Beethoven’s Triple Concerto:
A New Perspective on a Neglected Work

by

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ABSTRACT

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Beethoven's Triple Concerto for piano, violin, and violoncello, opus 56, is one of Beethoven's most neglected pieces, and is performed far less than any of his other works of similar scope. It has been disparaged by scholars, critics, and performers, and it is in need of a re-evaluation.

This paper will begin that re-evaluation. It will show the historical origins of the piece, investigate the criticism, and provide a defense. The bulk of the paper will focus on a descriptive analysis of the first movement, objectively demonstrating its quality. It will also discuss some matters of interpretive choice in performance.

This thesis will show that, contrary to prevailing views, the Triple Concerto is a unique and significant masterpiece in Beethoven's output.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The time is 1803, the onset of Beethoven’s heroic middle period, and the time of his most fervent work and most productive years. With the *Eroica* symphony just finished, the world of large-scale symphonic writing would never be the same. In the midst of writing his famous *Waldstein* and *Appassionata* sonatas, his fourth piano concerto, and the enormously taxing first version of his only opera, *Leonora*, Beethoven composed the Triple Concerto for piano, violin, and violoncello, opus 56. That the Triple Concerto was born among such distinguished siblings is a sure indicator that it at least cannot be ignored. But it is actually one of Beethoven’s most neglected pieces, and is performed far less than any of his other works of similar scope. Additionally, it has been raked over the coals by scholars and critics since its premiere. The Triple Concerto is badly in need of a re-evaluation.

Being myself primarily a recreator, that is, not much of a composer, I am most interested in the “how” of a piece—how it is to be recreated in performance. This can and must be informed by the “why” of a piece. Why did Beethoven compose a concerto for three solo instruments? Why did he employ this particular formal and tonal structure? Why is there no cadenza? These and many other “whys,” when wisely asked, inform the performer in the “how.”

And in discovering the fundamental logic of the Triple Concerto, we can also begin to more accurately assess its worth and its place in Beethoven’s music. This is indeed an issue, because though some pieces need no justification of their greatness, the Triple Concerto, with its ravaged reputation, is certainly in need of a defense. This paper
will show that, contrary to prevailing views, the Triple Concerto is a unique and significant masterpiece in Beethoven’s output.

Chapter 2: General History of Opus 56

Beethoven in 1803-1804

To place the Triple Concerto in its historical context, let us first examine Beethoven’s life at the time of its composition. The first reference to a concerto for piano, violin, and cello is in a letter of 14 October 1803 from the composer’s brother Carl, acting as secretary, to the publisher Breitkopf und Härtel. It is not known whether Carl is referring to a discarded concerto in D for the same instruments or to the surviving Opus 56. In any case, Beethoven was sketching the extant composition by at least March 1804 and completed it by the time of the private performances of May/June.

This was a busy time for Beethoven. In the middle of his proverbial middle period, he was occupied by much more than the completion of his Triple Concerto. Having arrived in Vienna in 1792, Beethoven quickly established a reputation as perhaps the greatest improviser that musical capital had ever heard. In the ensuing decade, as he continued his studies, played the piano, and composed, his reputation grew, and he was soon considered the equal of the elder Haydn. By 1802, he was already complaining of a hearing deficiency and moved to the suburb of Heiligenstadt in an attempt to alleviate further loss. It was there that he wrote the famous Heiligenstadt Testament, describing his torture and despair. This is well known to anyone familiar with Beethoven’s biography. But it is important to remember that just as his hearing damage started to

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become acute, he embarked on some of his most productive years, years that include the Triple Concerto.

The Triple Concerto is Beethoven's 56th opus. To lend further perspective, consider a selected list of works composed before the Triple Concerto: four piano trios, twenty piano sonatas, three piano concertos, five string trios, nine violin sonatas, six quartets and two symphonies. Also in 1803-4, Beethoven began what was to become a decade-long battle to complete and present his only opera, Leonora, later renamed Fidelio. This struggle included two revisions, three different librettists, battles with the theater administration, and repression from the censor. Concurrent with his work on the Triple Concerto, Beethoven worked on or completed other middle-period masterpieces like the Waldstein piano sonata, the fourth piano concerto, the fifth symphony, and especially the Eroica third symphony. Listing Beethoven’s activities and compositions is more than an academic and biographic exercise; it shows that while he was composing the Triple Concerto, he was also composing works which became some of his most beloved and popular music. This is not to say that Beethoven was incapable of writing below his full powers, as one might say he did in Wellington's Siege. But it is more difficult to believe that he did so concurrently while composing the Eroica. Though certainly possible, this paper will show that the Triple Concerto is a unique masterpiece equal to its close compositional siblings.

Disputed Early Performance History

The early compositional and performance history of the Triple Concerto has been generally misunderstood and wrongly reported. Most commentators take their cue from

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Anton Schindler, Beethoven’s unreliable biographer and sometime amanuensis, who erroneously wrote that the first performance of the Triple Concerto took place in the summer of 1808 with Archduke Rudolph himself playing the piano part, and gentlemen named Seidler and Kraft playing the violin and cello parts, respectively. In fact, the first rehearsals and performance took place just after the work had been completed, and were sponsored by and took place at the palace of Beethoven’s sponsor and friend, Prince Lobkowitz, in late May or early June 1804. Prince Lobkowitz was a fanatical music lover who supported Beethoven artistically and financially. These rehearsals/performances were arranged for the expressed purpose of hearing the Eroica symphony and the Triple Concerto for the first time, and also to give the composer a chance to hear them and make any desired changes. Prince Lobkowitz paid handsomely for these readings as well as for the dedications of the Eroica and the Triple Concerto. The soloists for these private performances were the composer at the piano, and two principals of the Prince’s orchestra, the violinist Anton Wranitzky, and the cellist Anton Kraft, who had formerly studied with and played for Haydn at Esterházy, and for whom Haydn wrote his very difficult D-major concerto. It is important to note that the composer, and not, as is often reported, the lesser pianist Archduke Rudolph, was playing the piano, because the piano part is often blamed for the work’s supposed failure. Being a triple concerto, the piano is naturally not afforded as much solo time as it would be in a fully fledged piano concerto, but the part is no easier than, say, the first piano concerto.

5 Bernard van der Linde, preface to Ludwig van Beethoven, Concerto for Piano, Violin, Cello and Orchestra in C Major Op. 56 (Munich: Henle, 1999), iii.
No account survives of the reactions of the composer or his patron to these initial readings. We do, however, have accounts of the first few public performances. The first took place in Leipzig in 1808 and the account in the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* is far from positive, probably due to a poor performance. The second public performance was in Vienna, and was also poorly received because “the performers took it too casually.” This was the performance Schindler claimed to be the premiere, with the solo parts performed by the violinist August Seidler, the cellist Anton Kraft, and, if we are to believe Schindler, the young Archduke Rudolph at the piano. Schindler also reports that the work was not heard again until 1830, after Beethoven’s death. It would seem that the Triple Concerto had no more success in Beethoven’s lifetime that it has had since.

**Current Neglect**

Even today, the Triple Concerto is only seldom performed. In a survey of orchestral repertoire of the 2004-2005 concert season, Beethoven was found to be the most frequently performed composer in the United States. Of the 103 orchestras surveyed, there were 677 scheduled performances of works by Beethoven. Only 7 of these were of the Triple Concerto. To contrast this number with that of Beethoven’s other concertos, there were 60 scheduled performances of the fifth piano concerto, and 55 of the violin concerto. Even the less frequently performed Piano Concerto No. 2 received 22 performances. Other years were not as bleak for the Triple Concerto: 16 performances in 2003-2004, 29 in 2002-2003, 12 in 2001-2002, but only 5 in 2000-2001!  

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7 *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* 10 (1807-8), col. 490-491.  
8 Schindler, 140.  
History of Genre

To highlight the uniqueness of the Triple Concerto, let us place it in the context of its historical predecessors. Beethoven was surely familiar with the rich Baroque concerto tradition. At its heart is the idea of juxtaposing two bodies of sound: a soloist or solo group (concertino) and the orchestra (tutti, ripieno or concerto grosso.) In the ritornello sections, the ripieno presents material, and in the solo sections the concertino may elaborate a theme from the ritornello or embark on new material. Ritornello and solo sections alternate, modulate and vary in length, with movements always beginning and ending with a full statement of the ritornello in the tonic. This very malleable form allowed for much flexibility and creativity in the Baroque concerto, for example in the Brandenburg Concertos of J.S. Bach. For classical composers, the concerto became principally for one virtuosic soloist. It also evolved from its Baroque origins to resemble the now-ubiquitous sonata form. First movements of classical concertos generally follow a seven-section pattern, demonstrated in Table 1:

Table 1: General Classical Concerto First Movement Structure

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exposition</th>
<th>Development</th>
<th>Recapitulation</th>
<th>(cadenza)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ritornello₀₁</td>
<td>Solo₁</td>
<td>Ritornello₂</td>
<td>Solo₂</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A  B...</td>
<td>A  B...</td>
<td>A</td>
<td>B...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>I~V</td>
<td>(V)~~~</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

But the classical concerto of Mozart and Beethoven is more than an amalgamation of both the sonata procedure and the Baroque concerto principle. As Rosen writes,
"Treating the sonata not as a form but as a style—a feeling for a new kind of dramatic expression and proportions—we may see how the functions of a concerto (the contrast of two kinds of sound, the display of virtuosity) are adapted to the new [sonata] style." He goes on to say, ever so eloquently, that "concertos are not ingenious combinations of traditional concerto-form with the more modern sonata allegro, but independent creations based on traditional expectations of the contrast between solo and orchestra reshaped with an eye to the dramatic possibilities of the genre, and governed by the proportions and tensions—not the patterns—of sonata style." How Beethoven adapted the concerto/sonata principle in his Triple Concerto will be discussed in Chapter 3.

Naturally, later composers further adapted the concerto in many formal and orchestrational ways, but it is significant that, with the momentous exceptions of Mendelssohn and Brahns, composers did not take up multiple-instrument concertos again until the twentieth century. Berg, Carter, and Shostakovich contributed to the genre, and Bohuslav Martinů composed two concertinos with the same solo instrumentation as Beethoven's. Seen in this historical light, the Triple Concerto is all the more unique a masterpiece.

**Chapter 3: Criticism and Defense I**

**Generic Criticism**

Ever since the Triple Concerto's first public performance, critics and scholars alike have spilled much ink in condemning it. Most published criticism is generic, nonspecific, and often seemingly prejudicial.

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12 Mendelssohn's two concertos for two pianos and Brahms' Double Concerto, op. 102.
In his otherwise insightful book on Beethoven's concertos, Leon Plantinga makes a point of disparaging the Triple Concerto. He calls it "prolix," "awkward," and "overly high minded,"\(^{13}\) and he writes that "it has about it a curious out-of-focus quality, as if its ideas never quite manage to come clear."\(^{14}\) Such a vague and unsubstantiated assessment is typical of commentaries on the Triple Concerto. Plantinga does however offer some thought-provoking observations about thematic diversity, which will be discussed later.

Published criticism ranges from the astute to the absurd. Another example of the latter kind can be found in Antony Hopkins' study of Beethoven's concertos. He writes that "it may be that Beethoven simply tired of the project and became less than his normally critical self,"\(^{15}\) and he questions if the Triple Concerto "represents a lapse on Beethoven's part, a lowering of his high standards."\(^{16}\) Another commentator even included the Triple Concerto in a list of Beethoven's "Cinderellas and ugly ducklings"!\(^{17}\)

Remarks of this sort are common in the Beethoven literature, but they are by no means the exclusive opinion. Some of the first words ever in print about the Triple Concerto offer a nice transition to more sympathetic interpretations. They come from a review of the second public performance in 1808:

It [the Triple Concerto] consists almost entirely of passages, seemingly equally divided among the three instruments, which in time become tiresome to both the listener and the player.... However, it is well known that one can rarely form a

\(^{14}\) Plantinga, 166.
\(^{16}\) Hopkins, 87.
\(^{17}\) Joseph Kerman, "Tovey’s Beethoven," in *Beethoven Studies* 2 ed. Alan Tyson (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 188.
distinct opinion upon first hearing Beethoven. Therefore, I’ll spare writing more about this concerto until we’ve heard it several times.\(^{18}\)

This reaction seems sensible and judicious, especially considering the rather poor performance this entirely new and novel work received.

Although general public and critical opinion condemns the Triple Concerto, there are some supporters. Michael Steinberg and Donald Francis Tovey offer the most penetrating and succinct discussions of the Triple Concerto. Steinberg acknowledges the condescension toward the piece, and then turns what is usually criticized into praise:

“The Triple Concerto … is formal, at times reserved in manner, spacious, and rich in themes.”\(^{19}\) Tovey scrupulously examines the Triple Concerto, then wittily dismisses his opponents: “If it were not by Beethoven, but by some mysterious composer who had written nothing else and who had the romantic good fortune to die before it came to performance, the very people who most blame Beethoven for writing below his full powers would be the first to acclaim it as the work of a still greater composer.”\(^{20}\)

Although general public and critical opinion condemns the Triple Concerto, there are some supporters.

**Thematic Criticism**

The only specific criticism of the Triple Concerto that I have discovered is a claim that its themes are indistinct. Of the first movement’s themes, Plantinga writes that “none of them has a very sharply etched character of its own; none seizes our attention as forceful or assertive, and none is notably lyrical,” resulting in architectural ambiguity or

\(^{18}\) Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung 10 (1807-8), col. 623. (My translation.)

\(^{19}\) Steinberg, 78.

\(^{20}\) Donald Francis Tovey, *Essays in Musical Analysis. Vol. 3., Concertos* (London: Oxford University Press, 1936), 96.
“a certain air of randomness.” This begs the question: is thematic contrast necessary for a successful composition by Beethoven? To investigate, let us juxtapose a few examples.

Let us first contrast two principal themes of the first movement of the Triple Concerto with those of the corresponding movement of another great C-major work, the first piano concerto. The first theme of the Triple concerto is played by cellos and basses alone:

Example 1: Beethoven: Triple Concerto: I. Allegro, mm. 1-10 (piano reduction)

The theme rises stepwise every two measures and contains prominent dotted rhythms.

The same could be said of the theme at m. 53:

\[\text{Example 1: Beethoven: Triple Concerto: I. Allegro, mm. 1-10 (piano reduction)}\]
It, too, contains prominent dotted rhythms and rises stepwise in each measure from B in m. 53, to C in m. 54, to D (this time on the second beat) in m. 55, and to E displaced by an octave in m. 56. In this sense, the two themes are close cousins.

Conversely, the two principal themes of the first piano concerto are quite distinct. The first theme is assertive and militaristic with its octave leaps and curt scales:

The second theme is lyrical and longing with its mostly stepwise motion and expressive appoggiaturas:

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Example 2: Beethoven: Triple Concerto: I. Allegro, mm. 52-56 (piano reduction)²³

Example 3: Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 1: I. Allegro con brio, mm. 1-4 (piano reduction)²⁴

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²³ Ibid., 3.
²⁴ Ludwig van Beethoven, Concerto for Piano and Orchestra No. 1 (Munich: Henle, 1990), 1.
Example 4: Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 1: I. Allegro con brio, mm. 49-52 (piano reduction)\textsuperscript{25}

There is, therefore, in the first piano concerto stark thematic contrast, and in the Triple Concerto, close thematic similarity. The question remains: is thematic contrast necessary for a successful composition by Beethoven?

Let us now compare the very same two themes of the Triple Concerto to those of one of Haydn’s lovely monothematic sonatas. Observe three themes in Haydn’s late and great Sonata in C-major. See examples 5, 6 and 7.

Example 5: Haydn: Sonata in C Hob. XVI:50: I. Allegro, mm. 1-6\textsuperscript{26}

\textsuperscript{25}Ibid., 4.
\textsuperscript{26}Joseph Haydn, Complete Piano Sonatas. Vol. 3. (Munich: Henle, 1995), 100.
They are identical in material, but dressed in different keys and figurations. The themes of the Triple Concerto seem more like distant cousins when compared to this Haydn sonata.

Before considering the relevance of thematic diversity, it is important to note that, depending on one’s criteria, one could find many greater and lesser degrees of thematic contrast in these examples. For example, I maintain that the affects of the aforementioned themes in the Triple Concerto are comparable, while the affects of the abovementioned themes in the first piano concerto are quite distinct, but there is still a consistency in Beethoven’s compositional process. Observe how both themes of the piano concerto go from I to V, they’re both the same length, and they both contain diatonic scales passages, the first ascending and the second descending. However considered, the expressive success of the piece is not dependent on thematic diversity.

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28 Ibid., 102.
Those who are looking for relentless *Sturm und Drang* are ignoring the multifacetedness and enormous range of the composer’s expressive palette. Did the young Beethoven not study with Haydn, the master of the monothematic sonata movement? Was Beethoven not the model for the developing variations of Brahms and Schönberg? Regardless of how one views the Triple Concerto, its thematic diversity is not a criterion of its success or worth.

**Chapter 4: Analysis of the First Movement**

A closer examination of the first movement reveals a consistency in Beethoven’s compositional process that matches the quality of his contemporaneous works. A comparison and contrast of the Triple Concerto to classical concerto principles places it firmly in the classical style but also highlights its novelty.

**The Concerto Principle**

What most distinguishes a concerto from other genres is that it pits individual against mass, soloist against orchestra. The opening orchestral *tutti* of any concerto is pregnant with dramatic possibilities, the foremost of which is that the soloist will at some point play *as a soloist*. And it is only when the soloist enters after the opening *tutti* that the audience’s expectations are fulfilled. And whenever the soloist stops playing, there is the expectation that he will later resume his soloistic role, a role that will culminate with a virtuosic cadenza towards the end of the movement. In the case of the Triple Concerto, Beethoven had to find a way to accommodate *three* soloists into the standard seven section scheme – four ritornelli sections surrounding three solo sections. But using three soloists drastically alters the relationships and proportions of material and form.
Beethoven was certainly faced with some formal challenges. Are all three soloists treated equally? Do they get an equal amount of solo time? Do they function as a trio unit, or only separately? In the end, we don’t know why Beethoven chose to compose a triple concerto, but we can at least examine how he handles three soloists, and more importantly, how his use of three soloists, instead of one, affects his piece.

Descriptive Analysis

Like any of Beethoven's lengthy movements, the first movement of the Triple Concerto has a structure that is both intricate and sophisticated. This can perhaps be best demonstrated in a graphic diagram, seen in Table 2. Note the formal headings (Ritornello 1, Solo 1, etc.) the areas within the larger headings (Principal area, etc.) the thematic labeling, the tonal areas, and especially the labeling of thematic distribution (what instrument is playing the theme.)

Table 2: Structure of the First Movement of the Triple Concerto

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Principal Area</th>
<th>(Transition)</th>
<th>Secondary Area</th>
<th>Closing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Theme 1</td>
<td>1&lt;sup&gt;developed&lt;/sup&gt;</td>
<td>Theme 2</td>
<td>Theme 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>m. 1</td>
<td>m. 13</td>
<td>m. 33</td>
<td>m. 53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>C - G</td>
<td>G - C</td>
<td>C&lt;sub&gt;On (not in) dominant&lt;/sub&gt; - G</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(m. 21 ascending scale idea)</td>
<td>(purple patch)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Orch.
Solo 1

Principal Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1</th>
<th>Theme 5A</th>
<th>5A</th>
<th>5B</th>
<th>5B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 77</td>
<td>m. 114</td>
<td>m. 118</td>
<td>m. 122</td>
<td>m. 126</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Transition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anticipation of 6</th>
<th>Theme 6</th>
<th>6</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 130</td>
<td>m. 134</td>
<td>m. 138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>C - a</td>
<td>C - a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soli/Orch.</td>
<td>Pno.</td>
<td>Vc.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Secondary Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 2</th>
<th>“Für Elise”</th>
<th>Theme 7</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 157</td>
<td>m. 161</td>
<td>m. 170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>D - A</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vc.</td>
<td>Vln.</td>
<td>Orch./Pno.</td>
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</tbody>
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Closing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1 Fragments</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 211</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A/a</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Soli (ascending scales/cadential preparation)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Ritornello 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 5&lt;sup&gt;A&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Theme 4</th>
<th>Theme 8&lt;sup&gt;(only appearance)&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 225</td>
<td>m. 235</td>
<td>m. 243</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

F - a     a       A

Orch.    Vc.

Solo 2  (Development)

**Part 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1</th>
<th>(Theme disintegrates)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 248</td>
<td>m. 256 m. 268</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A    E - A    A - V<sup>7</sup>/d

Vc.    Vln.    Pno.

**Part 2**

Non-thematic arpeggiation

m. 277

[ B<sup>b</sup> - bb - (C) - a - c ]

Soli.

**Retransition**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Fragments of 1</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 307 m. 315</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

C    C

V pedal point    C

Soli.  (ascending scales)

**Part 3**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 9&lt;sup&gt;(related to 5&lt;sup&gt;B&lt;/sup&gt;/only appearance)&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 299 m. 303</td>
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</table>

c    c

Vc.    Vln./(Pno.)
### Ritornello 3/Solo 3 (Recapitulation)

#### Principal Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1</th>
<th>1^\text{developed}</th>
<th>Theme 5^B</th>
<th>5^B</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 325</td>
<td>m. 337</td>
<td>m. 359</td>
<td>m. 363</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>C \rightarrow F</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>F</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

#### Transition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anticipation of 6</th>
<th>Theme 6</th>
<th>C/c</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 368</td>
<td>m. 372</td>
<td>Pno.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>m. 374</td>
<td>Vc.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>m. 376</td>
<td>Vln.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>m. 378</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Anticipation of 2</th>
<th>Theme 7 (&quot;Hungarian&quot;)</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 388</td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

#### Secondary Area

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 2</th>
<th>&quot;Für Elise&quot;</th>
<th>Theme 7 (&quot;Hungarian&quot;)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 394</td>
<td>m. 398</td>
<td>m. 402</td>
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<td>m. 402</td>
<td>m. 407</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>F - C</td>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vc.</td>
<td>Vln.</td>
<td>Orch./ Pno. filigree</td>
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<td>Vln./Vc.</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Soli</td>
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#### Closing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 1^\text{Fragments}</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>m. 448</td>
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<th>C/c</th>
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<tr>
<th>Soli (ascending scales/cadential preparation)</th>
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**Ritornello 4/Coda**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>No cadenza!</th>
<th>Theme 3 (first appearance since Ritornello 1)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 462</td>
<td>m. 470</td>
<td>m. 471</td>
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<tr>
<td>m. 475</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>$A^b - c$</td>
<td>V/C</td>
<td>C On (not in) dominant</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orch.</td>
<td>Orch.</td>
<td>C On (not in) dominant - G</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Cadenza would be here.)</td>
<td>(not in) dominant</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme 4</th>
<th>Non-thematic rhapsodic arpeggiation</th>
<th>Fragments of 1</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 478</td>
<td>m. 484</td>
<td>m. 494</td>
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<tr>
<td>m. 506</td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>G - C</td>
<td>C</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vln./Vc.</td>
<td>Cno.</td>
<td>(melodic inaction/harmonic stasis)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Pno. scales)</td>
<td>(Vln./Vc. scales)</td>
<td>(F) - C</td>
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<tr>
<td>(Soli in canon—perhaps related to theme 2)</td>
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**Piu Allegro**

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<tr>
<th>Compounded fragments of 1</th>
<th>ascending scale idea/cadential V-I accumulation</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>m. 514</td>
<td>m. 520</td>
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<tr>
<td>(m. 531)</td>
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<tr>
<td>C</td>
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<tr>
<td>Orch.</td>
<td>Soli/Orch.</td>
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In any opening ritornello the concerto principle immediately comes into play.

Throughout the orchestral *tutti*, the audience waits for the entry of the soloist. The first ritornello thus has a function of introduction, but this poses a number of problems that the composer must address. Firstly, if it is introductory, should it modulate? If so, should it return to the tonic, or end on the dominant? Classical composers solved this in a variety of ways, but they almost invariably ended the opening ritornello back on the tonic.

Modulation is necessary, as a presentation of all the themes in one key would be tedious.
But to return to the tonic at the end of the ritornello “is an action completed,” with resolution of tonal conflict, and negation of the introductory character of the first section. This was often solved by returning to the tonic for the final paragraph, which was then used again after the cadenza as the final statement of the movement. Beethoven did this with great success in the first piano concerto. Another issue for the composer: should all themes be presented in the opening ritornello, or should some thematic material be saved for the soloist? To present all thematic material in the orchestra would rob the soloist of his dramatic role. In the end, it is up to the composer to create an opening ritornello that has a serviceable structural weight, but with an introductory character that highlights the impending entry of the soloist. How Beethoven addresses these issues in the Triple Concerto will presently be discussed.

The presentation of the first and main theme could not be simpler: unharmonized octaves in the cellos and basses. (See example 1.) The rest of the strings enter for a half cadence, and at m. 13, the theme is repeated, developed, expanded and given a rhythmic underpinning for 8 bars over an unrelenting C-major harmony. At m. 21, as if C-major can be sustained no longer, the development of theme 1 continues as the harmony gives way to a glorious subdominant and the introduction of an important ascending scale idea in the bass voices. Schoenberg could easily have cited the ensuing sequence and modulation as a classic example of developing variation. Having modulated to the dominant, theme 2 unfolds at m. 33. Like the first theme, it contains prominent dotted rhythms and ascending subphrases. It immediately modulates, touching on several harmonies without actually cadencing, then finally cadencing back in the dominant. After an abrupt return to C in m. 40, theme 2 is heard again in the tonic. This

presentation is interrupted in m. 44 with what Tovey calls a “purple patch”: a shift to the subdominant side, a cessation of thematic material, and longing gestures, all ending with an equally abrupt shift back to the dominant. Theme 3 arrives in m. 53 (its resemblance to previous thematic material was discussed in Chapter 2) and it is notably back in the tonic, C-major. This might better be described as being on instead of in the tonic, as the pitch collection is definitely C-major, but there is a persistent pedal G in the bass. What makes this more than a simple dominant pedal point is that since the initial modulation from the tonic, Beethoven is taking care not to cadence in either the tonic or the dominant. Finally in mm. 59-60, theme 3 dissolves into persistent dotted rhythms on that most ambiguous of harmonies, vii\(^7\)/V, all over a V (G) pedal. This yields in m. 61 to a closing theme, theme 4, now definitely in the dominant, with its emphatic V – I (in G) repetition. Having ended the opening ritornello conclusively in G, Beethoven needs to return to the tonic for the first solo section. He does this with one of his least sophisticated, gruff, and most wonderfully Beethovenian methods: in mm. 69-72 bare octaves (like the opening) weave pianissimo without theme to m. 73, then a sudden fortissimo outburst on six octaves of unison G falls to C-major. Two bars of eighth note middle C in the first violins functions as a transition to the soli entrances. There is not even a leading tone to confirm C-major. Beethoven intended this transition back to the tonic to be as unexpected and startling as the composer himself screaming from the grave, “Here come the soloists!” To summarize, the opening ritornello presents the basic thematic material of the movement, modulates, ending in the dominant with an abrupt turn back to the tonic, but most importantly it provides an introduction for the soloists that nevertheless has the requisite structural weight of its own.

\(^{30}\) Tovey, 98.
If the first ritornello is an introduction of sorts, it is in the first solo section that the drama really ensues. And if we think of the concerto in its relation to the sonata, the first solo section may seem like the repeat of the exposition of a sonata movement. This analogy can however only be carried so far. Rosen rightly points out that this "second exposition is not a repeat but a transformation....The soloist's exposition is not a repeat with variations and a modulation, but a radically different presentation of ideas heard first in the orchestra, with the significance of the pattern completely altered by new ideas and a new approach." 31 The first solo section is therefore a dramatization of the first ritornello, complete with modulation and development.

With the grace of a great opera singer entering a bare stage, the cello intones the first theme dolce, cadencing as the violin enters, now in the dominant. The violin then plays the whole theme, with the cello commenting with a countermelody. Modulating back to the tonic, their duet ends on a half cadence of sorts and they have an unaccompanied recitative until m. 97, where the piano makes its appearance, also playing theme 1 in its entirety. This opening presentation of the soloists ends in a flourish of cadential virtuosity from the trio, utilizing the ascending scale idea of m. 21. Beethoven has therefore chosen to present his three soloists as separate entities, each with its own presentation of the theme. Still in C-major, what follows is a raucous new theme in the orchestra. After four bars, this theme (5A) is taken up in the cello, and is extended into what I have labeled 5B. The violin then greatly elaborates 5B in mm. 125-129. The transition ensues at m. 130 with fragments anticipating the approaching theme 6, which appears in its entirety at m. 134 in the piano and is repeated in the cello at m. 138. This is a modulating theme and, after about 57 bars of material mostly in the tonic, it fulfills its

function by settling on a phrygian half cadence in a-minor. So instead of modulating to
the more conventional dominant area, Beethoven has chosen the submediant, a-minor.
At m. 141 the half cadence in a-minor is repeated several times, confirming the new tonal
area. And after a tutti outburst from the orchestra, the piano rhapsodizes alone with a
virtuosic flourishes in the right hand and the left hand anticipating the forthcoming
theme. This bit of cadential virtuosity also subtly shifts modes from the minor to the
major, thereby preparing the secondary tonal area, A-major. Beethoven hence traveled to
the second area, A-major, by way of the more closely related relative minor, a-minor.
The cello leads again with theme 2 in m. 157. Like the first entry of the soloists, the
violin answers, this time on the subdominant (of A.) The orchestra then has its statement
back in A, with piano filigree. From these statements, we can see that Beethoven is
taking pains to give each solo instrument its own time in the spotlight. The piano filigree
evaporates into what I call the “Für Elise” section\textsuperscript{32}, where the piano seemingly
improvises through several keys for chromatic flavor, then settles back into the minor
mode of the secondary tonal area, a-minor. The violin and cello take up a new theme
(theme 7) at m. 182, which is tenuously related to theme 1 by way of its half-step
neighbor tones and dotted rhythms. This “Hungarian” episode was a standard orientalism
in Beethoven’s time, and is characterized by the minor mode\textsuperscript{33}, a steady thumping
accompaniment, short phrases, folk- and dance-like characteristics, and often persistent
dotted rhythms. The piano joins the Hungarian fun and at m. 201 takes off on its own
display of virtuosity, which is brought to a halt in m. 211 that is as abrupt and unexpected
as a car crash. Here follows the closing of the solo 1 section with the solo instruments

\textsuperscript{32} Because of its coincidental similarity to that piece.
\textsuperscript{33} Especially a-minor, for some reason.
intoning fragments of theme 1 and then racing to a momentous cadence with repetitions of the ascending scale idea from m. 21.

What conclusions can we draw from this extensive first solo section? Firstly, that the three soloists are equal partners, none acting subserviently. Secondly, Beethoven has chosen to modulate from C-major to A-major/minor; his harmonic plan is therefore more complex than a simple modulation to the dominant. Most importantly, this first solo section is not just another exposition for the soloists; at roughly twice the length of the first exposition, it is more akin to a development, a "free adaptation of the orchestral ritornello."34

The character of any second ritornello is always Janus-faced: it functions as a transition between solo sections and is therefore at once a beginning and an end.35 Unlike a sonata, there is usually no break between solo 1 and ritornello 2, and the question always arises: if we view the concerto form as akin to sonata form, where does the development begin? At the entry of the orchestra after the first solo section? Or with the return of the soloists?36 Every piece is treated differently, but in the Triple Concerto, the second orchestral ritornello serves as a rounding off of the exposition. Remember that the solo 1 section ended with a massive buildup of E7 harmony leading into the second ritornello. This should naturally resolve into the local tonic, a-minor. Beethoven instead moves deceptively to F-major with a statement of theme 5A. After a brief stay in F-major, the bass descends, modulating back to a-minor, and leading into the closing theme (theme 4,) not heard since the closing of ritornello 1. He thus closes the second exposition with the same material with which he closed the first exposition. Then with

34 Rosen, The Classical Style, 206.
35 Rosen, Sonata Forms, 83.
36 Rosen, Sonata Forms, 81.
the equivalent material from mm. 69-72, he diffuses the bombastic closing material in mm. 241-245, this time stretched to five bars. In the third bar of this phrase, the cello enters with a short theme (theme 8) so lyrical it could nourish a fully-fledged slow movement. This is however the theme's only appearance and it turns out that this is only a beautiful respite from the preceding clamor. It also serves as a transition to the major mode and to the development, the second solo section.

If the first solo section is an intensification of the opening ritornello, then the second solo section takes this even further. It strengthens the modulation of the exposition and increases the dramatization of the preceding material. Far from a random improvisation, Beethoven organizes the development of the Triple Concerto into three distinct parts (four, counting the retransition,) as can be seen in Table 2. Part 1 is most perplexing because, besides being in A-major, it is essentially an exact restatement of the beginning of the first solo section, which was a presentation of the three solo instruments each playing theme 1. What are Beethoven's intentions in launching this section in so unorthodox a manner? To begin with, utilizing the main theme in the development is not particularly peculiar, but to restate such a long section with only the change of key is indeed strange. Perhaps Beethoven merely delights in the simplicity of his theme, which hasn't been heard wholly for roughly 170 bars. Perhaps he feels the need to reestablish the supremacy of the three soloists. But I think it is most likely that Beethoven is subtly delighting in formal ambiguity. At the beginning of solo 2, we hear an exact repetition of something we have heard before, key being the only major alteration. This skewering of convention begs questions in the listener's mind: Is this the recapitulation? A false recapitulation? A strange repetition of the solo exposition?

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Retrospectively, this strengthens the argument for solo 1 as both a repetition and
development of ritornello 1, and solo 2 as a second development. In any case, Beethoven
here cleverly plays with expectations and introduces a wonderful sense of large-scale
ambiguity, which later will require resolution.

In m. 268, at the piano’s entrance, the repetition of solo 1 ceases to be exact.
Instead of remaining in the local tonic, A-major, the harmony veers towards d-minor,
without ever actually tonicizing that key. It dissolves into plunging arpeggios on V\textsuperscript{7} of d-
minor, which leads directly to part 2. Instead of resolving to d-minor, we are faced with
another large deceptive movement—part 2 begins emphatically on B\textsubscript{b}—that is
reminiscent of the end of solo 1 tumbling deceptively from E\textsuperscript{7} to F-major. Nowhere in
this development do we find any of the usual “rhapsodic arpeggiation” as in the first
piano concerto.\textsuperscript{38} But in part 2 of the development of the Triple Concerto, Beethoven
uses a more vigorous counterpart: violin and cello combine to duel with the piano in
forceful opposing arpeggiation. Here finally is the expected development: fast harmonic
rhythm, sequences, and rapid modulation that never tonicizes but merely lends a
chromatic flavor. Finally settling in c-minor, part 3 consists of two statements of the
tragic theme 9, which is somewhat related to theme 5\textsuperscript{B}, and which like theme 8, only
occurs once. Having settled in the minor tonic, the retransition easily shifts to the major
and provides a dominant pedal point that thrusts its way to the recapitulation with
fragments of theme 1 and the persistent ascending scale idea.

The recapitulation follows the general practice of combining ritornello 3 and solo
3, “a fusion of orchestral and solo expositions.”\textsuperscript{39} The ambiguity established in the

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item[38] Rosen, \textit{Sonata Forms}, 87.
\item[39] Rosen, \textit{Sonata Forms}, 94.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
development requires a resolution of some sort. This is provided unambiguously at the recapitulation by the strongest point of articulation thus far: the entire orchestra enters playing the main theme fortissimo and in the tonic; even the trumpets and timpani, generally used in the classical era as formal articulators, are given their most prominent appearance. This said, there is still a long way to go before complete achieving complete resolution. This recapitulation, like most, is actually a second development of sorts: it follows the general events of the orchestral and solo expositions, and as Rosen so impressively states, the “second development at the beginning of the recapitulation is the rule rather than the exception...but it can only be understood as related to dramatic intent, not as part of thematic order; it comes from a powerful sense of long-range harmonic dissonance, a conception not of the dissonant note in a chord, but of the long dissonant section in a tonally resolved work.”\textsuperscript{40} If we count the first solo section as a kind of development of the first ritornello, and the second solo section (the development proper) as a second development, then the recapitulation proper is in a certain sense a third development. Seen in this light, Beethoven certainly provides the link between classical procedure and the formal innovations of later composers, especially Brahms and Schoenberg.

Treating the recapitulation as a second (or third) development, what concerns us most is how Beethoven addresses—perhaps resolves—the previously presented conflicts. After the initial statement of the main theme in the orchestra, Beethoven returns to the same development of theme 1 that he used in the opening ritornello. But this time the solo instruments take turns interrupting the orchestra with arpeggios from part 2 of the development, and instead of leading to theme 2 and modulating to the dominant, the

\textsuperscript{40} Rosen, \textit{The Classical Style}, 211.
piano takes over and steers us tonally towards the subdominant, F-major. A modulation to the subdominant early in a recapitulation is quite common, as the exposition traditionally moves to the dominant (a I – V relationship,) and the recapitulation can then easily make the same modulation from I – V of the subdominant, thereby landing in the home tonic (because V/IV = I.) Once achieving F-major, Beethoven takes the course of the solo 1 exposition, going not to theme 2, but to theme 5B in the cello and violin. He thereby skips the presentations of 5A in the orchestra and cello. This slight abridgment and combination of ritornello 1 and solo 1 ideas is perfectly suited to the material and demonstrates Beethoven’s design in blending the two expositions into a single recapitulation. The transition of the recapitulation follows the same order of themes as the exposition, except for the significant return to the tonic, C-major, and the slight abridgment of material necessary for the modulation. The rest of the recapitulation, the secondary area and the closing, follows exactly the chain of events from the recapitulation, this time in the tonic. Beethoven has thus come virtually full circle. The conflict of the two expositions has been combined in a recapitulation with nearly complete satisfaction. But 70 bars remain....

In ritornello 4, the parallelism to the preceding corresponding section continues. Like ritornello 2, ritornello 4 is reached deceptively from the previous V7. The glorious A♭ presentation of theme 5A in m. 462 is cut short by what should be a tonic six-four harmony followed by a “surprise” virtuosic cadenza, according to the conventions of concerto style. In its place, Beethoven embarks on a long coda. A cadenza in any normal

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41 Surprise, because, though cadenzas are expected, the momentum of a piece is brought to a halt for the expressed purpose of virtuosic display.
concerto would be improvised by the composer or performer of the work. So what are Beethoven’s reasons for omitting the cadenza here? This hallmark of concerto style could not be realized by three soloists improvising simultaneously. Beethoven could have resorted to the pianist (the composer himself in the first performance) improvising alone, but that would mar the carefully balanced equality of the three soloists. He instead tackles the cadenza problem in an extensive coda.

Like a development, a coda is not an arbitrary collection of closing material; it is an organized conclusion of ideas as yet unresolved. But considering my portrayal of the solo exposition as a development of the orchestral exposition, the development proper as a second development, and the recapitulation as a kind of third development, it seems necessary to point out that the coda is akin to a fourth (!) development in its non-literal repetition and tying-up of material. Admittedly, this may be taking the concept of development too far, but it is useful in understanding the revolutionary innovations taken up and further developed (excuse the pun) by later composers.

In any case, the coda begins at m. 471 with theme 3, followed in m. 478 by theme 4, the closing theme. It is crucial for Beethoven to return to theme 3, unheard since the opening ritornello, as it played such an important role in the orchestral exposition. And a statement of the closing theme is essential to fulfill expectations from both the orchestral and solo expositions: theme 4 concludes the orchestral exposition in the dominant, and theme 4 concludes the solo exposition in the secondary key, the submediant. It is therefore necessary for the sake of closure to present theme 4 in the tonic, but the recapitulation is interrupted just before theme 4’s appearance by the “non-cadenza” and

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42 Mozart and Beethoven, being great virtuosos, improvised cadenzas in performance. Our only glimpse into their own improvisation is in their cadenzas written-out for students.
coda. So here, in the coda, theme 4 fulfills all expectations with its appearance first in the dominant, then in the tonic. Concurrent with this presentation of theme 4 in mm. 478-493 the solo instruments take turns weaving scales and athletic arpeggios throughout the texture. Then in mm. 494-505, harmonic rhythm decelerates to a near-standstill and the orchestral strings sustain piano cadential triads while the solo instruments alternate in calm, seemingly-improvised rhapsodizing, culminating in cadential trills for all three solo instruments. And now, in retrospect, we see that Beethoven has indeed written in a kind of cadenza for the three soloists, one that occurs at the same time as the coda. To restate, the just-described themes 3 and 4 actually close the recapitulation and an exceptional cadenza occurs simultaneously. Considering the trills and break in texture directly preceding m. 506, a good argument could be made for the coda actually starting at m. 506. But regardless of labeling, Beethoven’s intentions are clear in this unique solution to a three-instrument cadenza.

Coda or not, the downbeat of m. 506 has a harmonic surprise more subtle than the blatant deceptive cadences earlier in the piece. Instead of resolving to the tonic, Beethoven supplies a temporary subdominant flavor by leading from $V^7$ not to I, but to $V^7/IV$. This harmonic spin, so common at the end of a Bach prelude or later, a Brahms sonata, delays complete resolution and gives the music a nostalgic atmosphere, a temporary sojourn from intensity of the rest of the movement. From m. 506 through m. 513, there are fragments of theme 1 in the orchestra, and the solo instruments play new material. This material, perhaps distantly related to theme 2 by way of inversion and canon, most probably mirrors the harmonic relaxation with melodic obbligato meandering, a kind of thematic decompression. The subsequent Più Allegro, consisting
of compounded fragments of theme 1 and ascending scales, substitutes for the closing material usually found at the end of the first orchestral ritornello and again after the cadenza, as in the first piano concerto. Such a novel closing “tag” is necessary considering the unique nature of the cadenza, but it also helps Beethoven shift the structural weight to the end of the movement. This is a practice Beethoven employed with increasing frequency in his middle period, as in the contemporaneous Fifth Symphony. Earlier classical composers usually achieve large-scale resolution somewhere in the recapitulation, and if there is a coda, it politely rounds off the movement. But Beethoven had a penchant for extended codas; in fact, he designed his movements with this in mind, saving the structural weight and large-scale resolution for the coda. The V – I hammering in the Triple Concerto and the Fifth Symphony leaves no room to doubt this.

**Analytic Conclusions**

From the foregoing discussion, a few general observations can be made. A concerto for three soloists required Beethoven to rethink and remold his concerto style. What is remarkable is that he did so without compromising the equality of the three soloists. What if Beethoven had transcribed the Triple Concerto for one solo instrument, as he almost literally transcribed the Violin Concerto for piano? The proportions would be entirely wrong, and the result would unwieldy. But as it is actually written, the consistency of his compositional processes with contemporaneous works shows the Triple Concerto to be a work of great integrity.

This movement also displays some novelties that deserve a few words. The particular formal ambiguities of the development and their eventual resolution of
formal/tonal conflict are dazzling—similar to other works, but never again repeated in the same manner. And Beethoven’s tonal plan is also exceptional, with his secondary area of A-major/minor in a C-major piece. This is a good example of Beethoven’s experimentation with novel key relations, similar to the Waldstein Sonata, Op. 53, also in C-major. In that sonata the secondary area is in E-major in the exposition, and A-major—not the tonic—in the recapitulation.

The analysis presented in this chapter is more than an analytical exercise. It demonstrates both that the Triple Concerto is worthy of other great Beethoven masterpieces and that it is a unique and significant addition to Beethoven’s output as a whole.

Chapter 5: Criticism and Defense II

Awkwardness and Prolixity

The most common while perhaps most vague criticism of the Triple Concerto is that it is awkward and prolix. Regarding the former, it is almost too unspecific to acknowledge, but suffice it to say that if the listener accepts the piece on its own terms—without fixed notions of what a concerto should be—its quality is immediately apparent. As for being “prolix,”43 this is perhaps the criticism most frequently hurled at the piece by the closed-minded, or perhaps by open minds after bad performances. As demonstrated in Chapter 3, this can have nothing to do with Beethoven’s unique architectural plan. I believe this criticism is due to Beethoven’s use of the three soloists, the pains he took for them to be equal partners, and the often almost-literal thematic repetition. As at the beginning of the first solo section, each soloist plays the entire

43 Plantinga, 161.
theme individually. Sometimes the soloists act as a trio unit, other times as violin and cello against piano, but mostly the soloists act independently—this implies that Beethoven intended three separate soloists in his Triple Concerto and not a trio unit. In accord with his employing of the soloists comes the criticism of thematic long-windedness. Part of Beethoven's underlying plan is to give each of the soloists a platform to state themes. In truth, the development shows that he was even willing to repeat an indeed lengthy section. But to criticize this would be equivalent to criticizing Schubert's glorious repetitions. In the first movement of Schubert's E♭ Piano Trio, for example, the development actually repeats a very lengthy section twice, resulting in three near-identical sections. This technique, so common in Schubert, is rare—perhaps unique—in Beethoven. Literal repetition on the page involves responsibility for the performer—more on this in Chapter 6. In the end, the issue is one of aesthetics: the repetitions in the Triple Concerto result from the composer's treatment of the three soloists. A listener may draw whatever conclusions he wants, but the quality of Beethoven's craft is undeniable.

Chapter 6: Miscellany and Conclusions

Other Movements and Tempo Issues

If the first movement, at 531 measures, is grand and massive, and the third movement, at 475, lengthy and ebullient, then the second movement, with its mere 53 measures, may strike some listeners as too terse. To understand Beethoven's intentions, consider the proportions of the work as a whole: at thirty-five minutes, this concerto is already extensive, and with two so monumental outer movements, a similarly epic slow
movement would be unwieldy. As Michael Steinberg indicates, it was not until his later years that “Beethoven returned to the practice of writing slow movements on a grand scale.” Just like in the contemporaneous fourth piano concerto and Waldstein sonata, the Triple Concerto “presents a slow movement that is short, intense, non-developmental, and preludial to the finale.” This largo second movement is therefore of a gentle character and consists of basically two statements of the theme, followed by a transition to the finale, marked Rondo alla Polacca.

Continuing the discussion of the second movement, consider an issue that has, to the best of my knowledge, been overlooked in performances, recordings and scholarly literature. The second movement is marked largo and is in 3/8 time. It is one of only two instances that Beethoven ever used the term largo, the other being the second movement of the third piano concerto, which is also in 3/8. But what does largo really mean? And is largo faster or slower than adagio? In Italian, largo literally means “broad,” and Beethoven makes the painstaking point of notating the movement in 3/8 so that the fastest note values are 128th-notes. He could have more easily notated it in 3/4, which would make the fastest note values 64th-notes, and would imply three more or less strong beats per bar. That he chose 3/8 implies a certain oneness, with one strong beat per bar. Carl Czerny can corroborate this. Beethoven’s student, friend, assistant and lifelong devotee, Czerny was a great pianist and pedagogue, as any young piano student knows from his at times tedious exercises. Beethoven even chose Czerny to teach his beloved nephew, Carl. If Czerny is sometimes ridiculed by performers and scholars today, it cannot be denied that he was intimately acquainted with Beethoven’s own

44 Steinberg, 80.
interpretations of his piano works, as well as the common performance practices of the
time. A survey of current recorded performances shows that the Largo of the Triple
Concerto is usually taken at about sixteenth note = 63, making the eighth = 31.5 and the
dotted quarter = 10.5. But in his volume, On the Proper Performance of Beethoven's
Works for the Piano, Czerny writes that this Largo is to be taken at sixteenth note = 104,
making the eighth = 52, and the dotted quarter = about 17. 17 is indeed a slow, broad
tempo! At this tempo – with the sixteenth a good 40 clicks faster than current convention
– the movement is not a failed attempt at an imposing slow movement; it is, as Czerny

For further proof of Beethoven's intentions, observe the transition from the
second to the third movements, which is marked attacca:
Example 8: Beethoven: Triple Concerto: II-III. Largo-Rondo, (piano reduction)\textsuperscript{47}

Beethoven was becoming increasingly interested in unifying and linking movements, as he did in the \textit{Waldstein} piano sonata, and as he so brilliantly did in the fifth symphony.

For the Triple Concerto, the question arises: is there a tempo relationship between the second and third movements, as there often is in baroque and classical multi-movement

\textsuperscript{47}Ludwig van Beethoven, \textit{Concerto for Piano, Violin, Cello and Orchestra in C Major Op. 56} (Munich: Henle, 1999), 57-58.
works? Czerny thought so, as he suggests for the third movement, quarter = 104.\textsuperscript{48}

Hence, the sixteenth of the second movement becomes the quarter of the third. With the tempo relationship intact, the G-major stasis in mm. 43-53 of the second movement is no longer formless and unclear. It contains harmonic mystery and suspense while retaining a rhythmic structure that propels the music seamlessly toward the finale. Especially interesting is the written-out rhythmic acceleration in the cello in the final two bars of the movement. (See Example 8.) Beethoven's intentions are destroyed by the gross tempo distortions usually heard in performance. But when heard with sensible tempos and an acknowledgement of the inter-movement relationship, the whole concerto takes on a new mantel of sophistication and excitement.

Other Thoughts on Performance

If the Triple Concerto is the masterpiece I have argued it to be, whence then comes the general condemnation? I believe that the Triple Concerto, like the even-numbered symphonies, suffers from the prejudice of an undeservedly poor reputation. But that is not the whole story: I also believe that performers have done much to tarnish its standing.

Often dusted-off as a kind of novelty, performers have maimed the Triple Concerto with a romantic heavy-handed approach rather than performing it with the light classical buoyancy that it requires. This is especially evident in the second movement, where cellists are the usual perpetrators, inflating it into a gross distortion of what Beethoven intended. Another fault of the performer is treating the indeed many repetitions boringly. One cannot imagine the repetitions of a strophic Schubert song to be played and sung in exactly the same manner for each verse. In the same way, the three

\textsuperscript{48} Czerny, 98.
soloists of the Triple Concerto malign Beethoven’s intentions if each repetition is treated identically. This requires an interpretive imagination that actually frees the performer and emboldens him to make the most of the music. Performers also tend to treat the first movement episodically instead of architecturally. This is probably the result of not understanding the unusual structure of the movement and getting bogged down in details. As Chapter 4 has shown, the construction of the first movement is tight, and leads inexorably to the final bar. Without understanding this, a performance can seem never-ending, and without recognizing the structural weight of the end, the entire coda can sound perfunctory, like an afterthought. Perhaps the Triple Concerto is simply a piece that requires a deeper thoughtfulness and appreciation than most performers invest in it, whereas another of Beethoven’s works may be successful despite a mediocre performance. Even if the Ninth Symphony suffers a poor performance, its worth is not doubted. Maybe the Triple Concerto requires a superior performance to be successful.

Conclusions

Why then is the Triple Concerto a successful masterpiece? Without straying too much on an aesthetic tangent, one must first ask the question: what is a successful piece? This is certainly a subjective question, but one can still find aspects of a work, as I have done with the Triple Concerto, that objectively demonstrate its quality on some level. But on a more subjective and probably more convincing level, its quality can best be demonstrated in a good performance, perhaps paired with an indisputable masterpiece like the fifth symphony.

Perhaps its absolute uniqueness (formally and as a genre) in Beethoven’s oeuvre prevents complete acceptance in the same way it is difficult to accept Schoenberg as a
painter, Bernstein as a “serious” composer, or Wagner as a composer of comedy (as in *Parsifal.*) The Triple Concerto stands outside Beethoven’s works as a kind of stepchild. Maybe its exceptional nature prevents its acceptance in a world that has a restricted idea of Beethoven’s language and expression. But to pigeonhole Beethoven is to ignore the incredible subtleties and enormous range of his expressive palette. Perhaps audiences, musicians and critics of today are not accustomed to the sensibilities of this repertoire, which like much of Haydn, does not rely on the sometimes-blatant contrasts of the *Sturm und Drang* movement. It instead harkens back to eighteenth century notions of subtle expression and refinement.

A defense of the Triple Concerto is necessary because of its ravaged reputation. Heard without prejudice, without doubting and judging its uniqueness, it is as lofty as his celebrated symphonies and concertos. Accepted on its own terms, its uniqueness becomes its greatest asset and its significance in Beethoven’s output ceases to be doubted.
Bibliography


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