

Napoleon in a Bar Fight:
Analysis and Interpretation of the Treatment of Meter in the First
Movement of Beethoven's Eroica Symphony.

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A first version of this paper was submitted as final paper for the graduate course « Beethoven Symphonies-A.Fa18 » of Professor Christopher Park, at The New School, New York, in December 2018.

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I. Introduction

In this paper, I will analyze Beethoven's treatment of the strong and weak beat in the exposition and development of the *Allegro con brio* of the third symphony (Opus.55) and propose an interpretation informed by this analysis. I argue that by ceaselessly undermining the downbeat, the composer sets the stage for a credible confrontation between the strong and weak beat in the climax of the development section. I hope that, through this prism, the symphony will emerge with a novel musical, and possibly programmatic, coherence. In the following pages, I will take an inventory of all the techniques used by Beethoven to undermine the strong beat and empower the weak one.

II. Analysis

a. *The Meter:*

With the presence of two weak beats in a row, a triple meter provides a few advantages as the strong beat, or downbeat, is further put in relief than in a duple meter. Beethoven might have therefore chosen a triple meter to prop up the downbeat with the objective to further dramatize breaking it down¹. Another advantage of the triple meter is the possibility of hemiola-like syncopations (three consecutive half-note accents as in an hemiola but starting on the weak beat). With the extensive use of such accented syncopations Beethoven creates

¹ I acknowledge that those advantages are diminished in slower tempo but this is not the case in an *Allegro con brio* with Beethoven's metronome marking of 60 to the dotted half-note.

a series of accents in duple meter, challenging the listener's sense of pulse².

b. Exposition and Development:

Any analysis of the Eroica is confronted immediately by the stunning effect of the first two chords (Ex:1). Why Beethoven settled for these two chords we may never know. The sketches imply the composer entertaining, among other things, an introduction, like his two previous symphonies, and yet settles for these two remarkable strikes³. Where does their uncanny quality come from? Are they the beginning and end of a dispensed-with introduction? Are they upbeats, making the theme's dynamic a subito piano?⁴ Is the uncanniness stemming from the equality we hear in retrospect? If beat equality is a logical implication of Beethoven's treatment of the strong and weak beats in this symphony, these two chords might represent a sort of musical title, explainable only *a posteriori*. I propose that these two chords create what I will call an "equality motif" which will reappear in the analysis in the form of two consecutive strong beats. It is worth noting that at the repeat, the chords are not repeated, just as with an introduction, a *sf* right before the repeat seemingly

² Regarding the treatment of meter in the first movement of this symphony, see Cone, Edward, T. *"Musical Form and Musical Performance"* (New York) Norton, 1968. p.73; Dalhaus, Carl *"Ludwig van Beethoven: Approach to his Music."* trans. Mary Whitthall Oxford Clarendon 1991. p.137; Epstein, David *"Beyond Orpheus studies in musical structures Cambridge"*, Mass. MIT Press 1979. pp.131-132

³ Regarding the inception of the movement and these particular measures see Wade, Rachel, W. "Beethoven's Eroica Sketchbook." *Fontes Artis Musicae*, vol. 24, no. 4, 1977, pp. 254–289. Lockwood, Lewis. "Beethoven's Earliest Sketches for the 'Eroica' Symphony." *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 67, no. 4, 1981, pp. 462–467. Tyson, Johnson, Winter. "The Beethoven Sketchbooks" (pp. 137-143) *Gustav Nottebohm 2 Beethoven Sketchbooks* 1880. Lockwood, Lewis. "From Conceptual Image to Realization: Some Thoughts on Beethoven's Sketches." *Genetic Criticism and the Creative Process: Essays from Music, Literature, and Theater*, edited by William Kinderman and Joseph E. Jones, NED - New edition ed., Boydell and Brewer, 2009, pp. 108–122.

⁴ On the question of the two first chords, see Philip G. Downs. "Beethoven's "New Way" and the "Eroica"" *The Musical Quarterly* Vol. 56, No. 4, Special Issue Celebrating the Bicentennial of the Birth of Beethoven (Oct., 1970), p. 589. On the chords as upbeats, see the interesting exercise in self-critiquing by Edward T Cone "Musical Form and Musical Performance Revisited." *Music Theory Spectrum* Vol. 7, Time and Rhythm in Music (Spring, 1985), pp. 156-157.

aiding to reassert both tempo and the subito piano of the first theme (m.153).



Example 1: bar 1-2; v1,v2.

While it is obvious that the chromatic descent to C# after the triadic opening of the first theme creates harmonic instability (ex.2), less attention has been given to the staggered *sforzandi* that follow. These *sforzandi* echo the first two bars but now creating metrical instability. This will not be resolved for another 400 measures, with the orchestra aligning itself with the first theme in the recapitulation (m.404).



Example 2: m.3-12; strings

The first theme is taken up by the flute, clarinet and bassoon, its downbeat a *p* [*subito*]. The downbeat on the dominant in m.23 finally brings some sense of predictability

with an accent following a crescendo. Yet, Beethoven immediately attaches a *piano* to this

accent which leads to the first use of accented syncopations, starting on the second beat (ex.3a, 3b).

Example 3a: m.13-25; tutti

Example 3b: m.26-35; strings

The theme comes back on m.37, this time marked *ff* (ex.4). The *sf* on the third beat of m.40 challenges immediately the sense of stability created by the first bars of the *ff* theme.



Example 4: m.37-45; woodwinds

Examples 5 through 16 will be shown in a table for the sake of concision.

ex.5a	m.45-56	<p>The first transitional theme is an offbeat gesture.</p> <p>The last three thematic gestures are given an accent, either with a <i>sforzando</i> or with a dynamic marking. The downbeat to end the section is marked <i>piano [subito]</i>.</p>
ex.5b	m.57-58	<p>The <i>p [subito]</i> crescendos to the second bar of the 4 bar phrase.</p>
ex.6	m.65-68	<p>The second transition theme in the violin seems at first to fall back into a common beat hierarchy in two bar segments. But see the accompaniment: the two chords <i>tutti forte</i> are a statement of the “equality motif”.</p>
ex.7	m.83-85	<p>The second theme starts with an offbeat gesture. The <i>sforzando</i> placed on the third beat of the third measure brings pathos while robbing the downbeat of its role as closure to all the yearning built in the three preceding measures.</p>

ex.8	m.87-97	<p>The second theme is taken by the strings. Note the three <i>sf</i> one quarter note apart, spelling the rhythm of the triad (cf m.5).</p> <p>The flute adds ambiguity by starting a measure later. The third statement of the theme finally gives some sense of repose, albeit with an accented appoggiatura on a dominant seven chord. The proceeding gestures come on offbeats except for a slightly incongruous downbeat by the Bassoons.</p>
ex.9	m.99-125	<p>After the stillness of the second theme, rhythm is revved up by offbeat gestures and a combination of the triadic and first transitional material appearing <i>forte</i>, with syncopating <i>sforzandi</i> and without slurs.</p>
ex.10	m.126-131	<p>The following bars expound on triadic material with strong offbeat <i>sforzandi</i>, leading to these six chords (ex.10). These chords represent the clearest expression yet of the dissolution of the beat hierarchy.</p>
ex.11	m.132-135	<p>The celli and violas play the downbeat of the next phrase <i>piano [subito]</i>. <i>Sfps</i> fall on measures 2 and 4 of the four-bar phrase.</p>
ex.12	m.144-146	<p>A syncopation leads us to chords with <i>forte</i> dynamic expressing accentuation. Combined with the <i>sforzandi</i>, it spells the “equality motif”.</p>

ex.13 (DVLP)	m.171-181	The first transition theme returns. Note the proliferation of <i>sfp</i> and <i>sf</i> .
ex.14	m.202-207	The second transition theme comes back with the first two bars of the first theme played in the bass line. In the repetition, the bass line is accented with <i>sforzandi</i> on the third beat.
ex.15	m.210-211	Even though the first violins start on the downbeat (on a <i>piano [subito]</i>), the second part of the “equality motif” is provided in the rest of the string section.
ex.16	m.240-241	After a return to the first theme, a fugato starts in the viola with accented 2nd beats. The celli anchors the sense of pulse__we do not hear the bar line as displaced, only that the second beat is stronger.

The use of offbeat gestures, accented syncopations, *piano [subito]* on downbeats⁵, dynamic markings as accents⁶, *sforzandi* on weak beats or on the weaker bars in hypermeter, and the “equality motif” have all combined to create a relentless subversion of the downbeat and the conditions for the climax starting at measure 251⁷.

⁵ This is, of course, a common technique in Beethoven’s compositions. In a vacuum, not much could be inferred from such a technique except its usual *raison d’être*. In the present context, it does participate in the general undermining of the strong beat.

⁶ Often, Beethoven will not indicate an accent or *sf* if the accent falls on a change of dynamic. The inference being that the accent is “hidden” by the dynamic. A dynamic might even be repeated (see ex.12b) seemingly redundantly. In such cases, it seems that Beethoven considers the dynamic marking itself to be an accent.

⁷ On the dislocation of meter, see Downs, Philip G. “Beethoven’s ‘New Way’ and the ‘Eroica.’” *The Musical Quarterly*, vol. 56, no. 4, Oxford University Press, 1970, pp. 592-594.

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c. *The confrontation:*

The rhythm of the fugue theme is carried by the first violin only, the rest of the orchestra holds its note, in a stalemate of sorts (ex.17). Both seem to escape the impasse with syncopations, the violins reaching upwards, the harmonic interval contracting further. The line stalls and starts again, the two unaccented beats of the fugue rhythm giving some respite before the syncopations return. The trumpets cry and the timpani erupts in a thunderous trill. Both lines stall one last time, the first violins scale further yet, the syncopation returns with an undermanned downbeat played solely by the bass line (m.276). The line hiccups, an augmented second, shakes, a major third. Finally the downbeat reacts with all its might, a lion the size of a constellation, wounded a thousand times since the symphony started. The second beat doesn't wait for the roar to stop, it adds its own, a minor second — this is it — the syncopation exploding into a downbeat of deafening silence, and its cosmic ripples.^{8 9}

⁸ The silence on the downbeat of m.184 is discussed in Cooper, Barry. "Beethoven's Uses of Silence." *The Musical Times*, vol. 152, no. 1914, 2011, p. 34. Kinderman, William. *Beethoven*. University of California Press, 1995, p.91.

⁹ Wagner heard in this confrontation "a Titan wrestling with the gods". Stipe, Thomas. *Beethoven:Eroica Symphony*. Cambridge University Press. p.62

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The musical score is written for a large ensemble, including strings, woodwinds, brass, and voices. It features complex rhythmic patterns, including triplets and sixteenth notes, and is marked 'tutti'. The score is divided into two systems, each with multiple staves for different instruments and voices. The notation includes various musical symbols such as clefs, time signatures, and dynamic markings.

Example 17: m.251-287; tutti—the confrontation (1/2)

Example 17: m.251-287; tutti—the confrontation (2/2)

d. *The e minor episode:*

The third theme appears in the oboe (ex.18). Its verso, in the second violins and celli, provides the counterpoint. The contraction of the off-beat melody in its middle, the syncopated accompaniment, the insouciance of the *pizzicati* in the bass create a feeling of *entre-deux*. The hitherto treatment of the strong beat and weak beat seems upended.



Example 18: m.288-295; tutti

e. *The vanishing of the beat:*

Measure 305 brings back the first theme, in the C Major expected in m.255, then a second iteration of the third theme which leads to a searching, modulating section (Ex.19). Here, the jagged Bass line spells a syncopation. The first theme in the winds is in a canon giving bar-long pulses. Only a *sfp* in the fourth bar in the strings gives a lilting punctuation between the modulations. A crescendo leads to a series of calls—again, bar-long pulses in the winds (ex.20). The strings respond with the triad, decreasing in volume and size, all the way to *pizzicato*. The calls become weaker, the pulse more scarce (ex.20b). The dissolution of the beat hierarchy is almost complete.



Example 19: m.342-349; tutti (above). Example 20: m.370-377; tutti

(below)





Example 20b: m.378-393; tutti

Stillness reigns with a *pp tremolo* in the strings that seems to potentially go on forever, deeper and deeper into silence. No more pulse.(ex.20c)



Example 20c: m.394-402

The first theme reappears, *pp* in the horn, while the strings play a rare *ppp*. The orchestra reacts with increasing exuberance, leading to the recapitulation.

III. Interpretation and final thoughts

In light of this analysis, a few thoughts arise: Has the programmatic material associated with this symphony—its titles, subtitle, choice of dedicatee, etc...—diverted our gaze from Beethoven’s conspicuous treatment of the downbeat in the first movement and its potential allegorical significance? The treatment of the downbeat in Eroica seems to reflect a mise-en-abyme of the hero narrative in the compositional process itself—Beethoven creating the conditions for and administering a symbolic coup de grâce to the beat hierarchy as inherited from functional music. I believe that this compositional device is a major factor placing Eroica as a fulcrum between the classical and romantic era as it de facto christens *sostenuto*, the stylistic expression of equality inside the bar lines, as the modern style. Could we for example consider the horn entrance at m.398 a sort of primordial romantic statement, the hero rising outside of its metric and harmonic carcan?¹⁰

In extending the consequence of this analysis to the other movements, could the Marcia funebre be about the meter itself, a march for the old beat hierarchy? Could the often-noted metric chaos in the phrase below, the movement’s last, suggest as much?¹¹

¹⁰ Or, as Maynard Solomon proposes, if the Heiligenstadt Testament is the “literary prototype for the Eroica Symphony”, could the same horn entrance, as silence is almost kissed, be Beethoven’s ultimate decision to carry on? The e minor episode being, with its hero-themed counterpoint supporting its own reflection in the oboes, the musical pendant to Hamlet’s “To be, or not to be...” — Beethoven’s contemplation of suicide?

August Halm was the first to link the e minor theme with the first theme. Stipe, Thomas. “*Beethoven: Eroica Symphony*”. Cambridge University Press. p.70.

Richard Wagner and Heinrich Hermann both invoked Shakespeare in their writings on Beethoven. The later in reference to the e minor episode. Stipe, Thomas. “*Beethoven: Eroica Symphony*”. Cambridge University Press. p.58, p.62.

Maynard, Solomon. “*Beethoven*”. Second, Revised Edition. Schirmer Trade Books. 1977, pp. 157-158

¹¹ See for example David Holden “The Riddle of Beethoven's "Eroica"” *The Massachusetts Review* Vol. 3, No. 4 (Summer, 1962), p.647.

(ex.21)



ex.21: Marcia Funebre, m.238-247; v1

Finally, could the *moto perpetuo* quality of the Scherzo be a direct effectuation of the treatment of meter in the first movement— Beethoven showing what happens to a dance when its beat hierarchy has been flattened?¹² There is no place in the symphony that might portray more succinctly the act of undermining the strong beat and its consequence than the examples below. (ex.22a, 22b).



¹² In the words of André Boucourechliev "...les points sonores ne s'entendent pas un à un, ils deviennent étincelles d'une flamme, matière sonore nouvelle, palpitante, qui fuse, qui se déploie et se transforme dans le temps par gerbes entières..." Boucourechliev André, *Beethoven*, Éditions du Seuil, Paris 1963, p. 47.

The image shows a musical score for woodwinds, consisting of four staves. The first two staves are marked with a forte (*f*) and fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic, and the last two staves are marked with a forte (*f*) and fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic. The score is in 2/4 time and features a variety of note values including eighth, quarter, and half notes, as well as rests. The first two staves have a 'zu 2' annotation above them, indicating a second ending or a specific performance instruction. The music is written in a standard musical notation style with a key signature of one flat and a common time signature of 2/4.

Ex.22a, 22b: Scherzo, m.123-126, m.380-384; woodwinds.

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