the theme in m. 234 — the "various instrument taking the theme up bar by bar."<sup>14</sup> Cook, on the other hand,

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<sup>11</sup> M. 183 — the 1<sup>st</sup> bassoon, mm. 186, 192 — the 1<sup>st</sup> flute and oboe, m. 189 — 1<sup>st</sup> clarinet and bassoon.

<sup>12</sup> A comparison of 4 recordings of the symphony made by different conductors, revealed significant divergence in their interpretation of the dynamic and articulation markings of the timpani part in this passage. Due to the limited scope of this paper, I will not go into the details of their respective interpretive choices here. See the discography for information about the recordings.

<sup>13</sup> Tovey 1944, p. 72.

<sup>14</sup> Tovey 1936, p. 25

maintains that “the entries of the main theme are now only two bars apart.”<sup>15</sup> I tend to side with Tovey on this point, but it seems that this transition lends itself to more than one interpretation.

The first theme from m. 57 returns at m. 272 heralding the recapitulation, but, once again, a strong cadence is averted.<sup>16</sup> The tonal arrival at the tonic precedes the thematic reprise by 4 bars in m. 268, and even that onset does not follow a strong dominant antecedent. Although the dominant **A** is heard in the basses, and the dominant  $\frac{5}{4}$  chord has been prepared by the augmented-sixth “German” chord in the preceding bars, it is never resolved to the actual dominant triad and tonic appears without ever sounding the scale’s leading tone.

Beethoven avoids this potentially-dramatic cadence as he does other cadences in the movement, thus creating yet another unpunctuated transition from one section to another. He stays true to what seems to be the essential design consideration of the scherzo – the preservation of its continuous flow. This design is realized by using tonal devices, rhythmic devices and dynamic devices to minimize the effect of punctuation that naturally occurs in tonal music at the end of the classical period.

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<sup>15</sup> Cook p. 31

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

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## **Discography – 9<sup>th</sup> Symphony**

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