Response to John Gingerich,
“Beethoven’s Op. 95, Ignaz Schuppanzigh, and the Path to the Late Style”

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When we think about momentous shifts in intellectual history, those who leave a written trace dominate our imaginations. The written trace of Beethoven’s scores tell a remarkable story of the rapid development of instrumental music from a diversion to a kind of poetry. The lasting impact of these musical documents over subsequent centuries, for musicians, artists, and philosophers, is inestimable. Mark Evans Bonds’ recent work locates the story of Beethoven’s aesthetic revolution in the written trace of philosophers, literati, and critics, Schiller, Fichte, Schlegel, ETA Hoffman. But not everyone who played a role in this drama leaves an obvious written trace. John Gingerich’s recent work highlights the crucial role of one remarkable musician, Ignaz Schuppanzigh, in this story. His work raises the provocative possibility that Schuppanzigh’s role was in fact central, forgotten only because of the ephemerality of his art.

I referred to the Romantic aesthetic revolution as music-as-diversion becoming music-as-poetry. Bonds demonstrates this transition in aesthetic philosophy. We can witness the same transition by reading Beethoven’s works from Op. 1 to Op. 133. In the trace of these compositions we witness an organic evolution from diversion to poetry. The story of that growth is told in three chapters, the early, middle, and late. Bonds and Gingerich also draw upon the inescapable periodization of Beethoven’s works in characterizing Op. 95 as the gateway to Beethoven’s late style. I will claim that this periodization is so tenacious not because of some kind of sentimental attachment to Adorno, but because the story told by the works really does have three essential parts. It may be hard to precisely locate where one book ends and the next begins, but we can identify pivotal moments. Gingerich’s recent research establishes that Schuppanzigh was present at each of those pivotal moments, and this is perhaps the surviving trace of his role in the aesthetic revolution of Romanticism.

My picture of Beethoven’s artistic evolution comes from analysis of music from across his career, which is what I mean by “reading the works.” In the early pieces, we see something that you might describe as Haydn on steroids. This music is constantly clever, witty, delightful, stimulating. It relies on the robustly established musical conventions like sonata form much in the way that Haydn did, as a field for play. Examples of this kind of play include: • beginning a main theme with something that sounds like an ending, • undercutting a strongly expected cadential resolution to digress into an exploration of remote keys, • a subordinate theme that sounds new, but is actually based on the motivic material of the main theme. All of these are strategies that young Beethoven borrowed from Haydn, often deploying them with even more audacity. You can all probably conjure examples of them, and think of more such techniques in early works.

[Show Churgin transcription of P and S from Op. 29]

In the second chapter, formal manipulations become the basic argument of a piece. This calls into question what is the content of the composition: no longer can we speak of a musical form as a vessel for musical content, because part of the content is the manipulation of the form. I have argued (in my book *Organized Time*) that the critical moment initiating this second stage, Beethoven’s middle period, is found in a work that has received surprisingly little attention from scholars, the string quintet, Op. 29. This work is the first to use a non-standard subordinate key, a decisive innovation in this inversion of the hierarchy of form and content. The audacious finale combines a radical key plan with a disorienting insertion of contrasting-tempo material that would not be outdone by Beethoven until the late quartets. Gingerich has shown that the artistic collaboration between Beethoven and Schuppanzigh goes back as early as the Op. 18 quartets. The bold step forward in Op. 29 was therefore in the context of this collaboration, between a composer and musician who shared a new vision of instrument music’s place in culture, and advanced the language of music as a team. Without Schuppanzigh, perhaps there may have never been a “Beethoven hero.”

(Musicologists have typically used biographical events to anchor the location of the early-middle period boundary, and Op. 29 coincides well enough with such milestones as the Heliengestadt testament and Beethoven’s declaration of a “new way.” But if periodization exists to mark the development of compositional techniques and stylistic traits of the works, internal evidence is primary.)

The final chapter of Beethoven’s artistic journey is where the play becomes the field. The manipulations of form themselves become the form. To make an analogy, a poet may animate a strict lyrical structure by making clever use of enjambment and internal rhyme. But at some point, such devices can redefine the form, so that the poem creates its own unique form from scratch through rhyme, rhythm, and syntax. The form may then interact with the content, mimicking a theme of the poem, or seeming to grow out of the sound pattern of a key phase.

The middle-period/late-period boundary has always been harder to locate precisely. Perhaps that is due to the lack of obvious concurrent biographical turning points, or perhaps it is due to the greater difficulty of pinpointing exactly what makes the late style different from the middle one. Most writers have relied on broadly subjective characterizations of the music as fragmentary or intimate that don’t lend themselves to precise definition. Lewis Lockwood’s identification of the Op. 101 Piano Sonata with “the late style in all its fullness,” is, I would say, unassailable. The famously elliptical first movement is among the most obvious examples of form no longer acting as a framing device, but rather formal function as an attribute of musical ideas. The change is detectable earlier, though, in the Op. 95 quartet.

[Show example from Op. 95, end of final refrain]

There are remarkable features in all of the movements of Op. 95, but I will focus just on the finale, which is written using sonata rondo procedure. This movement is full of form-blurring techniques of middle-period vintage: the off-tonic slow introduction, the lack of a main theme cadence, the lack of a PAC at the end of the recap., which motivates the famously incongruous coda. The cadential material at the end of the final refrain shown here is newly introduced at this moment in the piece, and we see the first violin, the voice of Schuppanzigh, decisively taking control for the first time in the movement,

[Second page of final refrain Ex.]

and pointedly preventing melodic resolution where the closing section begins.

[Example: end of MT and ST]

The terse exposition of this movement exhibits the essential late-period approach. A bit of material from the end of the main theme here returns at the end of the transition. In the main theme, the idea comes at the end of a clear thematic construction that defines it as cadential. The fact that no true cadence is ever completed does not actually rescind the defining function of the material.

[Second page of Expo Ex.]

When it returns at the end of the transition, it is again cadential, here leading to an elided cadence followed by a post-cadential idea in C minor in the lower strings. Here also, Schuppanzigh, the first violin, tries to undercut the resolution, but does not completely succeed, as he will at the end of the final refrain. If we were looking for something to label as subordinate theme, the best we can do is these four measures. But it is clearly post-cadential, not subordinate theme function. The usual form-analysis practice of labelling sections here simply fails. Trying to resuscitate it would only inflict further harm.

Yet the important point is why it fails: it is *not* that the exposition lacks formal definition. If anything, the formal procedure is excessively over-articulated. Formal function is an essential defining feature of the material. Without it, the material lacks significant character altogether. The only way to understand this situation is that form is acting as a syntax here, not as a kind of architectural device. Form is the language in which Beethoven writes his musical poetry. Form had long had this syntactical character, but for a century this syntax had always been neatly served up in multiple course meals. This is the first point where a composer begins to write free verse, to decouple syntax, cadence, and tone from predefined schemata.

Beethoven takes this critical step in a work that is unmistakably experimental in character, with many strange features to show for it. It is the success of this experiment that led toward bolder essays in the late string quartets and piano sonatas. Opus 95 is therefore not the best prototype of the late style, but it may be the key moment in the middle-to-late story. It is also an intimate work, and one in which, if we listen, we can hear the voice of Schuppanzigh’s violin, urging Beethoven forward.

The picture of Beethoven as solitary genius is an idea whose time has long since passed. He did not compose in a musical vacuum. Bonds has shown us how Beethoven not only influenced the philosophers of Romanticism of his day, but also responded to them, and carried out their project in sculptures of spirit in sound. Gingerich, however, has upended deeper preconceptions by showing that the person accompanying Beethoven at each turn in his artistic story is a performer, Schuppanzigh. We may never be able to hear his violin, nor may we ever know the full impact of this artist on the history of European Romanticism. But Gingerich’s detective work has turned up what might be the crucial lead.