OCR AoS1: Beethoven's Violin Concerto, first movement

KS5

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Introduction

In 2020, the year marking the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth, OCR A level students are lucky enough to be studying a work by that composer. While a trip to Vienna to join in the #Beethoven250 celebrations may not be possible, there are many events and broadcasts taking place in the UK, helping the students to feel that their prescribed work is relevant and topical.

As the prescribed work for Area of Study 1 (Instrumental music of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven) students will need to be prepared to answer two ten-mark questions in Section B of the listening paper. Questions will be based on extracts from Beethoven's Violin Concerto, in which students must analyse, compare and demonstrate understanding of the background and context of the work. They will also have to show that they have engaged in wider listening.

Background and context

Beethoven wrote his Violin Concerto in 1806, and the premiere took place on 23 December of that year, just days after the work had been completed. Beethoven wrote the piece for the violinist Franz Clement, who was at the time one of the leading violinists in Vienna and also conductor at the Theater an der Wien. The premiere was given at a benefit concert in aid of Clement (meaning he would have kept the profits). However, when the Concerto was published, it was dedicated to a friend of Beethoven's, Stephan von Breuning, rather than to Clement.

After its premiere, the Concerto did not receive a huge number of performances. The reasons for this are unclear: contemporary accounts suggest that the audience liked the Concerto, but that the critics did not. After Beethoven's death, the child prodigy Joseph Joachim, first performed the Concerto in London in 1844, aged 12, beginning a revival of the work's popularity. Since then it has been a staple of the violin repertoire.

By 1806, Beethoven had already composed most of the concertos he was to write – four for piano and a Triple Concerto for violin, cello and piano, leaving just the Fifth Piano Concerto still to come. He'd also written two *Romances* for violin and orchestra around the turn of the century, and a sketch for a different Violin Concerto in C major around the time he moved to Vienna from Bonn in 1792. However, this earlier Violin Concerto was never completed. Beethoven did play the violin himself but was not a virtuoso player. It seems that Clement may have had a significant input into the solo violin part of his completed Concerto.

The year 1806 belongs to what's often referred to as Beethoven's 'Middle Period' (1802 to 1812). The period begins with the letter Beethoven wrote during his summer visit to a village outside Vienna, known as the Heiligenstadt Testament. In this letter, he laments his increasing deafness. He returned from the summer composing in a 'new way' (as he described it). Having initially followed the path laid down by Haydn and Mozart, his works became larger and longer, and pointed more towards a Romantic style of music. The Violin Concerto is significantly longer than works by Haydn and Mozart. The first movement alone, at 535 bars and about 25 minutes, is longer than many complete concertos and symphonies by those other two composers.

In 1807 the composer and publisher Muzio Clementi visited Beethoven, with the aim of getting permission to publish some of Beethoven's works in England. It seems that he also persuaded Beethoven to create a piano concerto version of the Violin Concerto. The piano concerto version (known as Op. 61a) was indeed published, but some are sceptical as to how much of the arrangement was done by Beethoven himself. This work is not really considered to be one of Beethoven's concertos and is rarely played. The piano version was dedicated to the wife of Stephan von Breuning, Julie.

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Ludwig van Beethoven's exact date of birth in Bonn is not known. He was baptised on 17 December 1770, and it's likely that he was born shortly before that date.

Scores

Each student will obviously need their own copy of the score, on which they can make notes. Available for free online are the Breitkopf score without bar numbers and the Eulenburg score from 1935 with bar numbers every ten bars. The Breitkopf score has a further disadvantage that instrument names are given only intermittently. Scores available to buy include a Bärenreiter Urtext, Henle Urtext, a newer Eulenburg (1981) and an Eulenburg audio+score. Whichever score is used, students will need to have bar numbers (added by hand if necessary) in order to find particular passages quickly and easily.

Instrumentation

The work is scored for flute, two oboes, two clarinets in A (sounding a minor 3rd lower than written), two bassoons, two horns in D (sounding a minor 7th lower than written), two trumpets in D (sounding a tone higher than written), timpani tuned to D and A (the tonic and dominant), solo violin and strings.

Beethoven therefore uses a relatively standard late-Classical orchestra, but with just one flute. At this time, brass instruments did not have valves, so were only capable of playing notes in the harmonic series in the key to which they were tuned (which could be changed by inserting a crook of a particular length into the instrument). For this reason, the brass mainly play the tonic and dominant notes. The strings mostly play in four parts, but sometimes the cellos and basses are separated onto different lines to play different music, giving a five-part texture (eg bar 51).

The solo violin

At around the time Beethoven was writing this Concerto, there had been some adjustments made to the structure of both violins and their bows, resulting in their ability to play much louder. However, although it seems that Beethoven had this modernised violin in mind when writing the work, contemporary reports suggest that Clement had not embraced the changes and continued to play on an unmodernised instrument with an older bow.

The violin part in this Concerto has a very wide range, including some extremely high notes (eg the top E in bar 204, which is two octaves above the open E string). Throughout the work, the violin has many fast notes including triplets and semiquavers, playing scales, arpeggios and octaves, often decorating the melody played by the orchestra. There are some similarities to the passagework found in the piano concertos of Mozart.

The violin enters at bar 89, overlapping with the orchestra. It plays an improvised-sounding passage, based on the dominant, for 12 bars, before the first subject is heard. The soloist therefore enters slightly earlier than might be expected.

Structure

In the Baroque period, the solo concerto had become standardised as a three-movement work (in contrast to symphonies and sonatas in four movements), with movements following the pattern fast-slow-fast. Haydn and Mozart continued this convention, which Beethoven also follows it in this Concerto.

However, Beethoven chooses to run the second and third movements together: the second movement ends with an A major chord in the strings (the dominant of the finale, which is in the tonic key of the work, D major) and a short solo violin cadenza, then the third movement follows without a break.

The structure of the first movement is discussed in detail below. The second movement (in the subdominant key of G major) is in a kind of variation form, while the finale is sonata-rondo (ABACABA).

First movement form

Before undertaking any other work on this movement, students will need to have a clear idea of the basic structure, since where a passage comes in the movement has a significant bearing on keys and other features.

Classical composers were keen to exploit the new sonata form possibilities in their concertos, using it in the first movements of sonatas and symphonies (and elsewhere). However, links remained to the preceding Baroque concertos, which were written in ritornello form. This led to a kind of hybrid structure, where elements of both sonata and ritornello form may be discerned, and the same is true of the first movement of this Violin Concerto.

Ritornello form
In ritornello form, the ritornellos are the main theme, played by the orchestra in full or part at intervals throughout the movement in varying keys. These are separated by episodes in which the soloist is prominent, playing either new music or music based on the ritornellos. The opening and final ritornellos are in the tonic key of the movement.

The basic outline of the movement is as follows:

Section	Part of section	Bar numbers	Main key areas
EXPOSITION	Orchestral exposition/first ritornello	Bars 1-88	D major
	Solo exposition/first solo	Bars 89-223	D major and A major
DEVELOPMENT	Second ritornello	Bars 224-283	Various keys
	Second solo	Bars 284-364	
RECAPITULATION	Third ritornello	Bars 365-385	D major
	Third solo	Bars 386-496	D major
	Fourth ritornello	Bars 497-510	(D major)
CODA		Bars 511-535	D major

This Concerto has the standard 'double exposition' – an orchestral exposition followed by the entry of the soloist (accompanied by the orchestra) in a solo exposition. This means that, unlike in a symphony or sonata, the exposition is not strictly repeated (hence the lack of a repeat sign at the end of bar 223) as there have already been two expositions.

Harmony and tonality

Although Beethoven follows the same basic progression of keys as found in sonata-form works by Haydn and Mozart, this is only half the story. Along the way he visits many other related and even unrelated keys.

The opening is very clearly in the tonic key of D major, with a diatonic theme presented by the woodwind, emphasising chords I and V. Suddenly in bar 10 the violins play the unharmonised note D sharp, far removed from the tonic and unsettling the feeling of calm. However, the following bar is the dominant 7th chord, quickly re-establishing D major as the tonic.

Similarly, at bar 28 the orchestra has the unexpected chord of B flat major, made more dramatic with the first tutti at an *ff* dynamic. This quickly leads to some bars in the tonic minor (D minor), a key that Beethoven regularly visits in this movement. In bar 40 the F natural (needed for D minor) is changed back to an F sharp and the second subject is heard in the expected key of D major (in the orchestral exposition). However, this is also presented in a tonic minor version from bar 51 and extended with a brief excursion to F major.

In bar 65, the D sharps originally heard in bar 10 return, but this time are harmonised with a diminished 7th chord. By leading to an E minor chord, followed by A7 and a return to the tonic, Beethoven helps to explain the presence of the D sharps and the fact that perhaps they are not so distant from the tonic key after all.

The solo exposition includes a similar excursion to the tonic minor (bar 126) and a modulation to the dominant, as would be expected for the second subject. This modulation means that the original D sharps are now A sharps, but are still harmonised with a diminished 7th chord (bar 166).

At the end of the solo exposition, there seems to be a long preparation for the return of the tonic, but expectations are confounded when an interrupted cadence into the start of the development moves immediately to F major. The F natural in the cellos and basses in bar 207 is a possible hint of what's to come. There is therefore no break between the exposition and development sections.

From bar 239 in the development, Beethoven once again makes use of a modal shift – the second subject theme is heard first in A major and then A minor. The music then begins to modulate towards C major. Beethoven achieves this with an enharmonic change: the A sharp in bar 261 becomes B flat in bar 263 and the 7th of V7 in F major, from where Beethoven moves to C major by bar 272. Again, this is a fairly distant key from D major.

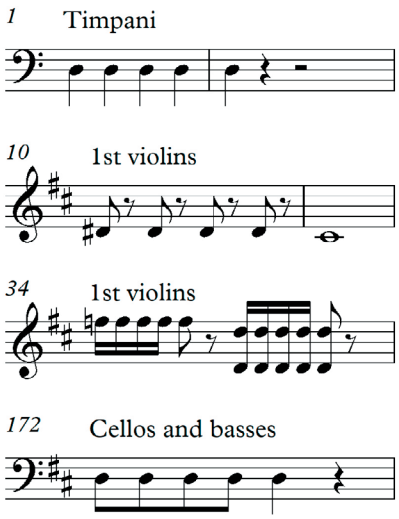
Beethoven uses a similar method to reach the key of B minor (the relative minor) by bar 301. The F natural in bar 298-299 is treated as an E sharp. Shortly afterwards bars 308-315 feature part of a cycle of 5ths (B major – E minor – A minor – D minor – G minor). After settling in G minor for a few bars, the music reaches E flat major by bar 343 and then D minor at bar 347. As would be expected, there is then dominant preparation at the end of the development (the pedal note from bars 357-361), ready for the return of the tonic at the start of the recapitulation.

The recapitulation remains in the tonic, except for the brief excursion to B flat major and D minor in the fourth ritornello, from bar 497 (hence the brackets in the table above). In the coda the movement ends triumphantly in the tonic.

Themes and motifs

Timpani motif

Innocuous as they sound, the opening five Ds played by the timpani have great significance in the rest of the movement, appearing in various guises, some of which are given below:



These are just some of the examples, including two in diminution (bars 34 and 172). It is a matter of personal taste just how far links with other parts of the music are taken. Some have pointed out that the rhythm used in bars 4-5 is the same as the opening motif, while the solo violin plays the rhythm in augmentation in bars 521-523. Students could spend some time looking for possible appearances of the motif throughout the movement, the most striking of which is probably the *ff* tutti statement at the start of the recapitulation.

First subject

The first subject theme, like much of the material in this movement, follows Classical convention and consists of two balanced four-bar phrases (the first ending with an imperfect cadence, and the second ending with a perfect cadence). The first subject continues with six bars of ascending scales, initially in octaves and then in 3rds.

The music first heard from bar 28 is sometimes referred to as a transition theme. Obviously in the orchestral exposition, there is no requirement to modulate, though Beethoven starts the theme in B flat major, requiring it to return to the tonic for the second subject.

This theme is not heard in the solo exposition (Beethoven uses other music to enable the modulation from the tonic minor to the dominant), but it is heard at the start of the development (in F major). Since the recapitulation follows more the solo rather than the orchestral exposition, the theme is not heard there. However, it reappears in its orchestral ritornello at bar 497, again in B flat major.

Second subject

The second subject theme from bar 43 sounds similar to the first subject, introduced by the woodwind, using crotchets and minims, balanced phrases (2+2 answered by 2+2) and diatonic harmony. The rhythm of the opening bar of this theme is the same as the rhythm found in bar 8 (in the first subject).

From bar 51 the theme is repeated in the tonic minor, including an extension using sequence. Similarly, the theme is presented in both A major and A minor in the solo exposition. This theme is also used in the development, from bar 239 in A major and from bar 247 in A minor, but now *ff* and extended with modulation.

In the recapitulation, it returns in the tonic (bar 418), but with new scoring. Significantly, the solo violin has this theme immediately after the cadenza (bar 511), with very light pizzicato string accompaniment. This is the only occasion where the soloist plays an undecorated orchestral theme.

Closing theme

Both expositions and the recapitulation end with a closing theme (see bars 77, 178 and 452), which consists of the alternation of chords I and V. The second bar of this theme also uses the rhythm found in bar 8.

Development theme

In Beethoven's middle period works, it was increasingly common for him to include a new theme in the development. In this movement it is found from bar 331, played by the solo violin in G minor, and includes suspensions at the ends of the phrases.

Texture

Beethoven uses a wide variety of textures and instrumental combinations in this movement. Significantly, the wind introduce both the first and second subject themes homophonically and then continue to play a prominent role in the rest of the piece.

This freedom for the woodwind to present material without support from the strings was a trend started in Mozart and Haydn's works, but is even more evident here. From bar 18 the wind begin playing in octaves and then in 3rds, with gradually more instruments joining the texture, with relatively light string accompaniment. At bar 305 onwards the bassoons have the melodic interest (in 3rds), while the strings play the accompaniment and the soloist adds decorative figuration.

The first orchestral tutti is at bar 28, again in a homophonic texture, but by bar 39 this has reduced to a monophonic texture, with just the first violins playing.

When the violins play the minor version of the second subject theme from bar 51, the violas and cellos have a new triplet accompaniment, foreshadowing the type of material the solo violin is often given later. From bar 60, the wind double the upper strings in octaves and 3rds, helping to give weight to the crescendo.

In the repeat of the first subject theme in the solo exposition, the solo violin adds a decorated version above, creating a heterophonic texture. This is the case for many of the times the soloist is heard in the rest of the movement – triplet and semiquaver arpeggios, scales, octave leaps and stepwise movement elaborate the longer notes played by the orchestra below.

From bar 134, there is an example of antiphony between the woodwind and strings, while the soloist keeps up continuous semiquaver movement.

When the minor version of the second subject theme is heard in the solo exposition (from bar 152) the melodic line is taken by the first violins and violas in octaves and the triplets are played by the solo violin rather than violas and cellos.

The cadenza

At bar 510, the orchestra pauses on a second inversion tonic chord (Ic), signalling that the soloist should perform a cadenza. Though this would sound improvised, it was increasingly common for composers to write out cadenzas for instrumentalists to perform.

However, Beethoven did not provide any cadenzas for his Violin Concerto. Many others have since been written, including some by Joachim and Kreisler, which are probably the most popular today. Beethoven did provide cadenzas for the piano version of the concerto, and some have tried adapting these for the violin, but they are not usually regarded as successful.

Since the entry in bar 511 is *p,* it is likely that the soloist would end the cadenza quietly, with the traditional trill on the penultimate note to give a warning to the orchestra that the cadenza is about to end.

Recordings

It's likely that one of the ten-mark questions in the exam paper will require students to compare two different performances of part of the Concerto. They will therefore need to practise doing this, and should listen to a wide variety of performances, including some historically informed ones. There are many recordings freely available online, in which students can compare the use of the musical elements and other features such as articulation and balance.

Wider listening

Though both Haydn and Mozart wrote violin concertos (it is generally agreed four and five respectively), these all date from much earlier than the Beethoven Concerto, as they were written in 1775 or before, in Mozart's case when he was still a teenager.

Students would benefit from listening to a Mozart piano concerto (where they can hear the similarities between the piano figuration and the violin figuration in this Concerto) and possibly Haydn's Trumpet Concerto, which dates from 1796 and was written for a friend of Haydn's.

Further Reading

- *OCR A Level Set Works Supplement 2020* by Simon Rushby and David Ventura (published by Rhinegold Education)
- *Beethoven: Violin Concerto* by Robin Stowell (Cambridge Music Handbook)