

OCR A level AoS1

Beethoven *Serioso*

Quartet

KS5

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Area of study 1: instrumental music of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven

The third and fourth movements of Beethoven's String Quartet in F minor, Op. 95, *Serioso*, form the 2021 prescribed work for OCR A level. This work should be studied and contextualised within a number of other works in this area of study. Students will find it useful to compare it to earlier quartets by Haydn and Mozart, as well as drawing comparisons with Beethoven's previous quartets and other instrumental works. This set 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 Op. 95.

Beethoven: some context

The three 'periods'

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

- ▶ 'Early' period: 1770-c1802, in which Beethoven's music is heavily influenced by the Viennese styles of Haydn and Mozart, but also where we can hear the beginnings of his distinctive writing that characterises in the subsequent two periods.
- ▶ 'Middle' period: c1802-14. This is often referred to as Beethoven's 'heroic' period, in which his Third and Fifth symphonies were written, as well as the Op. 59 quartets and his *Waldstein* and *Appassionata* piano sonatas. It was works from this period that defined Beethoven's distinctive and potentially 'difficult' sound.
- ▶ 'Late' period: 1815-27. 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 (including the invasion of Vienna by Napoleon's army) and some personal disappointments may have led to more ambitious styles in his writing, though direct links with biographical details remain mysterious.

The string quartets

Beethoven's 16 string quartets span his three periods, typifying his writing at these times. It is between the *Rasumovsky* quartets and his late quartets that Beethoven wrote his Op. 74 *Harp* quartet and Op. 95, the *Serioso*.

- ▶ Op. 18, Nos 1-6. Composed in his 'early' and youthful period (the very last years of the 18th century), these works are reminiscent of Haydn and Mozart: in fact, No. 5 in A is modelled on Mozart's K464, also in A.
- ▶ The Op. 59 quartets (the *Rasumovsky* Quartets) were written in 1806, in the middle of Beethoven's 'heroic' period. The quartets are longer and more symphonic in style, with extreme demands on performers and on the listener, more so than any previous work in the medium.
- ▶ The 'late' quartets: these five compositions were written in the last few years of Beethoven's life. These are regarded as idiosyncratic and rather inward-looking, as with many of the other works of the same period.

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String Quartet No. 11 in F minor, Op.95 *Serioso*

The *Serioso* Quartet is a bit of an anomaly in Beethoven's quartet output, and his life in general. He wrote it following some politically and personally tumultuous events in his life, which, in part, caused him to turn away from his 'heroic' style and begin a new chapter.

Beethoven spent most of his adult life in Vienna, but in 1809 (the year before the composition of Op. 95), his place of residence was uncertain. He received a job offer from the Kappellmeister at Kassel in Germany, but used this offer as a means of gaining a lifetime's annuity from three wealthy Viennese admirers. One of these was Archduke Rudolph (the Austrian Emperor's youngest brother), to whom Beethoven later dedicated the *Archduke* Piano Trio. Shortly after this, Napoleon's armies invaded Vienna for the second time in a few years. While Beethoven emerged physically unscathed, the occupation created a new threat to his livelihood as his supporters left Vienna and his annuity was decreased.

It was after these events that Beethoven buried himself in the study of strict counterpoint and immersed himself in the *stile antico*. This obsession with the old style is often interpreted as a retreat from the everyday world, as well as a kind of return to old Austrian conservative values, alongside a rejection of the French revolutionary leanings he had developed in his mature years.

Finally, in 1810, Beethoven proposed marriage to Therese Malfatti, the niece of one of his doctors. This was rejected, and it was during the summer of 1810 that Beethoven travelled away from Vienna and wrote his Op. 95. In the autograph manuscript, Beethoven titles the work 'Quartett *serioso*'. In a letter to the musician George Smart, he states: 'The Quartet is written for a small circle of connoisseurs and is never to be performed in public.' Beethoven dedicated the Quartet to an old friend, Count Nikolaus Zmeskall, an amateur cellist, perhaps one of the 'small circle of connoisseurs' mentioned in his letter.

Analysis

As well as being uniquely positioned in Beethoven's output, Op. 95 is known for its compact and compressed nature. The Quartet's main ideas and themes are condensed, though balanced with spaciousness in other themes throughout the Quartet. Students should get to know the first and second movements, their themes and tonal relationships. These will give them a greater understanding of the work as a whole.

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 still covered.

Third movement: *Allegro assai vivace ma serio*

Structure and tonality

Though not titled as such, the third movement is widely accepted as a scherzo and trio, typical of Beethoven's third movements.

Comparisons should be made with earlier models of the minuet and trio, so that students understand the differences. The third movement of Haydn's Quartet, Op. 20 No. 6, provides a stark contrast to Beethoven's movement, not just in terms of being a minuet but in tonality, texture and much more.

In Beethoven's writing, the third movement became much faster than a minuet, and many of his third movements are scherzos and trios. The term 'scherzo' means 'joke'. While this particular movement is fast, there seems little else that's fun about it, and Beethoven even includes the term 'serioso' in the tempo marking; quite fast, lively, but serious.

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

Bars 1-40	Scherzo (with repeat)	F minor (though tonality is ambiguous at the opening)
Bars 41-102	Trio	G flat major, D major
Bars 103-144	Scherzo (no repeat, two 'transition' bars at the end)	F minor, as before
Bars 145-182	Trio	D major, C minor
Bars 183-206	Scherzo (same as bars 17-40), faster	F minor

Unlike the ternary structure of a traditional minuet/scherzo and trio (usually a AABBA), Beethoven's movement is cyclical, returning to the trio for a second time and then closing with the final flourishes of the scherzo.

The relationships between the keys are worthy of note here. The first trio begins in G flat major, echoing the Neapolitan relationship that we hear at the opening of the first movement. The move to D major in bar 65 recalls a D major scalic flourish in bar 49 of the first movement, but perhaps its relationship is more of a tertiary one to both F minor and G flat major (using the enharmonic equivalent, F sharp). This tertiary relationship was something that Beethoven and Schubert explored within Classical structures, softening the tonic-dominant polarities of the Viennese Classical style.

Melodic construction, phrasing and other devices

Very much like that of Haydn, Beethoven's writing is often based on shorter, compact motifs, rather than long lyrical melodies (like Mozart). This Quartet is no different, particularly the main themes of the scherzo. The arresting dotted motif followed by one bar of rest is the basis of the scherzo:

Allegro assai vivace ma serio

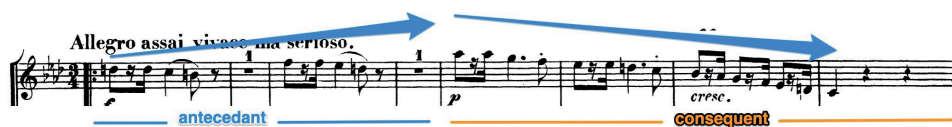


This reminds us of the opening of the first movement, which again, is a very short idea followed by a bar's rest:

Allegro con brio



The opening antecedent and consequent use this rhythm: the antecedent rises with one bar rests, while the consequent falls without these rests:



While using his short, compact ideas, Beethoven still employs the balanced and periodic phrasing typical of the Classical period. In the scherzo, Beethoven uses the singular unit, passed around the quartet texture (often in pairs), as well as developing it into a longer, more persistent idea. This longer idea is heard initially in the viola part in bar 13, though is often lost in the texture due to its *piano* dynamic.



Once the tonality of F minor is established, this dotted idea takes on a life of its own, sometimes descending (as in the viola part here) but often ascending, as the first and second violins do in 3rds in bar 17:

Like the opening bar, the starting point of this musical idea is repeated and rises in pitch, this time every four bars, climaxing at bar 25, starting at its highest point, with a *ff* dynamic. It will be from this point, that the final scherzo section will start, in order to close the movement (bar 183).

After its descent, the section closing passage begins with a loose inversion of this motif, with characteristic Beethovenian *sforzandos*:

The final four bars of the scherzo firmly seal the F minor tonality, using the dotted rhythm and playing in unison.

As was conventional, the trio's themes contrast with those of the scherzo. Here, Beethoven writes a chorale/hymn-like melody in the lower three strings. The melody length is irregular – nine bars long:

p *espress.*

This second violin melody is harmonised by the viola and cello, and the first violin provides arpeggiated decorations, adding a sense of movement and confirming the contrasting and generally diatonic melody and harmony compared to the scherzo.

Harmonic language

Beethoven's roots remain in tonal, functional harmony, but the third movement in particular disturbs this greatly, with the use of the diminished 7th creating an overall feeling of uncertainty to the scherzo.

The scherzo opens on a diminished 7th chord, the same one that's used in the bar before as transition between the second and third movements. This unsettles the listener and gives an uncertain tonal centre. The diminished chord dominates the opening two statements, but hidden on the second beat of both bars are the diatonic chords of F minor and C minor, essentially the tonic and dominant of the eventual tonality of the scherzo.

dim 7th Fm/C dim 7th dim Cm dim 7th

In the final four bars, Beethoven comes as close as possible to establishing a tonality of C minor, with a ‘cadence’ or move from the dominant to the tonic between bars 5 and 6 (though disrupted by an appoggiatura in the first violin), and *almost* a perfect cadence in bars 7 to 8. Once again, Beethoven creates more ambiguity with the B flat in the cello part, delaying its eventual descent and resolution to the C in bar 9:

Allegro assai vivace ma serio.

B. 17. Vb I cresc. - V I?..... I

Beethoven settles on F minor by bar 17, with the sforzando 5ths in the cello establishing this. From this point on, the diminished chord is less frequent, and the tonal functional harmony of F minor is confirmed by the end of the section:

B. 17. V I V I IV I I V

The harmony of the trio is much more straightforwardly functional, with only the occasional diminished chord colouring each of the nine-bar phrases. The linking sections (at bars 101-102 and 143-144) both recall the linking diminished chord between the second and third movements. Despite the contrast in harmonic language of both of these sections, it feels like it’s the diminished chord that overshadows the movement as a whole.

Quartet textures

The contrasts seen in Beethoven’s melodic and harmonic writing continue in his use of textures. The dominance of the first violin from the earlier years of his Viennese style is not heard much in this movement, which shows much more ‘equality’ between the parts. Contrasting and different textures include:

- ▶ Homophonic/chordal textures, heard both in the striking chords at the beginning of the scherzo and of course, during the chorale passages in the trio.
- ▶ The upper and lower strings in pairs in dialogue (bars 9-12).
- ▶ The pairs in canon with each other (the first and second violins starting bar 17, with the viola and cello playing the same material two bars later).
- ▶ Brief moments of melody-dominated texture, accompanied by chords (bars 5-8, violin melody, and bars 13-15, viola melody).
- ▶ There is a unison texture at the end of the scherzo. This is typical of the Classical style: Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven often used unison textures to open or close a section. Beethoven makes frequent use of this texture in the first movement of Op. 95.

Dynamics and articulation

Known for his off-beat sforzandos, Beethoven employs them here in the scherzo. We hear the first *sf* in bar 17, on the second beat of the bar. These *sf* markings further emphasise the strength of the second beat of the bar. These second-beat sforzandos can also be found in the trio in the first D major section.

The dynamic range of this movement is typical of the late Classical period, and of Beethoven in particular. As well as *pianissimo* and *fortissimo* markings, Beethoven is very specific his crescendos and decrescendos, particularly in the trio. Where the nine-bar phrases tail off, Beethoven is very clear about the sudden decrescendo after a four-bar crescendo.

Fourth movement: *Larghetto espressivo* – *Allegretto agitato*

Structure and tonality

Perhaps in keeping with the ‘serioso’ nature of the quartet, Beethoven composes the final movement in a sonata rondo form. The returning A section is typical of rondo form, but the tonal structure is reminiscent of sonata, hence, sonata rondo. As became typical in Beethoven’s later quartets, this final movement opens with slow introduction. The structure and tonality is outlined below, with an attempt to demonstrate the influence of both of the forms:

Bars	Rondo form	Sonata Form	Key
Bars 1-9	Slow Introduction		F minor
Bars 10-31	A	Exposition – first subject (repeated at bar 23)	F minor
Bars 31-50	B	Transition Second subject at bar 44	C minor
Bars 51-54	A	Development	F minor
Bars 55-81	C		D flat/B flat minor
Bars 82-93	B	Recapitulation Transition	F minor
Bars 94-97		Second subject	
Bars 98-132	A	First subject	F minor
Bars 133-175	Coda		F major

Unlike the key relationships of the scherzo and trio, Beethoven modulates to closely related keys in the final movement.

Structurally, we may have expected a return of the A section at bar 82, in accordance with a typical rondo form. However, Beethoven reverses the ideas and it’s the B section that we hear before the final statement of A.

The coda provides a huge contrast to the ‘serioso’ nature of the quartet. It is in F major, and the textures are reminiscent of Mendelssohn’s fairy music with its repeated *piano* quavers.

Melodic construction, phrasing and other devices

Motivic analysis can vary among musicologists. The main themes of the movement appear in different guises in the slow introduction. The Rhinegold A level guide refers to them as x, y and z, which I’ll also use here for consistency:

- ▶ Theme x is the falling 3rd, which becomes the main theme of section A.
- ▶ Theme y is the climbing quaver idea.
- ▶ Theme z is more static idea, employing the lower chromatic auxiliary.

► The interval of a tritone can also be heard, contributing to the ‘serioso’ nature of the quartet and like the third movement, harmonic instability.

x (falling 3rd)

y (climbing (and slightly falling) quavers)

z (auxiliary)

tritone

There are numerous uses of these themes, but their uses in the main ideas of the movement should be noted. After a two-bar transition of what could be considered as half of z, theme A (or the first subject) uses all three themes:

Once again, Beethoven’s ideas are compact, but balanced. Theme A presents short ideas repeated for two bars each. Note also how x is accompanied by movement of a 3rd in the opposite direction – some kind of inversion, perhaps, or simply an outline of the chord (F minor). Theme A is repeated from bar 21 in a lower tessitura, this time with a countermelody in the second violin.

At the start of the development (bar 51), Beethoven states theme A again, but in a shortened version (without z). Motifs x and y are explored and developed in this section (the development), with y in particular being explored throughout the quartet texture between bars 58 and 65.

It’s z that we can hear in the final strains of the last section A (bars 123-132), under which the cello creates a pulsating tonic pedal. Along with the tritones in the first and second violins, the auxiliary nature of the melody once again creates an unsettled feel, suggesting to the listener that this might not be the end after all.

The tritone can be heard in the first violin leaps in theme B (bars 32-39), creating a hugely unsettled feeling, typical of its transitional nature. The huge leaps, also contribute to the overall dramatic feel, as do the grace notes:

It is the second subject material that does not seem to evolve from any earlier ideas, and presents a somewhat lyrical contrast to the opening of theme A (first subject), but still a short idea that's repeated:

Here the tonic and tonic and dominant of C minor are clear for the listener, particularly with the inverted dominant pedal being played in the first violin. This is highlighted by the fact that the melody begins and ends on the dominant as well. This theme leads to some dialogue between the second violin and cello.

The theme of the coda is new material in the tonic major. This opening excitable phrase is treated fugally for a brief passage at bar 156, reminding us of Beethoven's return to a study of counterpoint in his later life. This theme closes the movement in unison.

Harmonic language

The final movement is unsurprisingly more stable than the scherzo and trio. After so much uncertainty, the confirmation of F minor (and then F major) give a resolute ending to the quartet. The diminished chord and other colourings are still found in this movement, and their presence continues to undermine the overall sense of tonal functional harmony.

The slow introduction is perhaps the most unsettling of all. Not only does Beethoven's opening motif incorporate an augmented 4th (the distinctive tritone that features in the movement), but instead of a conventional I-V V-I in the opening phrases, Beethoven also uses VIIb. Though of course closely related to V7 (its use is not atypical of the Classical style), like the opening of the scherzo, this choice of diminished chord continues to reflect the instability of the quartet as a whole.

As well as the diminished chord (red stars), the occasional dissonance/appoggiatura also adds to unease (indicated by the orange a).

Once theme A begins, the tonality of F minor is established throughout the first four bars (bars 10-13). The chromatic scale in bar 19 brings us to a potential interrupted cadence (bar 21), before the

hallmark pause on a diminished chord.

Theme B (bar 32) is based mainly on diminished chords (as well as having the tritone leaps), while the second subject returns to a more tonal and functional approach, along with the use of an inverted dominant pedal. Once again a chromatic climb can be heard in the approach to the return of the A section in bar 51.

As previously mentioned, the tonic pedal is used in the final ten bars of the last statement of the A section (bars 123-132). Even this is briefly thwarted, however, by the lower auxiliary (bar 129-130) z, along with chromatic versions of z in the viola part.

The coda contains the most functional harmony in both the movement and the quartet as a whole. With some occasional chromaticisms, the cello moves between the dominant and tonic notes for first 12 bars. The brief diminished chord at bar 145 is quickly replaced by its dominant 7th counterpart in bar 146, suggesting C major, before a perfect cadence at bar 151.

Quartet textures

Once again, Beethoven varies his textures throughout the movement:

- ▶ The slow introduction recalls the chorale-like texture of the trio.
- ▶ The first and second violins play in octaves from bar 8 and open theme A – this was typical of a lot of Classical writing.
- ▶ The crossing of parts gives interest to the textures. In bars 3 and 4, the viola climbs higher than the second violin, and in the second statement of A (bar 23), the second violin countermelody is higher than the melody.
- ▶ The repeated semiquavers in the second violin and viola, along with the tritones in the first violin (from bar 32) contribute to uncertainty of this section.
- ▶ The dialogue between the second violin and cello in the second subject, along with the high inverted pedal (bar 44), provide a new texture for a new theme.
- ▶ The final section A (bar 98) employs a new arpeggiated accompaniment rippling through the lower strings, reminiscent of many of Beethoven's piano textures.
- ▶ The repeated *pp* quavers in the coda remind us of Mendelssohn, particularly as the first violin climbs to its highest note of the quartet in bar 150.
- ▶ There is counterpoint at the end of the coda.
- ▶ The quartet closes with flourishing unison scales and a final scale in contrary motion.

Dynamics and articulations

Much as in the third movement, extreme dynamic ranges and articulations are evident in the fourth.

Noteworthy markings/directions include:

- ▶ Beethoven's tell-tale off-beat *sf*. An example of this can be found in bars 31 and 32, as well as bars 58-64 in the development section.
- ▶ Markings of *sfp* and *fp* are also found on weak beats (eg. in bars 47 and 48).
- ▶ Beethoven also makes clear in this movement when he wants the dynamic to stay as it is: *sempre piano* and *sempre forte* can be found through the movement.
- ▶ Beethoven also makes clear which particular lines he wants to be brought out of the texture, using *rinf.* (*rinforzando*) in reference to the cello in bar 45, for example.