OCR AoS 1 prescribed work 2024: Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4

KS5

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Area of study 1: instrumental music of the Classical period

The first movement of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 is the prescribed work for OCR's AoS1 for examination in 2024, and should be studied and contextualised within a number of other works in this area of study. Alongside this piece, studying other piano concertos by Beethoven, as well as some by Haydn and Mozart, will be essential in giving the students the best overview of the piano concerto in the Classical period.

This prescribed work in particular gives the teacher and student the opportunity to study how Beethoven's writing exploits and expands upon the forms and conventions of the Classical style. It's strongly suggested that students or teachers come up with a timeline of the Classical period, including composers' movements around Europe and works that the students have studied. It's essential that students understand the context in which the works they study were written, whatever you choose to study alongside this work.

Beethoven: some context

The three 'periods'

It's widely accepted that Beethoven's output can be divided into three periods:

- 'Early' period (1770-c1802): Beethoven's music is heavily influenced by the Viennese styles of Haydn and Mozart, but we can also hear the beginnings of his distinctive writing to come in the subsequent two periods.
- 'Middle' period (c1802-1814): this is often referred to as his 'heroic' period, in which his Third and Fifth symphonies were written, as well as the Op. 59 quartets and his 'Waldstein' and 'Appasionata' piano sonatas. It was works from this period that defined Beethoven's distinctive and potentially 'difficult' sound.
- 'Late' period (1815-1827); this period is marked by Beethoven's return to counterpoint, which he had not used in his 'heroic' period. The political unease of the time (invasion of Napoleon's army in Vienna) and some personal disappointments may have led to more ambitious styles in his writing, though direct links with biographical details remain mysterious.

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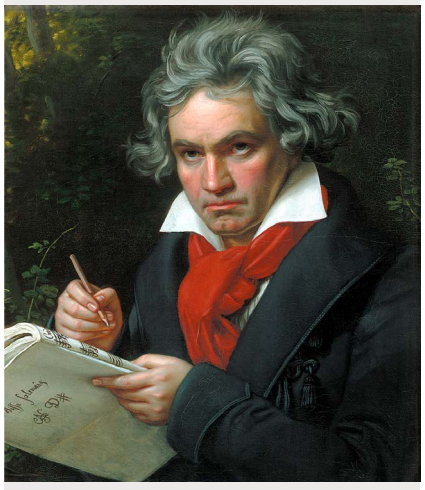


Ludwig van Beethoven, painted in 1820 by Joseph Karl Stieler

Sonata form

The first movement of Beethoven's Piano Concerto No. 4 is in sonata form, though not the form recognised in Haydn or Mozart, nor even in Beethoven's early works. By the 'middle period' of his career, Beethoven had expanded sonata form into something with more themes, and therefore more scope for development. The first movement itself is just under 20 minutes long, longer than many of Haydn's and Mozart's complete works.

Introducing learners to sonata form can come in two parts. Using Mozart's *Eine kleine Nachtmusik* provides a good starting point in terms of outlining the basic structure and tonality of the form. In order to grasp the scale and expansive nature of this particular work, however, the 'double' or 'orchestral' exposition will also need considering with your learners. The Classical concerto came to begin with this introduction of the main themes by the orchestra before the entrance of the soloist. This orchestral exposition would not, however, modulate, a privilege saved for the soloist. The soloist's exposition would not necessarily be an exact repeat of its introduction, and indeed, learners will discover a potential reimagining of this in Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto, in which the soloist weaves in and out of the main themes, decorating and elaborating in anticipation of the composer's final complete piano concerto, which would be completed three years later.

Alongside this work, other concerto movements by Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven should also be studied to contextualise this work – the notes for the Beethoven Violin Concerto (OCR prescribed work in 2020) (covered in its own *Music Teacher* resource, March 2020) will help for comparison, especially since the works were written at a similar time, but a good range of repertoire will still be required in order to demonstrate a depth of understanding for Section B.

Beethoven's piano concertos

Beethoven's five piano concertos demonstrate the transition and evolution from Classicism to Romanticism. The first three concertos show his unique and forceful style within the form and balance of the Classical style. The opening of the Fourth Piano Concerto sweetly introduces a new development in not only the concerto (the soloist opens the work with no accompaniment) but also Beethoven's expanding of the Classical style. Bar 5's B major 'substitution' for the tonic chord introduces a tertiary relationship that becomes a feature of the Romantic period, particularly in the works of Schubert and Brahms. In Beethoven's Fifth Piano Concerto, the scale of conception and space is breathtaking.

Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major

Beethoven composed the Fourth Piano Concerto between 1805 and 1806, during the 'heroic' phase of his career. By 1805, he had gained a reputation throughout Europe as a composer of instrumental music, but opera still eluded him. It was perhaps the combination of his focus on operatic writing, his (unrequited) love for Josephine Brunsvick, and his potential adapting to his deafness, that led to a reduction in his compositional output in 1805. By the end of the following year, however, there was a renewed period of fertility, with a steady stream of works, many on a large scale, including the Fourth Piano Concerto. This was premiered in private in March 1807 (with Beethoven as the soloist) at the home of Prince Franz Joseph von Lobkowitz, along with his *Corolian* Overture and his Fourth Symphony. Beethoven was also the soloist at the public premiere of the work in December 1808 in Vienna's Theater an der Wien, alongside the premieres of his Choral Fantasy and Fifth and Sixth symphonies. This was to be his final appearance as a soloist.

As with a typical concerto, there are three movements – the first is the OCR prescribed work. It is, of course, worth listening to and analysing all three movements for context:

- Allegro moderato
- Andante con moto
- Rondo: Vivace

Analysis

The analysis below takes on board the elements of music with reference to the OCR A level specification. The elements are grouped slightly different from OCR in this resource (in order to save space) but the relevant ones are covered. It should also be noted that interpretations of a concerto-sonata form on this scale will not always be consistent and the same. These notes will be published before any other supporting materials from music education publishers for this particular work and provide one particular interpretation of this form.

Structure and tonality

As already discussed, Beethoven's expansion of Classical writing stretches the structure of sonata form. In the opening, not only does the soloist appear before the orchestra, but the quiet dynamic is also in total contrast to the traditionally more vibrant announcement by the soloist after an orchestral introduction. Here, Beethoven changes the direction of the concerto tradition. Not only does his Fifth Piano Concerto open with an announcement from the soloist, but so did many of the concertos that followed in the Romantic period.

While the traditional orchestral exposition would often present both first and second subject groups, Beethoven does not do this, and we do not hear this until the soloist's second exposition.

While Beethoven expands on sonata form, the tonal framework remains largely intact, in terms of the modulation from the tonic to the dominant in the exposition, along with the return to the tonic. However, the relationship between these two keys has begun to soften, and the journey from the tonic to the dominant is not as direct as it was in Haydn's and Mozart's sonata forms. Tertiary relationships between keys emerge, which came to be a feature of the Romantic period. We hear this immediately in the opening strains of the Concerto. After a five-bar solo piano introduction in G major, the orchestra enters at bar 6 unexpectedly in B major, setting up a new harmonic expectation for the movement. This relationship can also be found between the two ideas in the first subject group in the second exposition and recapitulation. In the second exposition, the first of the two ideas (bar 89) is in G major, with the second in B flat major (bar 105) – the 3rd between them making it a tertiary relationship. In the recapitulation, the second idea appears in E flat major (at bar 275) – again, a tertiary relationship.

Overall, relationships between the key centres are still functional and closely related.

The overall structure and tonality of the first movement is as follows:

Section	'Themes'	Bar Numbers	Key
Exposition 1 (orchestral) * **Bars 1-74**	First subject group	1-29	G major
	Transition/modulatory theme	29-49	A minor C major G major B minor C major G major
	Closing theme(s)	50-74[1]	G major
Exposition 2 **Bars 74-192[3]**	Piano 'introduction' scalic passages accompanied by strings and oboe	74-89[1]	G major
	First subject group Second idea	89[3]-104 105-118	G major B flat major (towards) D major
	Second subject group	119-133	D major
	Transition/modulatory theme	134-159	D minor F major E minor C major B minor (towards) D major
	Closing theme(s)	160-192[3]	D major
Development **Bars 192[3]-253[1]**	Themes from the exposition are explored	 196-199 200 206 210 214 235 237 239	Passes through many keys: F minor D minor B minor F sharp minor C sharp minor E major E minor G major
Recapitulation **253[2]-348**	First subject group Second idea	253[2] 275 281	G major E flat major G minor (hints of from V)
	Second subject group	286	G major
	Transition/modulatory theme	301 305 309 313 319	G minor B flat major F major A minor C major
	Closing theme	324	G major
	Cadenza	347	Ic in G major
	Closing theme	348 to end	G major

*Including the opening five bars from the soloist.

Melodic construction, phrasing and other devices

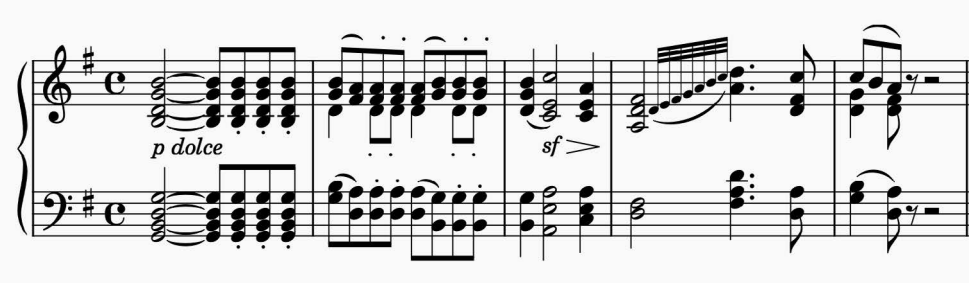
There's as much to be said about the decoration and expansion of the main themes are there is to say

about the ideas themselves. This provides a summary and a prompt for a deeper analysis with your learners.

The main themes are below, with some notes about their appearance in the movement:

First subject group

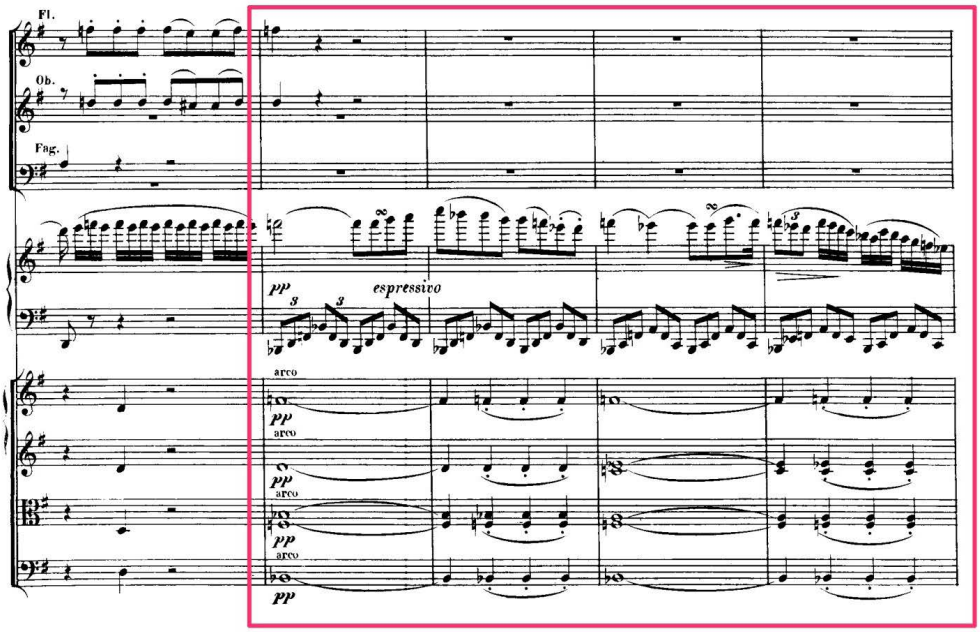
This theme is characterised by the three-quaver upbeat into the second bar, as well as the lilting



quavers in the second bar itself. Its presentation and development varies hugely throughout the work, and it's often heard starting with the three-quaver upbeat. The surprise statement from the opening *dolce* piano solo is not really how we hear the theme during the rest of the work. It's used imitatively and vigorously in the orchestral exposition (eg bars 14 to 19) as well as entering somewhat subversively in the transition theme (eg from bar 41), behaving as a transition itself to the closing theme (eg bars 45-49 leading to bar 50). In the development section, this idea appears in the woodwind, winding through a number of keys, a backdrop to the piano and descending scales (bars 204 to 216). The theme is restated in the recapitulation, again with the solo piano but in a contrasting dynamic from its original statement. The dense chords in the left hand provide the theme, while decorated with alternating semiquaver 3rds in the right.

A second idea as part of this first subject group can be found at bar 105. Similar in its rhythm to the first idea, in terms of the quaver movement, this melody has more shape and explores a higher register of the piano:

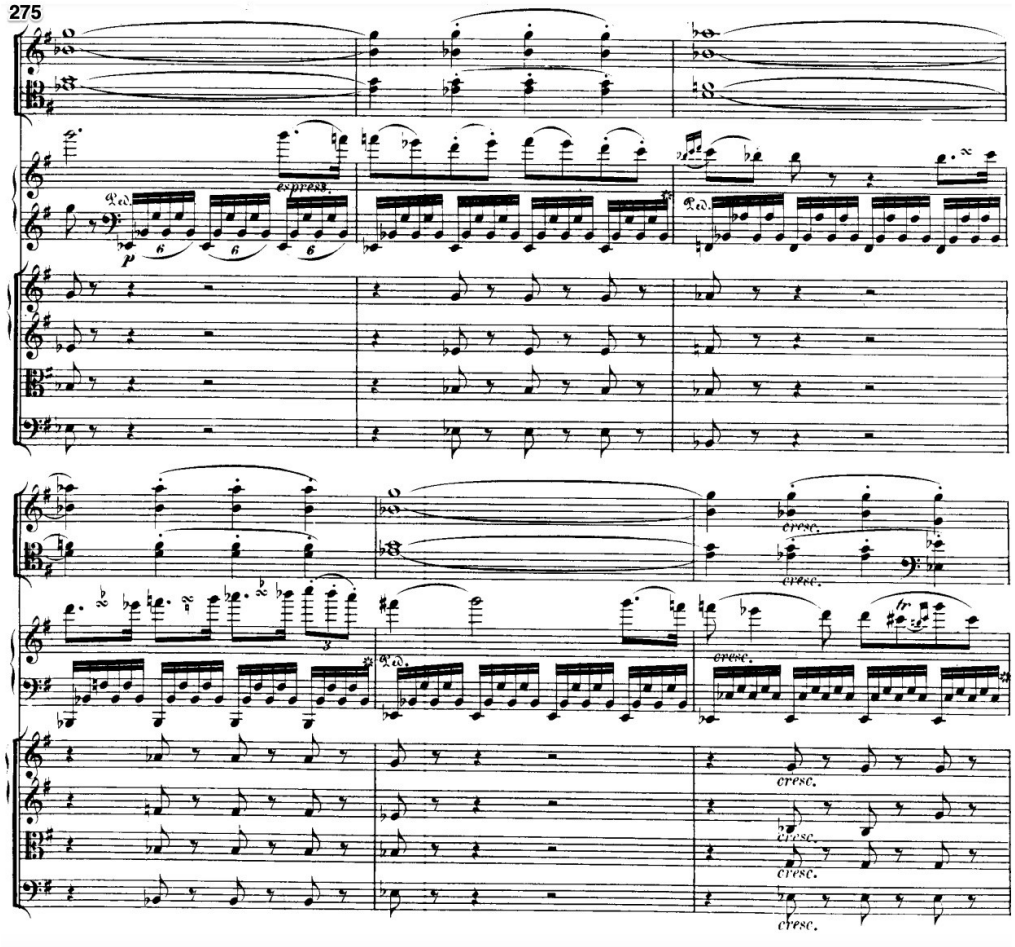
This theme quickly passes, but does make a return in the recapitulation in E flat major at bar 275. The



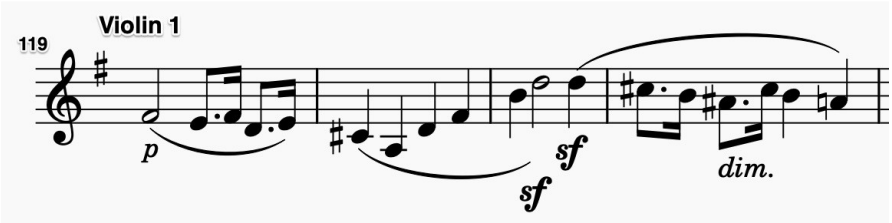
register of the piano is similar, but this time it's accompanied by sustained chords from the oboes and

bassoons, with pizzicato accompaniment from the strings. The melody differs slightly, and this time the left hand plays semiquaver sextuplets and not quaver triplets:

Second subject group



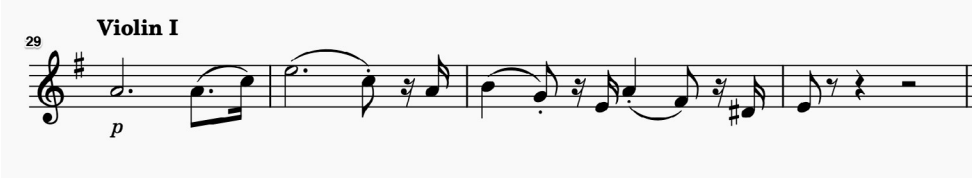
This theme is not heard until the second exposition, delaying the modulation to the dominant. A solo



bassoon followed by the clarinet take this theme four bars later, while the piano provides melodic and harmonic decoration (more on this technique shortly). This theme has a wider range, and the dotted rhythms along with the legato articulation provide a contrast to the first subject.

Transition/modulatory theme

Like the second subject, this theme's dotted rhythms are distinctive, and are imitated by the cello section at different intervals. In the second exposition, it appears in D minor (the dominant minor) after



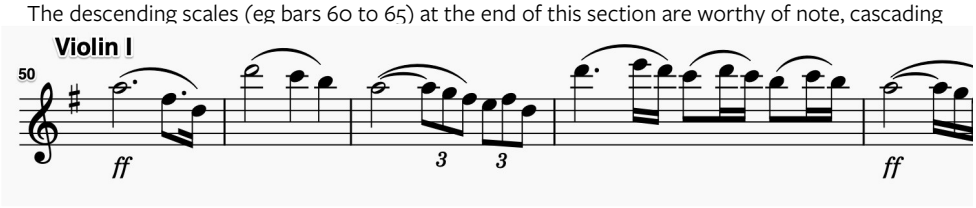
the second subject (bar 134) and in the recapitulation, in the tonic minor (G minor, bar 301). Beethoven takes this theme through a number of keys, demonstrating his expansion of sonata form. While there will have traditionally been brief moments of modulation in the exposition, a move quite so far from the tonic or dominant would have been unusual until now, let alone an exploration of a number of (albeit related) keys.

This transition/modulatory theme and its passage provide space before the closing passage of the exposition.

Closing passage

This closing passage (or coda) is majestic and, while bearing some rhythmic similarities to the previous passage, its register, dynamic and general direction of melody create a jubilant ending to the exposition. In this passage, the second two bars are a decoration of the first two. This decoration continues extensively in the piano later on, an example being in the passage beginning in bar 347.

The descending scales (eg bars 60 to 65) at the end of this section are worthy of note, cascading

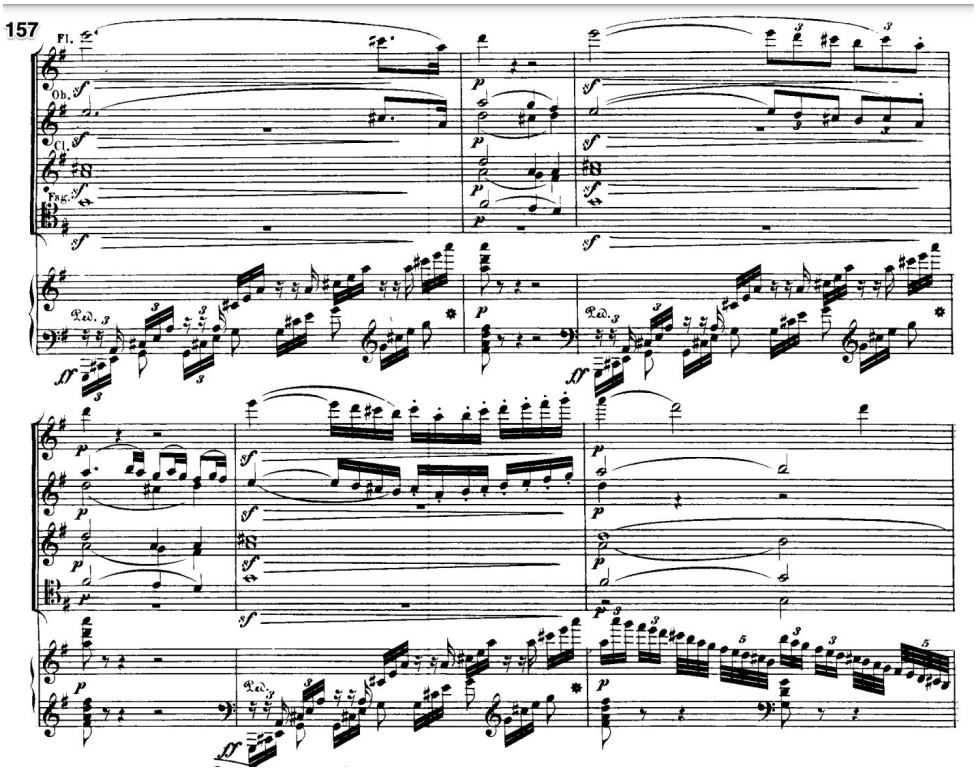


through the texture, creating a link to the final statement of the first subject, which closes both

expositions and the work itself.

The appearance and development of this closing passage once again demonstrate Beethoven's expansion of Classical writing. Themes are no longer just restated, but textures and dynamics change significantly. One example can be found at bar 157, where the woodwind take on the theme with rises and falls in dynamics, while the piano accompanies with arpeggios:

The piano repeats this idea at bar 170 accompanied by *pp* strings – again, Beethoven has changed the



texture and dynamic.

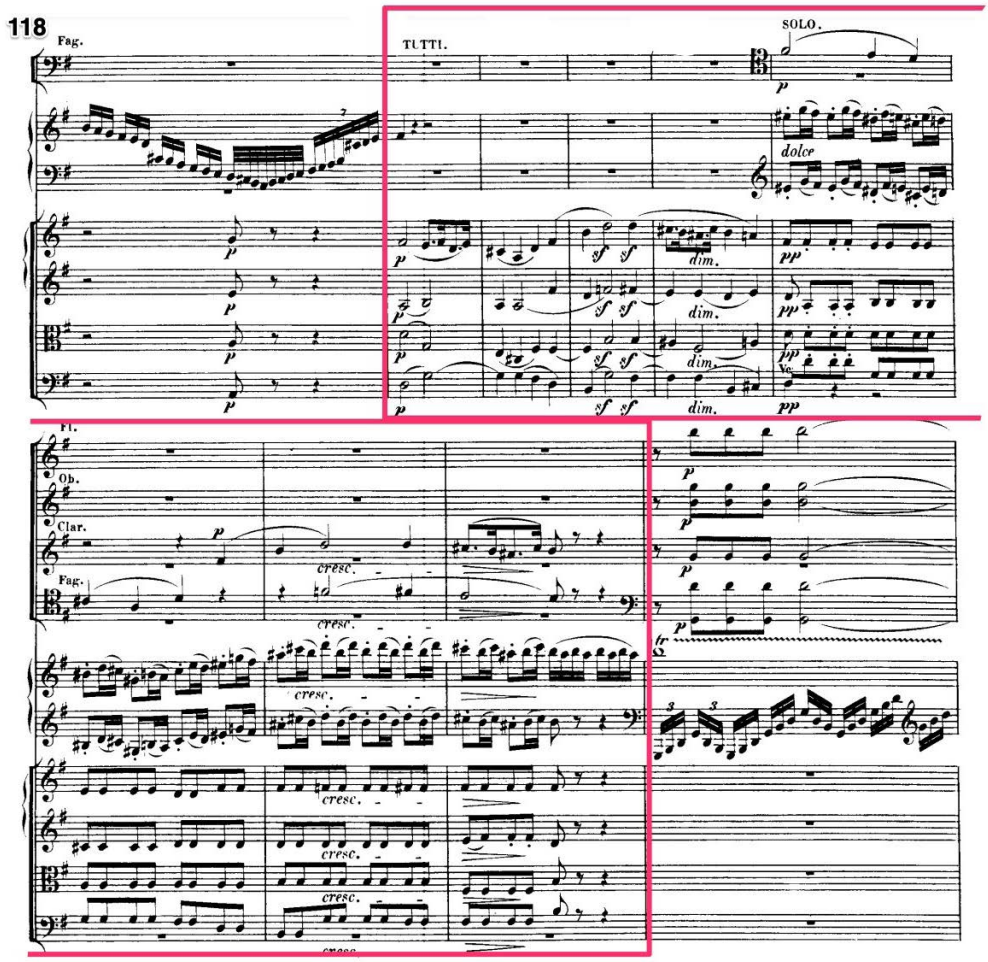
Melodic decoration and embellishment

As already discussed, Beethoven manipulates and develops these themes, demonstrating his move

away from the more rigid sonata form of the Classical period. He does this through his handling of all the musical elements, but melodically, the piano is given more freedom to play with virtuosity and introduce new countermelodies, weaving in and out of the (often decorated) themes in the rest of the orchestra. The examples are too numerous to mention here, but below are some striking ones.

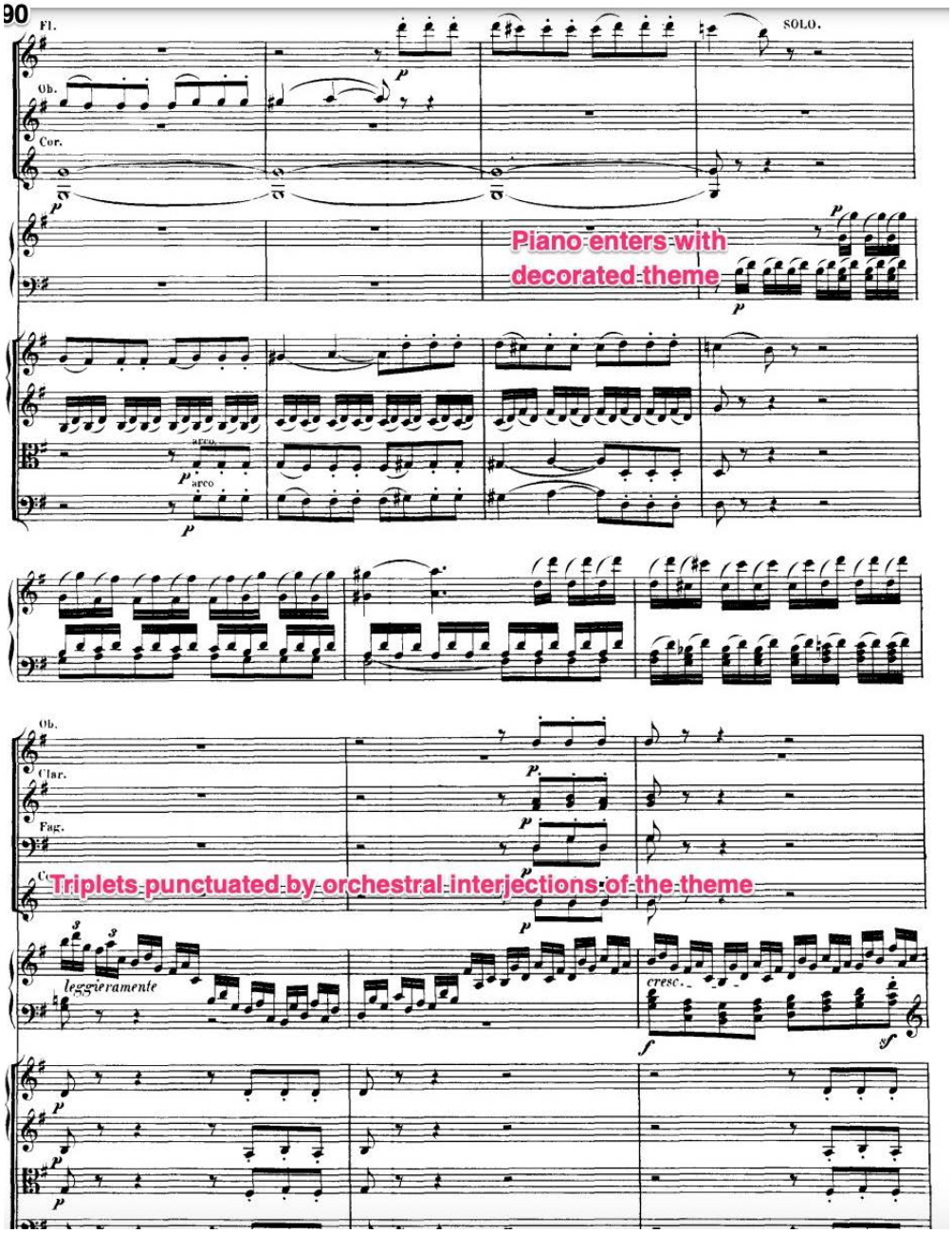
The second subject is presented first of all in the strings. Instead of taking this on afterwards, it is a solo bassoon followed by solo clarinet that share this idea, while the solo piano decorates both melodically and harmonically in a charming way:

Another example can be found when comparing some of the orchestral exposition to the soloist's exposition. Once the first exposition begins to take flight (bar 14[3] and onwards), the first theme is



presented in the woodwind (bars 15 to 18) and then is repeated and expanded upon by the first violins followed by the rest of the orchestra (bar 18^3 and onwards). When this occurs in the second exposition (bar 89^3 onwards), the piano takes over after the first four bars (bar 105^3 onwards), elaborating on the theme, which evolves into cascading triplets (bar 107):

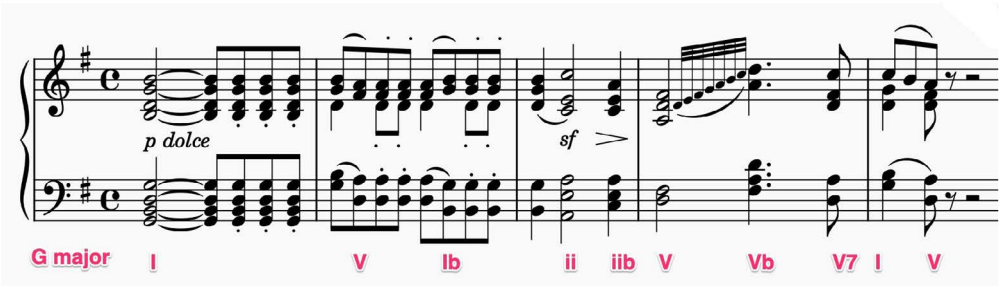
Harmonic language



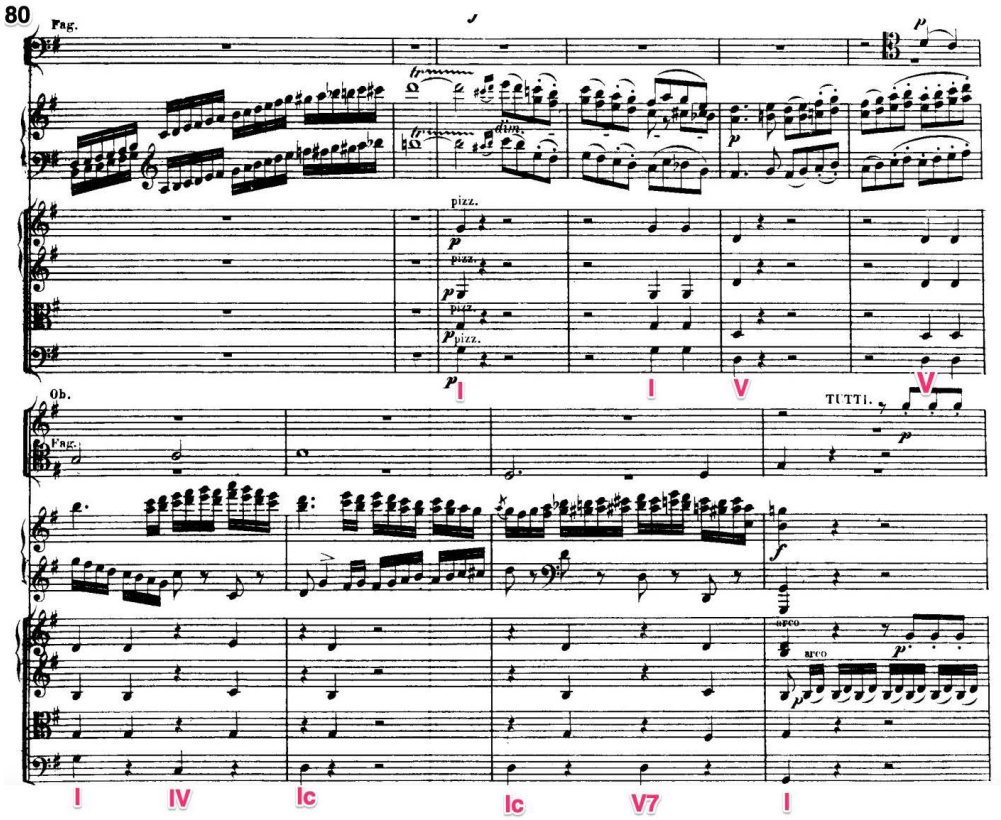
While introducing new relationships between keys in the overall structure of sonata form,

Beethoven's harmonic language remains tonal and functional. Chords are diatonic with first, second and third inversions being used at different moments to cement a modulation or to cause some uncertainty in tonality. Perfect cadences in particular are still used to confirm a modulation. Chromatic chords are used sparingly and provide touches of colour in a more conventional harmonic palette.

The opening piano sets the perfect tone for most of the harmonic language used in this movement. The solo piano confirms G major with the use of the chords from this key:



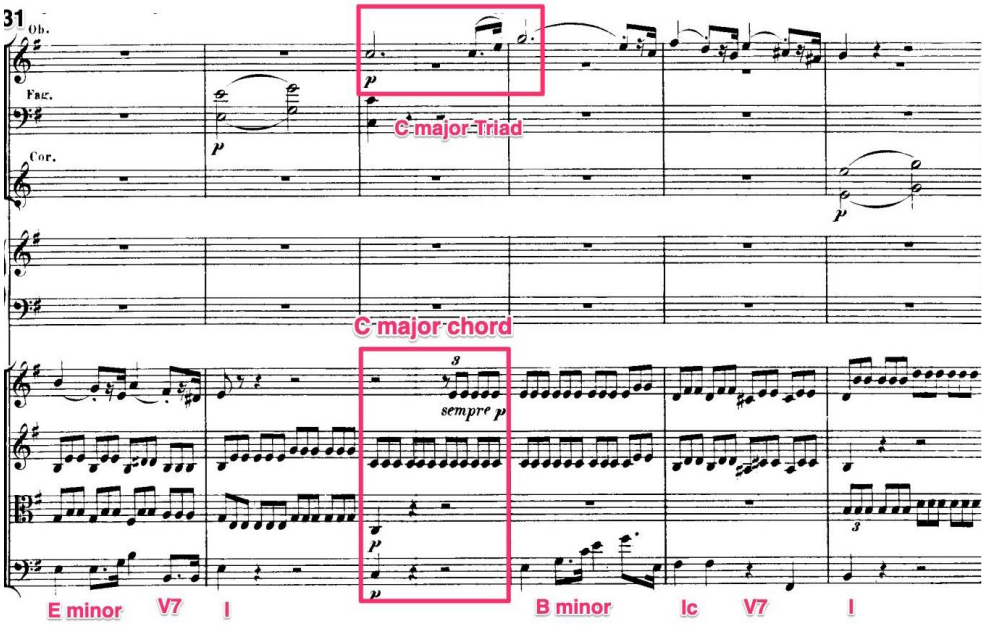
When the piano enters for second exposition, while adding chromatic inflections into its melodic writing, Beethoven ensures that the listener understands the key centre, with mainly tonic and dominant (root position chords) to confirm G major:



When the transition/modulatory theme passes through a number of keys, we know that we arrive in each key not only by the triadic nature of the melody and its root position chord, but also by the

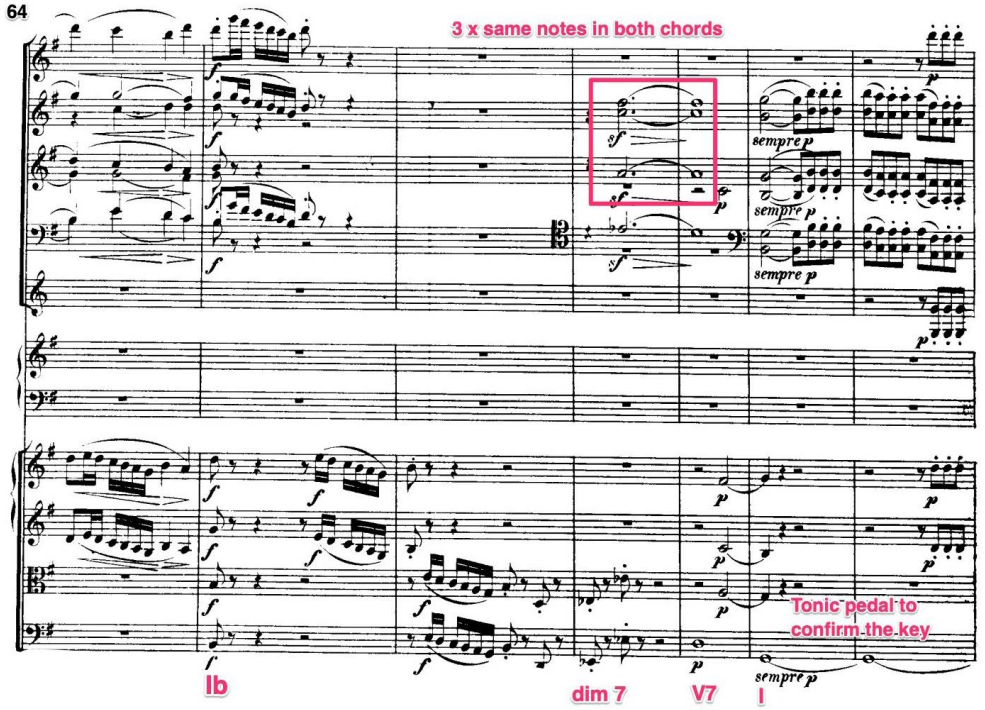
perfect cadence leading into each modulation:

Beethoven's use of first inversion chords provides a slightly less stable backdrop at the end of the



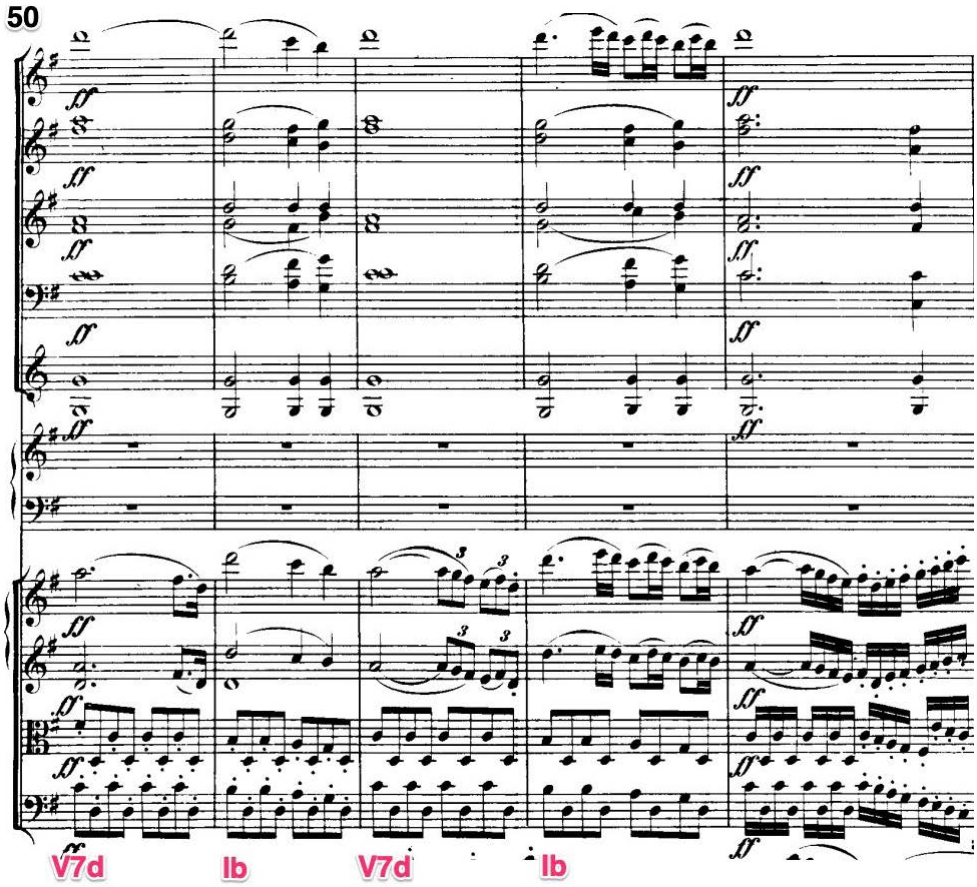
closing theme. The repeated first inversion chords between bars 60 and 64 eventually give way to one of the few chromatic chords in the movement, a diminished 7th at bar 66. The change of bass note under this chord transforms it to V7 and into a perfect cadence in the tonic.

The use of the second and third inversion chords is naturally rarer – the former being used as cadential progressions and of course, the chord on which the orchestra pauses ready for the cadenza



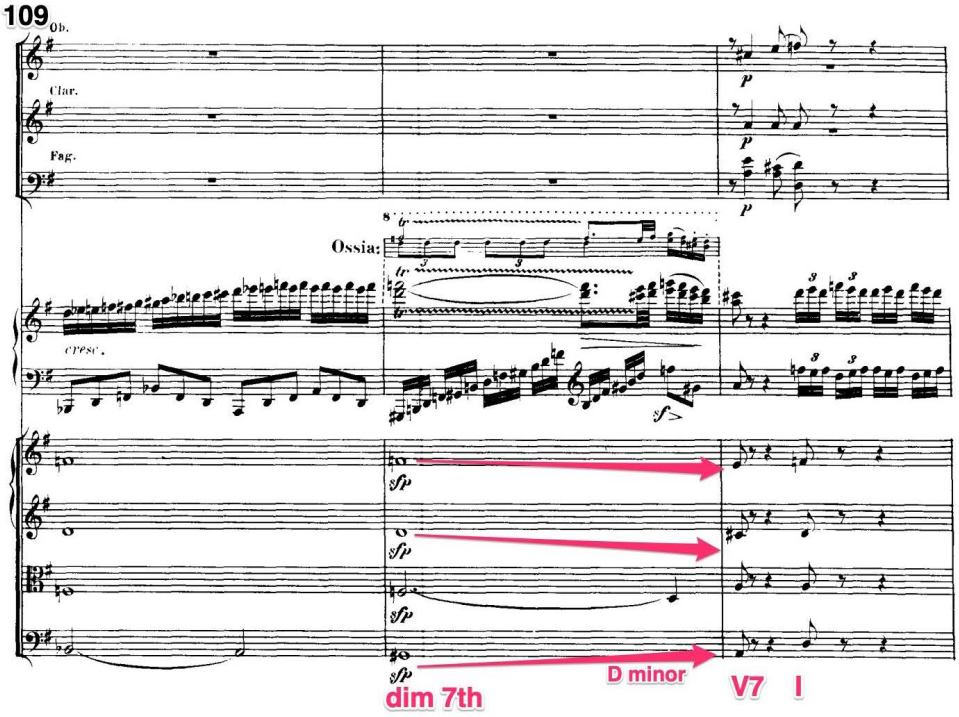
(bar 346). Third inversion chords can be found in the closing theme, resolving naturally to a first inversion chord (V7d – Ib), another example of functional harmony:

The diminished 7th chords can also be found at bar 110, again preceding the dominant 7th, but this time behaving more like an augmented 6th, with more of the notes of the diminished chord resolving



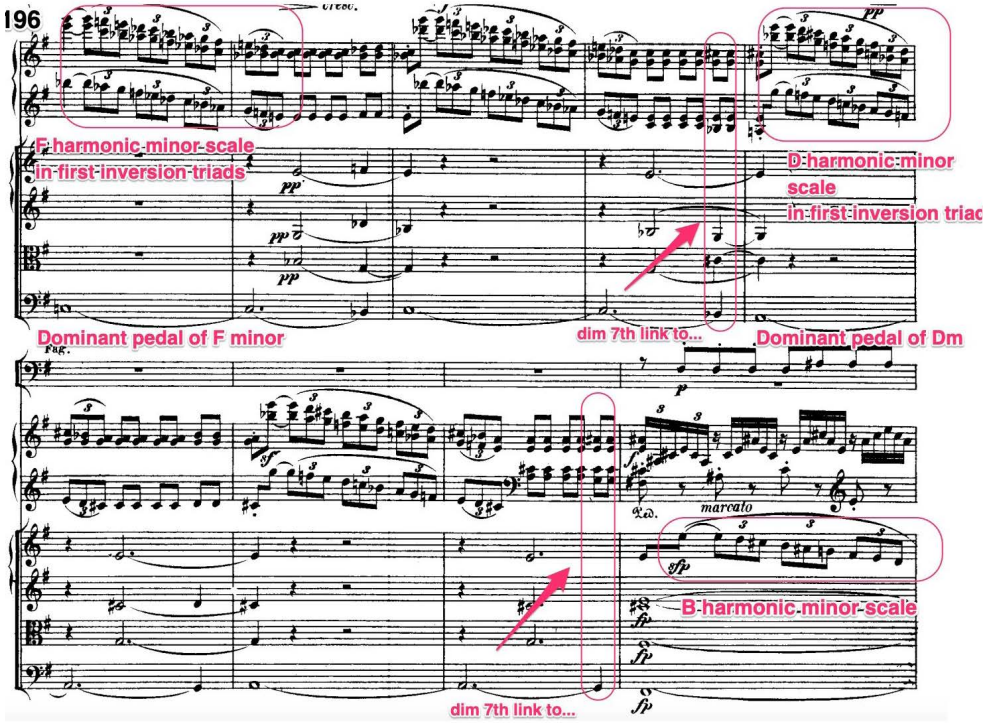
outwards to the dominant:

There are, of course, moments of uncertainty in the harmonies in the development section, though



with some scrutiny, it's possible to find the tonal and harmonic journey being created. At bar 196, Beethoven begins a passage of triplet descending harmonic minor scales over dominant pedals. The parallel first inversion triads in the right hand confuse the tonality, with the pedal providing uncertainty. This is compounded by the linking diminished 7th between the tonalities – its instability fitting for the development section:

This pattern continues (see the structure and tonality table above) until bar 215. Though arriving at



a rather distant key in the development section (C sharp minor), the harmony remains diatonic and

functional.

Finally, the numerous chromatic flourishes in the piano decorate the underlying functional harmony, sometimes providing fleeting dissonances.

Texture and instrumentation

Beethoven's 'denser' approach to texture and instrumentation demonstrates another move away from the Classical style of Mozart and Haydn. There's a glorious variety in his interpretation of the Classical melody-and-accompaniment texture. The woodwind and brass begin to gain some independence and have solo lines within the movement, and Beethoven explores the range and capability of the piano ravishingly throughout. The long lines of semiquavers often extend one idea into another, again blurring previously rigid boundaries.

Once again, this resource can only pick out a few highlights, but the teacher and learner are encouraged to pursue a more detailed analysis.

The different textures of the opening first subject are worthy of note. Starting out as a simple hymn-like texture, the music gains momentum as the accompaniment evolves into semiquavers (bar 14) in the second violin, which thickens by bar 21 with the violas joining them. The repeated quavers become harmonised in the woodwind and horns (bars 21 and 22) while the semiquavers in the second violins and violas become wider in their range.

The textures in the piano alone demand great virtuosity. The opening strains are no preparation for the unison moments (eg bar 74), scales in 3rds (eg bars 96 to 99), and continuous lines of semiquavers, be they scales or arpeggios, semiquavers or triplet semiquavers.

It's the consistency yet variation of texture that really does make this work so exquisite, and sets the tone for Beethoven's final complete piano concerto.

Other features of note

Beethoven's use of rhythm is worth studying, something to which I have alluded very briefly in the section on melodic construction. A melody's character is defined just as much by its rhythm as it is by its melodic shape, and Beethoven's use of rhythm in his melodies and his accompaniments gives shape and direction to the whole movement. As well as this, considering how triplets are introduced and used in the movement is also fascinating. The tempo and metre never change, but the subdivisions in many of the sections change the character of the music quite significantly.