

## Before its Time: Beethoven's Experiments with the Dominant Key Early in Sonata-Form Movements

The sketches for the first movement of the “Eroica” Symphony include a most strange compositional feature that Beethoven, not for lack of effort, is unable to fully incorporate into the final version of his movement. That is, presenting a version of the opening theme in the key of the dominant *before* the arrival of the second theme group. The formal tension that this creates is quite different from that of a monothematic sonata form that repurposes the opening theme in the key of the dominant *as* the second theme. In the “Eroica” sketches, Beethoven radically undermines the usual key of the second theme group in a major-key sonata form movement by arriving at its key prematurely. It is difficult to imagine that these untenable thematic assertions in the dominant had any chance of surviving intact through to the symphony’s final version. Yet a surprising number of drafts stubbornly maintain the dominant key’s intrusion into the first theme group.

Lewis Lockwood, in his book *Beethoven's Symphonies*, writes, “The last piano sonatas, the ‘Diabelli’ Variations, and the late quartets show [Beethoven] entering into a domain beyond the range of his earlier accomplishments. Nevertheless, there are pathways below the surface, many of them still to be explored, that show the ways in which his middle-period achievements anticipate aspects of the late style.”

In this presentation, I will explore what might be considered one such pathway between middle and late style. As Lockwood predicted, it lies far below the surface, in this case leading from these first movement “Eroica” sketch experiments. One late-style work that successfully incorporates a version of the opening theme in

the dominant key *before* the second theme group is the first movement of Beethoven's String Quartet in Bb Major, Op. 130. The opening Allegro theme recurs at m. 25 in F major some twenty-eight bars before the arrival of the second theme group. The dominant's early arrival has repercussions that are heard throughout the non-conventional first movement of Op. 130, starting with the second theme group not being in the dominant. Although the harmonic swerves and unconventional form of this movement have been discussed by several authors, including Joseph Kerman, Barbara Barry, and Daniel Chua, this presentation will consider the possibility that the movement's formal freedom is presaged by a compositional desire that fascinated Beethoven long before 1824.