

MUSICMAP NOTES

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Beethoven's Duet for Viola & Cello in E-Flat Major "mit zwei obligaten Augengläsern" ("with two eyeglasses obbligato"), WoO 32

Not published during Beethoven's lifetime; date of composition unknown. Discovered in a sketchbook dating from 1794-1800, with present 1st movement and minuet nearly complete. There were also some preliminary sketches for a slow movement. It has been speculated that the "obbligato eyeglasses" is a joking reference to Beethoven himself, who played viola, and his cellist friend Nikolaus Zmeskall von Domanovecz. Both men would've required their eyeglasses to perform this duet together.

Movement I – Sonata form, Allegro, 4/4, E-flat major

Exposition:

Main theme: Statement has viola lead, 8 bars (4+4), contrasting period with rising matched by falling motion. Nobly lyrical melody launched in grand style by staggered triple-stop, immediately followed by a double-stop. Cello provides broken chord accompaniment. Counter-statement switches to cello lead, down an octave. Opening gesture enhanced by expansion to quadruple-stop. Viola now provides broken chord accompaniment from above. In the last bars of the counter-statement, theme modified by viola imitation, leading seamlessly into...

Bridge: One continuous, evolutionary passage, starting with lively imitative runs, leading to brief new rhythmic idea in viola. Ends with clear, cadential gestures and pause.

Subordinate theme:

Part I – 9-bar (5+4) theme presented imitatively with cello lead. As with main theme, starts with grand multi-stop gesture, but structure then more free and irregular. Parallel but shortened consequent switches parts.

Part II – 8 bars (4+4), contrasting period. Contrasting material, with viola lead throughout. Flowing 8th-note cello accompaniment gives way to staccato in consequent. Also for consequent, viola harmonizes with itself in double-stops.

Closing material: Goes on longer than we might expect, quite free in its evolution without clear themes or periods. Much imitative play with various motives and distinctive rhythms.

Part I – Brief passage introduces rhythmic motive 'X.'

Part II – More virtuosic with new rushing 16th notes. Close interplay sometimes has cello above viola. Subtle play on 'X' from cello.

Part III – Introduces new motive ‘Y’ – brief, descending idea with staccato-sounding 16ths. This is followed by more imitative play that seems to come to a close with a cadence...but then is extended with more use of ‘Y,’ now in unison, bringing us finally to the exposition repeat. Afterward, the 2nd ending shifts the mood into minor mode as we enter...

Development:

Part I: Severe-sounding contrapuntal play with new rising 16th-note motive...not obviously clear how this relates to exposition.

Part II: Returns motive ‘X’ from the closing material, traded evenly between players.

Part III: New texture provides marked contrast...instead of imitation, now rapidly oscillating viola 16th notes create harmonic blur over slower cello line.

Part IV: Retransition. Cello provides dominant pedal, but only briefly. Sustained harmonies from the cello underpin a series of staccato 16th-note runs in the viola, followed by a shorter, more fragmentary pattern of multi-stop chords (both instruments simultaneously), with pauses and other brief gestures. This spare quality continues with the introduction of the first pizzicato in the piece. B-flats (dominant) prominent in anticipation of E-flat (tonic). Suspense enhanced at end by slowdown to adagio and fermata.

Recapitulation:

Main theme: Statement a literal repeat. Counter-statement starts, but almost immediately morphs into new freer material. This takes the place of the original bridge, but eventually incorporates some of its elements, most recognizably at the end. A new surprise false-start precedes...

Sub-theme: Part I clearly recognizable, but telescoped by the omission of the third bar, which actually makes it a more regular 8 bars (4+4)

Part II is close to the original, but with the middle of the passage slightly recomposed. It also has a darker effect now with the viola in the lower octave.

Closing material: For Part I, the cello line is significantly more animated.

Part II is much as before, but the cello here works up to a strainingly high tessitura.

Part III is just as before, save for the new key.

Coda:

Part I: Unusually, Beethoven does not seem to quote any previous material. New imitative passage contains steady 8th notes from cello, contrasted with wide-leaping viola quarter notes.

Part II: Strong contrast with long held notes...a quiet lull, dropping down to *pp*.

Part III: Animation returns with growing rhythmic excitement and crescendo up to strong, confident end.

Movement II – Minuet & Trio, Moderate tempo, 3/4, E-flat major

Quite a well-mannered minuet for Beethoven, with an actual minuet feel, as opposed to some of his early dance movements which he labels “minuet,” but are really scherzos.

Minuet:

Part I is quite short and ends softly and rather tentatively. In Part II, this soft ending becomes the basis for a nice, mysteriously hushed extension, followed by a codetta. Part II is quite long in proportion to Part I. Frequent multi-stops from both instruments add a pleasing richness to the sonority throughout.

Trio:

The trio is more in simple binary form than rounded, and suggests an antique contrapuntal style. The beginning of Part II, which is in minor, projects an especially effective gravity.

Da Capo & Coda:

After the usual “da capo” repeat of the minuet, Beethoven with his love of codas is unable to resist adding a few new bars to bring the movement to a close...returning to the tentative, mysterious mood that he had earlier projected.