3 The compositional act: sketches and autographs

BARRY COOPER

One of the best-known features of Beethoven's composing activity is his enormous efforts and struggle to produce his great masterpieces, in contrast to Mozart, who is reputed to have composed with great facility, working everything out in his head. Abundant evidence for Beethoven's struggles comes from his numerous sketchbooks, which were sufficiently prominent and unusual to draw forth comment from several eyewitnesses who wrote accounts of him. For example, Ignaz von Seyfried reported: "He was never found on the street without a small note-book in which he was wont to record his passing ideas."[1] Although Beethoven is not the only composer to have used sketchbooks, he seems to have been the first to have done so in any kind of systematic way, and almost no other composer has devoted such a large proportion of his time to refining his initial ideas through sketching processes.

Beethoven's propensity for making rough drafts and sketches for his works began almost as soon as he started composing as a boy. Moreover, one of his first published works – a set of three piano sonatas of 1783 (WoO 47) – contains a number of handwritten amendments in the printed score he owned, which are not merely corrections but subtle refinement of such things as articulation marks.[2] Such close attention to detail, and an incessant desire to seek improvement on his existing ideas, were elements that remained with him throughout his life, and gave the impetus to increasingly elaborate methods of sketching. By the time he left Bonn for Vienna in 1792 he had made many pages of sketches and unfinished drafts, and he valued these sufficiently to take a sizeable portfolio of them with him. In Vienna, he continued making sketches on loose sheets of paper for the next few years, and in most cases more than one work can be found on a single page, giving a very jumbled appearance.[3]

By 1798, as the number of pages of sketches increased rapidly and threatened to get out of hand, Beethoven decided he needed a better way of storing his sketches, and turned to using actual manuscript books prepared specially for the purpose. So began a series of sketchbooks that eventually amounted to over seventy altogether.[4] One reason why he made the change to sketchbooks in 1798 may have been that he began to write his first string quartet (op. 18 no. 3) at that time. He seems to have regarded string quartets as a particularly elevated form of composition,

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and so perhaps he felt the need for the increased space and coherence that a proper sketchbook would provide. At all events, the main work sketched in the first half of his first sketchbook was op. 18 no. 3, although the jumbled nature of his earlier sketches persisted, with other works appearing on some of these pages.

Beethoven's first sketchbook, known as Grasnick 1, lasted from mid-1798 until early 1799, and subsequent sketchbooks of similar size generally lasted a roughly similar length of time. Their size varied considerably, however, some having nearly 200 pages while others have fewer than 50; sixteen staves was the most common number per page, laid out in oblong format. Virtually all the surviving sketches from the early period were written in ink. If he sketched out of doors in pencil, as he did later, these sketches have disappeared. Loose sketchleaves were not entirely abandoned with the arrival of sketchbooks, but their use was confined mainly to periods between the end of one sketchbook and the start of the next. Although his first two sketchbooks were acquired ready-made, in subsequent years he often prepared his own by sewing together left-over (or newly acquired) manuscript paper to create home-made sketchbooks, such as Landsberg 7 of 1800–01. In such cases, their make-up was generally irregular, with the number of staves sometimes varying between different sections of the book.

During the 1800s Beethoven's sketching gradually became increasingly elaborate, with larger numbers of drafts and sketches being made for later works, although the increase was erratic rather than steady. He also began to show a preference for doing some of his composing out of doors, during the long walks that he liked to take at all times of the year. Since it was impracticable to carry large sketchbooks, pen, and inkwell with him, he took to carrying in his pocket loose sheets of manuscript paper and a pencil, in order to jot down ideas that occurred to him while he was out. The best of these would then sometimes be transferred to his sketchbook when he reached home. Thus these were effectively sketches for sketches, and were rarely incorporated direct into a finished score. Some sheets were also evidently used partly at home and partly out of doors, for they contain a mixture of pencil and ink sketches; in some cases this was because he used the pencil while at home, but where the leaf has a fold down the middle this suggests that it was at one time folded for putting in his pocket to carry around.

Inevitably, as the sketching process grew more complex, he eventually found that loose leaves were inadequate, as they had been in 1798 for his main sketching, and he began using "pocket sketchbooks" as they have become known. Each of these consisted of a batch of single sheets of oblong manuscript paper, which were folded down the center by

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Beethoven and stitched together to create a little booklet in upright format (height greater than breadth) – again usually with sixteen staves per page. Sometimes he did not bother to stitch the leaves together, and so where the total number of pages is very small, it becomes debatable whether one can refer to it as a sketchbook at all, rather than just a couple of bifolios folded together. Almost every pocket sketchbook has well under fifty pages, and so each tended to be used up much quicker than a desk sketchbook.

The earliest known pocket sketchbook dates from 1811, and contains sketches for *Die Ruinen von Athen*, but all the rest date from 1815 or later, forming a more or less continuous sequence that runs parallel to the main sequence of desk sketchbooks. In both sequences there may be a substantial gap between one sketchbook and the next, but there is virtually never any overlap. It has been suggested there is an overlap between the Kessler and Wielhorsky sketchbooks of 1802–03, and between Mendelssohn 6 and the sketchbook containing *Meeresstille*, but in the former case the evidence for the overlap is far from compelling, while in the latter the *Meeresstille* sketchbook probably dates from about March 1813 to early 1814 (earlier than was once thought), in which case it wholly precedes Mendelssohn 6 of 1814–15.[5] A more persuasive case for an overlap occurs in a sketchbook of 1810–11, where some sketches for the last two movements of the Quartet op. 95 clearly predate some in the preceding sketchbook (Landsberg 11). There are also occasionally situations where Beethoven created a home-made sketchbook using paper that had already been partly filled (as may have happened with the one of 1810–11), giving an apparent, but not real, overlap. In addition, there is a curious case where a sketchbook of 1801 (Landsberg 7) contains a group of sketches for *Egmont* that clearly could not have been inserted before 1810. But such instances are rare, and the sketchbooks can by and large be seen as a kind of calendar of Beethoven's composing activity.

A further type of sketch format comes into prominence in connection with Beethoven's late quartets (1824 onwards). This consists of individual bifolios containing sections of string quartet written in full score.[6] Previously, his sketches had normally occupied only one or two staves for each bar, but now he started regularly using four staves per bar, in what have become known as score sketches. Only rarely are all four staves completely filled, but the extra space that became available enabled him to develop what he himself called a new kind of partwriting, in which all four instruments are allocated important melodic lines in a sort of polyphonic harmony. His earlier sketches, by contrast, tend to imply that only one or at most two melodic strands are important at any one time, even though this was of course not always the case. There are occasional

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instances of sketching in score amongst his earlier sketches, and his numerous folksong settings (1809–20) were sketched almost exclusively in this way, virtually none appearing in his sketchbooks. Only in 1824, however, did he adopt score sketching as a regular procedure alongside his other sketching methods. Thus in his last three years four possible formats were available: loose leaves, pocket sketchbooks, desk sketchbooks, and score sketches. One might expect there to be a sense of progression from pocket sketchbook to desk sketchbook to score sketch to final score for each passage, but this is rarely the case: the score sketches might contain early ideas, or the pocket sketchbooks might contain ideas for late revisions, and so anyone studying the genesis of these quartets has an exceedingly difficult task trying to follow the sequence of sketches from different formats.

In addition to the actual sketches, other types of material can be found associated with the composing process. A few works were abandoned after being begun in full score. This applies to several early piano works and, most notably, to a piano concerto of 1815 that would have been Beethoven's last. Here the score begins confidently, but peters out during the orchestral exposition.[7] More commonly encountered are abandoned pages of an autograph score. Sometimes, after writing out his final score, he made further corrections that necessitated inserting new leaves in place of existing ones, which were discarded but might still survive.[8] On other occasions, after he had begun a score, the work in question was set aside for some time, with the pages left incomplete. Then a new score would be written out, with the blank spaces of the incomplete score perhaps being used for sketches for some other work. There are, for example, several pages of an early score for the *Namensfeier* Overture (op. 115) in which only the first violin part has been entered, with the remaining staves used for sketches for another work. Occasionally the final score for a whole movement or work became so messy with corrections that Beethoven was forced to write it out again, as with the finale of the Piano Sonata in A♭ op. 110, but normally he ensured there was only one autograph score.

Throughout his life Beethoven carefully preserved his earlier sketches and clearly valued them, though how often he actually consulted them is uncertain – probably not very often. Despite changing his lodgings in Vienna frequently, and moving to a different residence in the country almost every summer, he managed to preserve his sketchbooks more or less intact right up to his death. After his death, however, the picture deteriorated rapidly. His musical effects were sold by auction on 5 November 1827, and his sketches were sold off as individual books or small lots to the

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highest bidders. Thus they were immediately dispersed, and the dispersal widened throughout the nineteenth century. Some buyers sold books on still intact to various collectors, while others sold individual pages or gave them away to friends as souvenirs of Beethoven's handwriting (the sketches themselves were regarded at this stage as more or less indecipherable and of no consequence). In due course several collectors owned most of the books, which eventually found their way into various public libraries – mainly the Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde in Vienna, the Beethoven-Archiv in Bonn, and especially the Prussian State Library in Berlin (now the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Preußischer Kulturbesitz). But by this time nearly all had a few pages missing, while one from 1801 (containing the "Moonlight" Sonata amongst other works) had been systematically dismembered by Ignaz Sauer, who had bought the sketchbook at the original auction and sold off its pages individually at a profit. Most of the missing pages from the sketchbooks do still survive, but they have inevitably become scattered round the world, as have some of the loose sketchleaves that never formed part of a book. Now, however, scholars have managed to identify which of the dismembered pages belong in which books, by using some ingenious pieces of evidence such as matching up watermarks, sketch content, stave-rulings, stitch holes and even ink blots![9] This has enabled the sketches themselves to be studied more successfully than would otherwise have been possible. Meanwhile some of the missing leaves have still not been located, and there are even a few whole sketchbooks missing. One, the Boldrini pocket sketchbook, has not been seen since the late nineteenth century, and one or two others probably disappeared during Beethoven's lifetime or immediately afterwards: his Septet, First Symphony, and Quartet op. 18 no. 4 were all composed within a short space of time in 1799–1800, and yet virtually no sketches survive for any of them, so that the obvious inference is that a single sketchbook has been lost, rather than large numbers of loose leaves. (Still more improbable is any suggestion that Beethoven wrote these works without any sketching. He made sketches for the simplest and most minor works, and so it is inconceivable that he made none for such large and complex works as these.)

Altogether over 8,000 pages of sketches still survive – such a large number that a great many of them have still not been studied in detail, although the works on each have nearly all been identified. From the sketches that have been examined closely, many conclusions have been drawn about Beethoven's composing methods. The pioneer in this study was Gustav Nottebohm, who published extensive descriptions and extracts of most of the main sketchbooks during the latter part of the nineteenth century.[10] After him, little further original work was done for

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Example 3.1 Sketches for a symphony in C minor, Bonn, Beethoven-Archiv, Mh 59, fol. 61v

Al[legr]o

Sinfonie in C moll

nearly a hundred years, although there are some notable exceptions. Since the 1960s, however, study of Beethoven's sketches and autograph scores has blossomed, with important contributions from at least a dozen writers, enabling a much fuller, though still somewhat provisional, account of his composing methods.[11]

Beethoven's methods varied considerably, since no two works posed exactly the same problems and so were not composed in exactly the same way, and his sketching processes became increasingly complex during his lifetime, as indicated earlier. Some broad strategies, however, can be found fairly consistently throughout his entire output. Often the genre of a new work would be determined by some commission he received from a patron or publisher. On other occasions he chose a particular genre of his own volition. Once the genre was chosen, a few brief ideas would be jotted down, fixing the key and something of the character of the work. The key signature normally appeared with the initial sketch, since this helped to define the work, but it was usually omitted from subsequent sketches once the key was established firmly in his mind. These preliminary sketches are generally referred to as "concept sketches," although there is no precise definition of this term and it sometimes embraces any short new idea. Very many concept sketches can be found for works that never got off the ground – Nottebohm once estimated that Beethoven had begun at least fifty symphonies, most of which never progressed beyond the title and the first few bars, as in Example 3.1 (Bonn, Beethoven-Archiv, Mh 59, fol. 61v), an idea for a C minor symphony to follow no. 8 in 1812. Once the initial concepts were down on paper, Beethoven turned his attention to the form of the work or movement. If the movement was to have a regular form such as sonata form, there is generally no indication in the early stages, except perhaps for a word such as "Rondo" or "Minuet." If he was planning some innovative form, however, as in the finale of the *Eroica*, he usually sketched a kind of synopsis of either the movement or the work (or sometimes a group of movements) at an early stage.[12] This synopsis would often include a mixture of themes and words, the words including references to such things as keys, tempi, and formal or structural procedures. In a few cases he made more than one synopsis sketch for a single

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Example 3.2 Sketches for the *Egmont* Overture, Vienna, Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, A 42, p. 3

[etc.]

work or movement – there are several for the Quartet in C♯ minor op. 131.[13]

If the work was to have several movements, Beethoven worked intensively on each one in turn – almost always in numerical order except that, if the work was to have an overture, this was always composed last. Once he had established the broad outline of a movement, he moved on to making longer drafts for it, covering a substantial section or even the whole of a very short work such as a strophic song. These sketches have become known as continuity drafts, since he appears here to have been trying to establish the overall flow of the music, and a sense of the proportions between one passage and the next. Such drafts are normally written with the texture compressed on to a single stave – whether the work was a symphony or a piano sonata – with only the main melodic outline shown. In some bars the bass line may be shown instead, perhaps with some indication of harmony in the form of figured-bass numerals. These features are illustrated in Example 3.2 (Vienna, Gesellschaft der Musikfreunde, A 42, p. 3), which shows part of a draft for the *Egmont* Overture (cf. mm. 207–28). In a few drafts, particularly for vocal works, two staves are used instead of one, although one or other might be left largely blank; and in the late quartets the score sketches generally fulfilled the role of the continuity drafts, which appear only rarely in the relevant sketchbooks. In Beethoven's early period, one or two continuity drafts often sufficed, but in his later works ten or a dozen can sometimes be found for a single section. In such cases, each successive draft tends to be closer to the final version than its predecessors, but there is some backtracking, with ideas from early drafts disappearing, only to reappear at a late stage.

Short drafts of fifteen to thirty bars are relatively uncommon, and when they do appear they can often be found to link up with another section on an adjacent page to form a longer draft. Alongside the longer drafts, however, Beethoven often made what might be termed "variant

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sketches," when one or more alternatives to short passages would be jotted down. These might then be incorporated into a subsequent draft, thereby providing a valuable indication about their sequence. Normally he proceeded from the top of a page to the bottom, and from the beginning of a book to the end. Sometimes, however, he left blank spaces, which might later be filled in with further sketches, either for the same work or even a different one altogether. Moreover, initial concept sketches were often entered at the top of a blank page, in which case the rest of the page might well be filled with some completely unrelated material. This jumbled appearance, coupled with difficulties in reading the sketches (the pitches of noteheads are often unclear, there are numerous alterations and crossings out, and words are often badly written), makes the sketches seem extremely daunting at first sight, and is one reason why they were studied so little in the decades after Beethoven's death.

Another reason for neglect of the sketches was their incomplete and uncertain nature. Although the above description gives a fair indication of Beethoven's normal progress, it is somewhat idealized; usually some sketches are missing, so that it is rarely possible to trace the precise growth of a work from initial conception to final version. Sometimes, too, he composed with the aid of the piano – especially in his earlier years before his hearing deteriorated – in which case fewer written sketches would be needed. It also happens that all sketches are open to more than one interpretation, with regard to both their content and their layout; thus although it is often possible to deduce what probably happened, both in terms of Beethoven's concept of the work and of how he set about putting the sketches on paper, relatively little can be concluded with scientific certainty.

When Beethoven had more or less finished sketching a work, he began writing out the autograph score, and the final continuity draft is often extraordinarily similar to this, with most bars matching exactly. The autograph score itself, however, was sometimes amended extensively. The changes made at this stage were rarely of structural matters or phrase lengths, but generally of texture or layout.[14] In some autograph scores it can be seen that he began writing them out a little too early, so that although the first page has barely a single correction, subsequent pages become increasingly messy. Occasionally whole pages became so bad that they had to be replaced, as mentioned earlier.

Even after the final score was ready for the publishers, changes sometimes continued to be made. In most cases a copyist used to prepare a fair copy of the work, either for performers or the publisher, and some of these fair copies show last-minute alterations. There are also some famous cases of still later alterations. The prolongation of the second

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Example 3.3 Piano Sonata op. 106, "Hammerklavier," mvt. 2, addition of first measure, letter to Ferdinand Ries 19 April 1819 (BG IV, no. 1295; Anderson II, no. 993)

The first bar must still be inserted, namely:

1st bar 2nd bar etc. all as written

u.c. ped. *

pause in the Fifth Symphony was one of a number of small changes to this and the Sixth Symphony that were made "during" the first performance (according to Beethoven), after copies of the music had already been sent to the publishers, who had to be sent a list of these late changes. The first bar of the slow movement of the "Hammerklavier" Sonata was also added at a similar stage, as indicated in a letter to Ferdinand Ries (see Example 3.3).[15] And in the Second Piano Concerto, which had been repeatedly revised between about 1788 and 1798, Beethoven's final thoughts of 1801 came too late to be incorporated into the published version at all. The same applies to his final ideas for the Fourth Piano Concerto, which were evidently inserted into a copyist's score after the work had been published.[16]

What clearly emerges, then, is that the works do not exist in some "ideal" form where perfection has been achieved and nothing could be altered. In some works, notably the last piano sonata, op. 111, Beethoven's final intentions are not always clear in the sources, which contradict each other in places.[17] Even where his intentions do seem clear, he might well have thought of further modifications if he had returned to the work later. With *Fidelio*, his 1814 revisions to the earlier version were very substantial;[18] and he indicated that he would have liked to revise many of his earlier works. Perhaps the imperfections in his works help to enhance their character. Many of his works evoke a sense of struggle, and striving for the unreachable – a quality rarely evident in Mozart's work. The view that Beethoven found composition more of a struggle than Mozart did is partly correct but is misleading in several ways. Beethoven could compose as quickly as Mozart, for his numerous improvisations – instant compositions – were admired by all. Mozart's music is generally simpler in texture than Beethoven's, and would therefore need less sketching; moreover, Mozart did not hoard any sketches he made, so that where he encountered difficulties – as in his six quartets dedicated to Haydn – evidence for his struggle is largely lost. Nevertheless, the desire to strive for the highest

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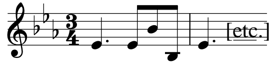
Example 3.4 Sketch for main theme of *Eroica* Symphony, Moscow, Glinka Museum, Wielhorksy, Sketchbook, p. 44



possible achievements, even those beyond grasp, is an integral part of Beethoven's character, and the abundance of sketches is a reflection of that desire.

Beethoven's sketches, then, function as both musical and biographical documents, and they form the strongest link between his life and his output, which are all too often considered separately. At the most basic level, study of the sketches has enabled many works to be dated with far greater precision than would otherwise be possible, even though the sketches themselves hardly ever bear any dates, and it has often led to substantial revision of a work's supposed period of composition. For example, the "First" *Leonore* Overture was composed after nos. 2 and 3, in 1807, not before them as some used to believe.[19] And Beethoven's pupil Czerny claimed that the last three piano sonatas (opp. 109–11), though completed in the 1820s, originated before 1817,[20] whereas the sketches show that none were begun before 1820. The sketches also furnish evidence about Beethoven's composing habits and how these changed over the years, as well as how systematic (or unsystematic) he was in organizing his compositions on a practical level. They also prove that his unprecedentedly complex compositions were achieved as a result of extremely hard work, as well as pure genius. Thus the sketches indicate much about his life and character.

They are equally significant, however, on a purely musical level. They provide extensive clues as to why certain notes are where they are, and why works turned out as they did, as well as giving some indication of how else they might have turned out. Study of the sketches helps one to see, and therefore hear, the music from the same angle as Beethoven saw it, thereby aiding communication between the composer and the listener, and understanding of the music itself. They sometimes reveal previously overlooked motivic relationships between different ideas in a movement, or confirm one's suspicions that such a relationship is significant and was planned by the composer. For example, it has been claimed that the opening theme of the *Eroica* is an elaboration of the first four notes from the bass line of the finale (this bass line having been composed earlier). The sketches confirm that Beethoven devised the opening theme in this way, for his earliest sketch for it (Example 3.4) is an almost exact quotation of those four notes. Although this discovery does not affect the existence of the abstract relationship between the two themes, it is reassuring

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that Beethoven was clearly aware of it and approached the first-movement theme from this angle. Conversely, sketch study can refute an analytical hypothesis. In the Quartet op. 130, which originally concluded with the *Grosse Fuge* as finale, it has been suggested that the whole quartet is founded on this fugue theme. Yet the sketches show that most of the quartet had been written before Beethoven first considered the *Grosse Fuge* for the finale, by which time he had sketched about a dozen other possible finale themes. Thus the themes in the earlier movements are not dependent in any way on the *Grosse Fuge.*

With such striking biographical and musical revelations, it is no accident that sketch study has proved to be one of the most fruitful fields of Beethoven research in the past thirty years. Yet the majority of the sketchbooks have still not been published in facsimile and transcription – an essential step toward their better understanding.[21] So many sketches still remain to be examined in detail that significant information about both Beethoven's life and the musical content of his works is likely to emanate from such studies for many years.

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