

6 “The sense of an ending”: goal-directedness in Beethoven’s music

NICHOLAS MARSTON

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

(T. S. ELIOT, *FOUR QUARTETS*, “LITTLE GIDDING,” V, 1–3)

Why does a piece of music end? Or rather, why does it end where it does? Webern, during the composition of his Six Bagatelles for string quartet op. 9, felt driven to a particularly uncompromising answer: “Here I had the feeling, ‘When all twelve notes have gone by, the piece is over.’”¹ He was, admittedly, recalling his path to twelve-note composition; yet Heinrich Schenker, concerned exclusively with the structure of tonal music – to him, Webern’s was a “path” that led away from music altogether – was equally clear about endings. In *Free Composition* he claimed that “with the arrival of $\hat{1}$ the work is at an end. Whatever follows this can only be a reinforcement of the close – a coda – no matter what its extent or purpose may be.”² There will be more to say about codas in due course; but we need immediately to distinguish Schenker’s construal of “coda” from the conventional one whereby, for example, the section of music that follows the end of a sonata-form recapitulation is denominated the “coda.” A particularly clear Beethoven example is the coda to the finale of the “Appassionata” Sonata, beginning at m. 308: the double bar and new tempo indication articulate this coda especially strongly. Schenker’s notion of ending is, like Webern’s, bound up with his particular theoretical perspective, whereby any tonal composition is understood as the “composing-out” of a primordial contrapuntal construct (the *Ursatz*). The upper-voice component (the *Urlinie*) traces a stepwise descent through the triadic space $\hat{3}-\hat{1}$ or $\hat{5}-\hat{1}$, while the bass articulates the large-scale progression I–V–I. The endpoint of the *Urlinie* – the arrival at the tonic note ($\hat{1}$) – may or may not coincide with the last note of the piece, or with some surface formal division. Thus it is entirely possible that the arrival at $\hat{1}$ – Schenker’s “ending” – might occur within or before a “formal” coda such as that at the end of the “Appassionata.”

This brief excursus on the Schenkerian coda is intended to show how our initial question (“why does a piece of music end?”) shades easily into another: *how* does a piece of music end? What accounts for that “sense of

an ending”³ that music, and particularly tonal music, communicates so powerfully? This is to ask not so much about *ending* as about *closure*.

Closure is by no means exclusive to music; it is also a property of literary texts, both fictional and non-fictional, of film, and is a much-discussed topic in literary criticism. Don Fowler distinguishes “five senses in which the word ‘closure’ [is] used in modern criticism:

1. The concluding section of a literary work;
2. The process by which the reader of a work comes to see the end as satisfyingly final;
3. The degree to which an ending is satisfyingly final;
4. The degree to which the questions posed in the work are answered, tensions released, conflicts resolved;
5. The degree to which the work allows new critical readings.”⁴

These definitions may serve equally for the study of musical works; we need only substitute “musical” for “literary” in no. 1, and (perhaps) “listener” for “reader” in no. 2. All five are pursued to varying degrees in the examples from Beethoven’s music which follow; for as Fowler himself admits, while it is possible to distinguish these various senses of closure, “they are all intimately connected.”⁵

Understanding a musical work in terms of questions posed and processes played out involves the notion of causation: the work is interpreted as a sequence of events with the potential to affect one another and to precipitate certain consequences. On this view, the end of a work is anything but arbitrary: it comes to seem a logical necessity, preordained and even “willed” from the outset. This interpretative mode is one that is powerfully associated with Beethoven’s music, and above all with his so-called “heroic” style. Scott Burnham has made particularly strong claims about the stranglehold that this particular style, “to which only a handful of [Beethoven’s] works can lay unequivocal claim,” continues to exert on our experience of music:

For nearly two centuries, a single style of a single composer has epitomized musical vitality, becoming the paradigm of Western compositional logic . . . This conviction has proved so strong that it no longer acts as an overt part of our musical consciousness; it is now simply a condition of the way we tend to engage the musical experience. The values of Beethoven’s heroic style have become the values of music.⁶

Burnham is clear as to the special quality of heroic-style endings, and in an absorbing account of the *Egmont* Overture he writes as follows of Beethoven’s celebrated codas:

they strongly narrate the form, not only culminating the movements to which they are attached but standing apart from them, adding “The End” to their

respective stories in such a way that one leaves the experience convinced that “The End” is more than some arbitrary cutoff point: it is actually present, in potentia, from bar 1. The process of narration and the story being told become one.⁷

“The end” is indeed where we start from.

The individual movement

A particularly clear example of an ending that responds directly to an initial premise occurs in a work that is itself a beginning of sorts: the first movement of the Piano Sonata op. 2 no. 1.⁸ The first eight-bar phrase articulates an imperfect cadence (i–V) (Example 6.1). The arpeggios in mm. 1–2 and 3–4 establish the melodic highpoints a^b2 and b^b2 , supported by f and e in the bass. Bars 5 and 6 then repeat these highpoints (note the *sforzando* emphasis); the sense of connection between them – that is, that a^b2 links up to b^b2 despite the intervening turn figures – is reinforced by the metrical “foreshortening” whereby the initial two-bar units (mm. 1–2 and 3–4) are condensed into one-bar units. This has the effect of an acceleration, driving the music onward to the climactic m. 7, where a new highpoint, c^3 , is reached. That this defines a goal and a turning point in the music is variously marked: by the *fortissimo* marking, the unique rhythmic value (a full minim) assigned to the c^3 , and by the spread chord that, spanning c^2 – c^3 , may be understood as a development of the grace-note (c^2) embellishment of a^b2 and b^b2 in mm. 5 and 6. Thereafter the melodic line descends quickly to the cadential e^2 in m. 8. The bass, conversely, continues to rise; having ascended from f to g in mm. 5–6, it undergoes in m. 7 an acceleration equivalent to that in the top voice of mm. 5–6, so that m. 7 contains a^b – b^b , leading on to the cadential c in m. 8. All this is illustrated in Example 6.1, which makes one additional point: that the climactic c^3 is not obliterated by the succeeding descent but remains “active” over and beyond the cadential dominant in m. 8. (The sudden plunge in m. 9 into a hitherto unheard low bass register is vital to the sense that the c^3 is left hanging in musical space.)

Thus the first eight-bar phrase initiates a fragmentary melodic line in a specific register (a^b2 – b^b2 – c^3); one task for the movement will be to pick up this thread and find a satisfactory means of “knotting” it. The knot is tied only in the closing bars; but the sense of that ending is enriched by events at the outer extremes of the development section. After the conventional exposition modulation from the tonic minor to the relative major (A^b), the development begins by transposing the opening bars to that key, but with the important difference that the original two-bar units

Example 6.1 Piano Sonata op. 2 no. 1, 1st mvt., mm. 1–8

(mm. 1–2 and 3–4) are extended to three bars (mm. 49–51 and 52–54). The immediate melodic goal of the transposed mm. 1–2 is precisely the climactic c^3 of m. 7, but harmonized now in relation to A^b major rather than F minor. The “extra” m. 51 provides a new element, d^b^3 , representing a further ascent in the long line begun with a^b^2 in m. 2. This d^b^3 is reiterated in mm. 53–54, after which the upper voice returns to the register below c^3 .⁹

The recapitulation is signalled already at m. 81, where a long dominant pedal commences. Following the textural reduction to an isolated, repeated middle C in mm. 93–94, the bass descends by step from there to f in m. 101, where the recapitulation begins. This stepwise bass motion c^1 – f is the reverse of the ascending progression heard in mm. 5–8 and about to be repeated in mm. 105–08. And there is another reversal at work as the recapitulation approaches: d^b^3 , reintroduced in m. 96, initiates a line descending to a^b^2 (m. 102), from which the exposition ascent to c^3 will be recapitulated. In their “undoing” of bars 1–8, these reversals in the outer voices change the sense of the a^b^2 in m. 102: this now sounds less as the origin of an ascent to c^3 than the goal of a descent therefrom (Example 6.2). What appears as straightforward repetition thus discloses a quite different meaning; and the heightened dynamic (*forte* rather than *piano*) also works to make of the recapitulation something paradoxically *new*, despite its otherwise repeating literally music heard at the beginning of the exposition.

Redefinition of the commencement of the recapitulation relative to the exposition can of course be made much more dramatic than in the case of op. 2 no. 1. The parallel moment in the first movement of the Ninth Symphony, for example, demonstrates the power of a simple modal inflection to promote a sense of forward motion as opposed to a circular return to the already-heard. By launching the recapitulation from an electrifying D major triad in $\frac{6}{8}$ position, Beethoven ensures that F^\sharp , the crucial defining element of the major mode, will be forced upon the listener’s consciousness. Conversely, the *downplaying* of the double return

Example 6.2 Piano Sonata op. 2 no. 1, 1st mvt., mm. 93–102

f: V i

Example 6.3 op. 2 no. 1, 1st mvt., mm. 145–52

f: V i iv V i

(thematic and tonal) at the recapitulation can itself contribute to goal-directedness by delaying the resolution of tension: with Beethoven, as is well known, the locus of such resolution is typically the much-extended coda. Good examples of a destabilized recapitulation occur in the first movements of the Eighth Symphony and the “Appassionata” Sonata: in each case unstable tonic $\hat{6}_4$ harmony replaces the expected root-position triad.¹⁰

To return to op. 2 no. 1, the immediate continuation of the recapitulation reintroduces the climactic c^3 in m. 107, so that the a^2 of m. 102 should be regarded more precisely as having the sense both of an ending and a re-beginning, the conclusion to which is to be found in the last eight bars (145–52). It is easy to hear that c^3 , sounding for the last time, *fortissimo*, in m. 146, ushers in a stepwise descent to the cadential f^2 .¹¹ Meanwhile, the bass makes its way down through the fifth c^1 – f once more before attaining a lower register to reinforce the close (Example 6.3). This is no arbitrary ending, but one predicated upon specific initial circumstances. To understand those circumstances and their consequences later in the movement is to understand why this particular ending makes sense.

The first movement of op. 2 no. 1 exemplifies clearly some typical features of Beethoven’s goal-directed structures. The “goal” arises through the early establishment of a *lacuna* or gap, and one “purpose” of the movement is to fill that gap.¹² In the case of op. 2 no. 1 the gap is melodic and harmonic (the $\hat{3}$ – $\hat{5}$ ascent a^1 – c^3 combined with an imperfect cadence,

I–V); it is also registral, in that Beethoven is careful to maintain the f^2 – c^3 register as the site of melodic closure; closure is delayed until the very end of the movement; and the entire sequence of events is mapped on to a sonata-form structure. Sonata form, by its very tonal and thematic dynamic, lends itself particularly well to this kind of compositional thinking, and it is thus no accident that many of the movements discussed below are exemplars of that form. But this is not to say that the strategies employed in op. 2 no. 1 may not be transferred to other, broader, formal and generic contexts. The next two sections move beyond the single movement to consider goal-directedness across entire multisectional and multimovement works, beginning with works in variation form.

Variation form

Beethoven employed variation form both in individual movements of multimovement genres and in independent works. Compared to sonata form, Classical variation form might seem largely antithetical to the creation of goal-directed structures: the concatenation of a tonally closed theme with a series of similarly closed variations preserving its essential tonal structure and proportions, with minimal tonal development (typically, a modal shift in one variation from major to minor, or the reverse), threatens to produce circularity, even stasis.¹³ There is theoretically no limit to the number of variations a composer might write on a given theme; why, we must ask, does the series stop where it does? And is the order of the variations significant, or might it be altered without detriment to the sense of the whole? Such questions are important in the analysis of variation sets.

The majority of Beethoven's independent variation sets, using either pre-existing or original themes, are represented by the piano variations he composed chiefly for his own performance prior to 1802;¹⁴ variation-form movements in instrumental works are spread more widely, and it is often observed that Beethoven's later works show an increased interest in variation form.¹⁵ Of special interest in the present context are those multimovement works with variation-form finales: examples are the "Harp" String Quartet op. 74, the Violin Sonata in G op. 96, and the late Piano Sonatas in E and C opp. 109 and 111. (The finale of the *Eroica* Symphony is a fascinating hybrid.¹⁶) Variation-form slow movements include those in the String Quartet in A op. 18 no. 5, the "Archduke" Trio op. 97, and the String Quartets in E \flat , C \sharp minor, and F opp. 127, 131, and 135;¹⁷ the slow movements of the Ninth Symphony and the String Quartet in A minor op. 132 employ variation form, too, though as part of

a broader scheme in which the theme and its variations are separated from one another by the intrusion of a sharply contrasting theme.¹⁸ And not to be forgotten is the variation-form *first* movement of the Piano Sonata in A♭ op. 26.

A gradual increase in elaboration from one variation to the next was an accepted strategy for imparting a sense of direction. This was often coupled with proportional diminution of note values: the progressive increase in the surface rhythmic figuration created the effect of a gradual acceleration in tempo, and a real increase in the level of virtuosity, while the underlying harmonic rhythm remained constant. The variation movements of the “Archduke” Trio and the Piano Sonata op. 111 both employ this technique, a further effect of which is the sense of a gradual recession of the theme into the “distance” as it is left further and further behind by successive variations. But in some cases the “distance” between theme and variation is widened radically at the very outset, two examples being the first of the variations on “Rule, Britannia” WoO 79, and variation 1 in the finale of the Piano Sonata op. 109. The latter work is striking in that variation 2 immediately restores a sense of close proximity to the theme, almost as though it is the “true” first variation which has somehow become displaced.¹⁹

Departure implies return; and a valedictory reprise of the theme following its elaboration in a series of variations is a powerful means of creating closure in such works. Goal and origin are essentially identical in such cases, although all but one of Beethoven’s reprises are characteristically non-literal, involving a degree of transformation or partial variation. Examples include the “Eroica” Variations op. 35 (mm. 132ff.), the finale to op. 111 (mm. 131ff.), and the slow movements of op. 127 (mm. 76ff.) and op. 131 (mm. 243ff.): in each case the melody of the theme returns more or less literally while variation persists in the accompanying parts.²⁰ Moreover, the reprise in opp. 111, 127, and 131 follows hard upon a tonal move flatward from the tonic to a submediant or mediant region. In op. 111, variation 4 is separated from variation 5 (the reprise-variation) by a brief transitional passage tonicizing E♭ major before returning to the tonic, C major, through a series of descending thirds; in op. 127, variation 3 (mm. 59ff.) is itself set in the enharmonically notated flat submediant (E = F♭), which then falls a semitone to E♭, the dominant of the tonic, in m. 77 in preparation for the ensuing reprise-variation; and in op. 131, the reprise-variation (which is not complete) forms part of a substantial coda that begins by stating the beginning of the theme in the flat mediant, C major. (A balancing statement in the flat submediant, F, appears on the other side of the partial reprise: see mm. 254–57.)

In coupling a thematic reprise with a return to the tonic following a

tonal digression (which, moreover, may unfold outside the confines of a strict variation) Beethoven was drawing upon elements of sonata-form development and recapitulation.²¹ The variation movements of opp. 111 and 127 are more unusual than that of op. 131 in this respect, since tonal digression from the tonic during the coda of a variation set, as in op. 131, was in fact a relatively common procedure. A fine example from Beethoven's works occurs in the Variations on "La stessa, la stessissima" WoO 73, where variation 10 merges with an extended and tonally "developmental" coda including, at m. 145, a partial reprise in the neapolitan key, B major, of the opening of variation 10 itself. WoO 73 also demonstrates the importance routinely accorded to the coda in creating goal-directedness and closure in variation works: uniquely independent of the tonal and proportional constraints of the theme, the coda could well serve as the locus of greatest dramatic weight in the composition. Thus the distinctively Beethovenian end-weighted sonata design – whether one thinks of the individual sonata-form movement, as discussed above, or the multimovement structures considered below – might be thought almost endemic to the variation genre. A further, related means of adding weight toward the end of a variation movement was likewise to depart from the strict variation chain by inserting a fugue: two examples are the "Eroica" Variations and the "Diabelli" Variations op. 120. In each case the fugue is followed by a reprise-variation and coda, and thus functions analogously to a sonata-form development within the total form, a function made even clearer in op. 120 since the fugue is set in the flat mediant, E \flat major, prior to the return of the tonic in the final variation and coda.²²

While important in themselves as illustrations of Beethoven's concern to overcome the inherently static, non-directional nature of variation form, these various end-weighting strategies also serve to throw into relief his uniquely strict approach in the finale of the Piano Sonata op. 109. All six variations staunchly preserve the tonic key – not even a minor-mode digression here – and the proportions of the theme. And this is Beethoven's only variation work to end with a literal repeat of the theme, save for the omission of the repeats and a few grace notes, and some added octave doubling. If there is a sense to this ending, it surely lies beyond a mere homage to Bach's "Goldberg" Variations. Firstly, inasmuch as the theme "composes out" a progression from the initial g \sharp ¹ to b¹ and back, the entire movement may be said to "compose out" that structure of departure and return. Secondly, inasmuch as the theme can be understood as a recomposition and completion of a first movement lacking unequivocal closure, it is itself powerfully imbued with the sense of an ending.²³

The multimovement work

Rather than relying on issues of long-range linear completion, as do so many celebrated end-weighted movements of Beethoven's instrumental works, goal-directedness between the outer movements of a multimovement work may more typically concern relative weight or gesture. Here it is important to retain a sense of the conventional succession of forms and characters associated with the genres under discussion; and it is the typical casting of the first movement as the most complex and weighty that is chiefly at issue. First movements almost always employed sonata form, while less dynamic, more repetitive formal types such as rondo or variation form were considered appropriate to finales.²⁴

In short, one might speak of a progressive easing of the demands made on the late eighteenth- or early nineteenth-century listener; the rondo finale of a mature Haydn symphony, with its frequently "popular" melodic style, might even be equated with the (equally) traditional operatic *lieto fine*.²⁵ Beethoven too subscribed to this aesthetic (compare, for example, the primary themes in the outer movements of his First Symphony op. 21); yet he seems from an early stage to have been interested also in subverting it, by writing finales that are not merely equal in weight to their respective first movements, but which actually overpower them. Minor-key works form a special class here. In op. 2 no. 1 and op. 10 no. 1, Beethoven chose sonata form for both outer movements; in the *Pathétique* Sonata op. 13, he resorted to the more conventional rondo finale, but without easing the tone of the music appreciably. Neither did he opt in any of these three works to lighten the ending of the finale by a turn to the major mode: the music remains implacably in the minor. Elsewhere, the powerful sense of resolution imparted by this simple modal inflection offered a means of suggesting closure either within an individual movement or between two movements: the *locus classicus* is of course the Fifth Symphony, its triumphant C major finale dispelling at a stroke the threatening gloom both of the first movement and of the third, with which it is continuous.²⁶ The finale of the Ninth also rehearses the yielding of minor to major, thereby elevating to the level of the entire work the strategy adopted in the first movement.²⁷

Notwithstanding the potent sense of arrival at the finales of the Fifth and Ninth Symphonies, these movements can hardly be said to outweigh entirely their respective first movements, which are themselves of conventionally heavyweight build. In fact it is a measure of Beethoven's respect for generic convention that in his symphonies he never seriously departed from the norm of a big first movement. Things were different in the case of the sonata, where several decisively finale-weighted works may be

identified. The earliest is the “Moonlight” Sonata op. 27 no. 2, the second of the two works that Beethoven published as “sonata quasi una fantasia.” The description has as much to do with the *attacca* and *segue* instructions directing the linkage of the separate movements into connected, fantasia-like structures as it does with the unconventional movement-sequences themselves; nevertheless, it is this latter aspect that plays most powerfully to the end-weighting of the “Moonlight,” in which Beethoven reserves a driving, “first-movement” sonata form for the finale. Two much later and important examples are the Piano Sonata in A op. 101, and its close neighbor, the Cello Sonata in C op. 102 no. 1. The first movement of op. 101 can be assimilated to sonata form only weakly, thanks to the avoidance of a strong tonic articulation before m. 77 where the recapitulation closing group begins. By placing the exposition first group on the dominant, which harmony is then almost imperceptibly tonicized at an early stage, Beethoven all but destroys the tonal polarization on which sonata form so vitally depends. This is just one of many features that contrive to make the first movement of op. 101 unconventionally muted.

This muting begins to make sense when an improvisatory flourish brings the third movement (*Langsam und sehnsuchtvoll*) to an early halt on a V/A triad, only to give way to a modified and fragmented version of the opening bars of the first movement. This recall itself soon yields to the finale, a full-scale sonata-form movement that provides unequivocal tonic definition at the outset (mm. 32–33). There is a strong sense that the right-hand falling third E–C# accompanying the initiatory V–I cadence is a “corrective” to the more feeble descending fourths e^2 – b^1 in mm. 2 and 4 of the first movement, serving as they do merely to prolong the underlying dominant harmony.²⁸ The finale of the Ninth again comes to mind, even though in op. 101 no soloist is on hand to reject previously heard music with the preemptory injunction, “O Freunde, nicht diese Töne!”

The Cello Sonata op. 102 no. 1 makes essentially the same statement in an even more remarkable way. The work opens in C major with what might at first appear to be a slow introduction. But rather than ending poised on the dominant, as convention would demand, it closes in the tonic, only to be followed by a full-scale sonata-form “first” movement in the relative minor, A minor.²⁹ The precise status of the initial C major section is thus cast in doubt. An unexpected recall of this material again occurs partway through the slow movement – and as in op. 101, this has an improvisatory, fantasia-like cast – before all is swept away by the finale. “These tones, but not in the same order” might be the unspoken command here, for the opening of the sonata-form finale audibly reverses the descending fourth c^1 – b – a – g intoned by the cello at the very outset. Both sonatas, then, effectively “narrate” their end-weighted movement

sequence; and, to the extent that Beethoven's strategy relies powerfully on withholding until the finale the kind of strong tonic affirmation that would normally be expected at the beginning of a such a work, we see clearly here that "to make an end is to make a beginning".

Contra closure

Beethoven's tendency to alter the conventional dynamic of multimovement works, his main purpose usually being to shift the main dramatic weight from the beginning to the end of the sequence, is obvious enough. Works such as op. 101 and op. 102 no. 1 further illustrate not only his radical departure, above all in his later music, from the conventional number and sequence of movements but also his challenge to the autonomy of the individual movement itself. These tendencies become especially pronounced in the last three piano sonatas (opp. 109–11) and the five late string quartets (opp. 127, 130/133, 131, 132, 135). As Richard Kramer has put it,

the aesthetics of Classical style dictate a work in which the individual movements make powerful claim to *Selbständigkeit*. But in the music of the 1820s, and nowhere more eloquently than in Beethoven's last quartets, the fragile networking of "fragmentary" pieces together into some work whose concept depends on the palpable ties between movements . . . can be said to renegotiate the terms by which the work claims to be a sum of its parts.³⁰

Perhaps the best example (one quoted by Kramer himself) is the String Quartet in C# minor op. 131, whose seven movements flow into one another in such a way as to weaken their autonomy. The numbering of the movements from 1 to 7, a curious detail reminiscent of an operatic score, only reinforces the sense that these are not so much individual movements in the Classical sense but rather interdependent sections of a single long movement.³¹ Beethoven makes op. 131 a strongly end-directed work by withholding a full-scale sonata-form movement until the finale. End and beginning are palpably connected in this quartet, in that the finale includes a prominent thematic transformation of the first four notes (G#–B#–C#–A) of the fugue subject with which the quartet opens (Example 6.4).³²

Yet the very end of the op. 131 finale casts doubt on the tonal closure of the whole work, since the concluding C# major triads portend both V/IV and I^{#3}. In fact the music leans strongly towards F# minor (IV) from m. 349 onward; and this, too, links the finale with the first movement, where the sense of the ending is poised precariously between tonic and subdominant.

Example 6.4 String Quartet op. 131, 1st mvt., mm. 1–4; finale, mm. 22–25

In his survey of Beethoven's quartets, Joseph Kerman stresses the degree to which the late works are characterized by opposing tendencies towards *dissociation* and *integration*. To him, op. 131 represents Beethoven's most highly "integrated" work while the String Quartet in B♭ op. 130 counts as the most "dissociated."³³ Although a work that pushes dissociation to extremes need not entirely forfeit satisfactory closure, there can be no doubt that op. 130 forces a confrontation with closural issues that are more profound and troublesome than in any other Beethoven work. Simply put, the celebrated "finale-problem in Beethoven" reaches its apogee with this work. The substitution of a light-weight sonata-rondo movement for the original fugal finale, subsequently published as the *Grosse Fuge* op. 133, raises major aesthetic questions which (to anticipate my conclusion) cannot be definitively resolved, but which have nonetheless dogged a vast literature addressing whether Beethoven jumped or was pushed – whether his substitution of the new finale reflects a personal judgment that the fugal finale was a mistake, or whether he made the change unwillingly, at others' insistence – and whether one or the other version of the quartet is therefore *the* definitive one. Probably no one has argued more lengthily, passionately, and at times misguidedly, for the priority of Beethoven's original conception than Ivan Mahaim; though Klaus Kropfnger, a more recent apologist, has also concluded unequivocally that "only the original version [with the *Grosse Fuge* as finale] corresponds to Beethoven's [compositional] idea."³⁴

For Kropfnger and others before him, Beethoven's sketches figure importantly in an argument favoring the fugue. The argument holds that a fugal finale, and even the theme of the *Grosse Fuge* itself, was part of Beethoven's earliest conception of the quartet. Kropfnger makes the point quite explicitly:

The analysis of the sketches . . . demonstrates, then, that the fugal finale of the B-flat quartet was not something arbitrary, but rather was the decisive *Schlussgestalt* of the cyclic configuration of the work: that is, one based on an original intention, confirmed, made fast, and developed through numerous decisions in the course of the compositional process, and then finally realized as a whole.³⁵

But a diametrically opposite view can be found. Barry Cooper finds in the sketches evidence that “the *Grosse Fuge* was by no means Beethoven’s first idea” for the finale, and concludes that it may in fact “be seen as something of an intrusion into the quartet, rather than the germ from which the work sprang.”³⁶ On this reading, the eventual substitution of the new finale poses fewer aesthetic problems. Kerman is also disinclined to say that “the fugue ‘must’ have been central to [Beethoven’s] conception from the start”; and he is in any case adamant that the answer to the aesthetic problem (“which finale?”) is properly to be sought not in the sketches but in the work itself.³⁷

Confrontation with the work itself raises the question of closure at two levels: firstly, closure within the *Grosse Fuge* itself, whether taken as the finale to the quartet or as an independent work; secondly, the closural role of the *Grosse Fuge* in relation to the quartet as a whole. Beethoven himself famously described the fugue as “tantôt libre, tantôt recherchée,” and it is a critical commonplace that for long stretches it is hardly fugal at all. This is especially true of the second main section, the G \flat major *Meno mosso e moderato* (mm. 159ff.), and also of the ensuing jig-like *Allegro molto e con brio* (mm. 233–72). This latter section, indeed, seems in some sense decisive for the fugue as a whole: it is the only music treated to anything like a formal recapitulation (mm. 533–64), whereafter it sets the controlling “tone” for the rest of the movement. But how to take the concluding section, beginning at m. 662? A linear-contrapuntal approach might identify the passage from m. 716, where the preparation for the concluding cadence begins, as one that concludes a process begun at the beginning and end of the first main section. As Example 6.5a shows, the initial countersubject accompanying the “gapped” version of the main theme (mm. 30–35) contains a middleground $\hat{5}-\hat{4}-\hat{3}$ ($f^2-e^{\flat 2}-d^2$) progression which turns back on itself ($d^2-e^2-f^2$, mm. 34–35) in order to meet the tonal requirements of the answer. The climactic entry of this countersubject in m. 153, now set one octave higher, falters on $e^{\flat 3}$ (mm. 155–56), harmonized as V^7/B^{\flat} ; and this $e^{\flat 3}$ falls not to d^3 but to $d^{\flat 3}$ (m. 158) as the harmony is abruptly skewed upward to G \flat ($\flat VI/B^{\flat}$), which becomes the local tonic of the following section (Example 6.5b). The music beginning at m. 716 relates both to the initial presentation of subject and countersubject and to the climactic entry of the latter in m. 153; but now the lines and previously syncopated metrics are smoothed out as the melodic descent continues beyond $e^{\flat 3}$ to complete, at last, a large-scale $\hat{5}-\hat{1}$ descent (Example 6.5c).

As with the first movement of op. 2 no. 1, this ending makes sense as a long-delayed completion of processes interrupted in the early stages of the work. But with the *Grosse Fuge* there is also the extraordinary change

Example 6.5a *Grosse Fuge* op. 133, mm. 31–35

Example 6.5b op. 133, mm. 153–58

Example 6.5c op. 133, mm. 716–end

of “tone” to be considered. Far from merely completing the middle-ground linear processes begun with the initial combination of subject and countersubject, these concluding bars confirm the total transformation of the character of that material; the *Grosse Fuge* ends a world away from where it begins. Kerman notes the “incongruity of tone” set by the jig-like material of the *Allegro molto e con brio*, which he describes as a “vise for the form”; he also detects an ever-closer grappling with the theme that is important for the “over-all sense of the work.”³⁸ But one might argue to the contrary, that the “over-all sense” is precisely one of the ultimate abandonment of contrapuntal rigor (albeit “tantôt libre . . .”), with all its connotations of seriousness, to a distinctly more homophonic texture (the combination of subject and countersubject in mm. 716ff. somehow does not sound “contrapuntal”) connoting a lighter, even humorous vein. For Richard Kramer, the progression is one from obscurity to coherence, as

hinted by the reverse presentation, at the outset, of the “premonitions” of the “four main ‘subjects’ of the music to follow.”³⁹ Seeking to relate the *Grosse Fuge* to the preceding Cavatina, Kramer considers the operatic precedent whereby the “short Cavatina” figures in “the crisis before the *Lieto fine*.” He concedes that “the *Große Fuge* is no *lieto fine*, but it is emphatically a finale, not least in its mission to ground – to absorb – all these disparate, refractive musics that precede it [in the quartet].”⁴⁰ Not a single, undifferentiated *lieto fine*, certainly; but the internal trajectory – from confusion or complication to resolution and *lieto fine* – of the *opera buffa* chain finale can offer a formal and dramatic paradigm for the “over-all sense” of the *Grosse Fuge* itself.

What of the sense of the *Grosse Fuge* as an ending for the quartet? That the pitch configuration of the fugue subject is closely related to the opening of the first movement has been frequently pointed out. Kramer’s analysis of this relationship seeks to demonstrate not only that the first four bars of the first movement stake out a harmonic progression implicit in the fugue subject, but that this harmonization also yields the underlying circle-of-fifths progression (G–C–F–B \flat) in the *Overtura*.⁴¹ Example 6.6 expresses the relationship differently, by revealing the two-part counterpoint underlying the fugue subject: a top voice moving chromatically between B \flat (implied) and G, over a neighbor-note progression B \flat (–B \flat)–C–B \flat (implied). The upper-voice progression appears in octaves at the outset of the first movement, while the complete two-voice complex is easily distinguishable in the ensuing consequent phrase (mm. 2³–4).

The fact of a thematic relationship between the outer movements, while it might promote a sense of unity, does not infallibly establish a sense of goal-directedness toward the finale (the same is true of the op. 131 relationship shown in Example 6.4). And even though Reti, Misch, Kerman, and others have demonstrated more pervasive networks of inter-movement relationships in op. 130, such relationships still might not form a processive sequence of which the finale is the felt culmination.⁴² Nor should one neglect all that in op. 130 which resists the Forsterian imperative “only connect.” Inter- and intramovement relationships in op. 130 stand in a dialectical relationship to the celebration of “dissociation” that Kerman finds central both to the individual movements and to the totality of the quartet: “in many ways the Quartet in B \flat is problematic, but the heart of the problem lies in the quite radical attitude it embodies toward the balance, confrontation, or sequence of the movements”; op. 130 seemingly shuns any “sense of a central action, in some sort of analogy with the drama”; “digressions,” unanchored to any central action, then “assume a life of their own, and the life of the whole piece becomes the life of the ‘digressions.’”⁴³ From this perspective, the

Example 6.6 The subject of the *Grosse Fuge* in op. 130, 1st mvt., mm. 1–4

1st mvt., mm. 3–4

1st mvt., mm. 1–2

implied counterpoint

fugue subject

Grosse Fuge as quartet finale can hardly provide that sense of an ending whereby

the finale [acts] in some sense to resume, or resolve, or reinterpret, or transfigure . . . One would not even want to say that the Great Fugue transcends the early parts of the quartet: it wipes them out. There is a sense in which this Finale trivializes the journey which it means to terminate, and there is also a sense in which the Great Fugue orbits upon a private musical sphere of its own, needing no other sounds, needing no other universe.⁴⁴

Beyond the ending

Closure is a far more absolute condition in classical music than in most other arts. Literary narratives, for instance, often play with degrees of closure.

...

By contrast, in most tonal music of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, nothing less will suffice for purposes of concluding pieces than complete resolution onto the [tonic] triad. Equivocal endings, not coincidentally, are few and far between.⁴⁵

When music ends, it ends absolutely, in the cessation of passing time and movement, in death.⁴⁶

By stressing its autonomy and self-sufficiency (“needing no other sounds . . . no other universe”), Kerman hints that the eventual separation of the *Grosse Fuge* from op. 130 harms the fugue less than the quartet. The view that the new finale does not match the quality of the *Grosse Fuge* is frequently encountered; Kerman, certainly, can summon little enthusiasm for this “quiet, sunny, Haydnesque *Allegro*.”⁴⁷ Kristin Knittel’s study of the reception history of the late quartets shows that many nineteenth- and early twentieth-century critics had particular difficulty in understanding the new finale in relation to the pitiful circumstances of Beethoven’s last months (“what does it mean for Beethoven to be suffering so acutely, and yet write such a silly piece?”), leading them to invoke the notion of “transcendence” to explain the dissonance between life and art.⁴⁸ Yet Kerman is not afraid to interpret Beethoven’s decision to compose the new finale “as an acknowledgement . . . that he saw something wrong with the way [the *Grosse Fuge*] sat in the quartet.” Ultimately, he finds neither version of op. 130 entirely successful: Beethoven appears to have been striving – unsuccessfully – for “some new idea of order or coherence in the cyclic composition, an order markedly different from the traditional psychological sequence.”⁴⁹

This last point is a reminder not to underestimate the consequences of Beethoven’s decision to write a new finale for op. 130, whatever his reasons for doing so. He must have been well aware that the substitution would have a profound effect on the quartet *as a whole*.⁵⁰ To tack on a new ending while keeping the story unchanged was not an option: the new ending would itself “rewrite” the entire story. The new finale affects the overall sense of op. 130 most obviously through its redistribution of “weight.” Whereas the original version was massively end-orientated – whatever the precise sense of that ending – “the centre of gravity in the new version . . . is shifted from the end to somewhere else – just where, is hard to say; the other movements seem a little lost without the Great Fugue to dominate them. The Fugue runs the danger of trivializing the experience of the other movements, but the new finale runs the danger of seeming trivial itself.”⁵¹ Walter Riezler was able to find meaning in both versions of the quartet:

The present finale is not, as is often maintained, a mere make-shift, forced upon [Beethoven] by his publishers’ opposition and lack of understanding on the part of the public. Two possibilities are inherent in the previous movements: to increase the tension to the limit of human endurance and shift the climax to the end of the whole work, or to relax it and finish in a mood of quietness and serenity, which often, to be sure, hardly conceals the “abysses of the world.” Both endings are “organic,” and both are in keeping with the “idea” of the work, for it is this that is open to the “world-background.”⁵²

Riezler's words conceal a timely admonition: the end is not necessarily "where we start from." Rather, musical material is fluid, possessing multiple tendencies and possibilities that are not directed towards a single inevitable *telos*. Moreover, we as listeners or "readers" are ineluctably complicit in creating the sense of an ending. Nor should we forget that the composer is his own reader, and never more so than in a case like this one. Figuring Beethoven as a reader of op. 130 when faced with the task of composing a new finale opens up suggestive parallels with literary texts, which not infrequently adumbrate endings beyond the point at which they literally stop.⁵³ Such "aftermaths," or endings beyond the ending, may be straightforwardly narrated at an earlier point in the text, or hinted at more obliquely; they may even derive from the reader's possession of knowledge external to the text itself. The effects of such aftermaths may be profound, sometimes entirely reversing the sense of the ending in the text itself. We might, then, profitably conceive the new finale in op. 130 not as an alternative but as the composer/reader's individually constructed aftermath to his original ending;⁵⁴ equally, circumstances allow us to read the *Grosse Fuge* as an external source that modifies our sense of the ending in the main text.⁵⁵

These last remarks are intentionally suggestive – it is hoped, provocative – of new beginnings rather than endings. Having begun by documenting the very precise sense of the ending of the first movement of Beethoven's earliest piano sonata bearing an opus number, this study concludes with his last completed composition, one that casts naked light on the precariousness – the senselessness? – of our topic. How, then, to end? "Plaudite, amici, comoedia finita est!" Beethoven's reportedly "sarcastic-humorous" deathbed curtain-cue perhaps suggests that death, ineluctable but arbitrary, trivializes life: a sense of an ending, yet an ending without sense.⁵⁶ Or it may be read as "a gesture of defiance, reminding us that life, although transient, is necessarily more vivid than death."⁵⁷ *Finis coronat opus*.

