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Three Symphonies in One Year? Beethoven's Sketches of 1812

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Beethoven's sketchbooks, as is well known, contain vast quantities of preliminary ideas for works that never reached completion. These sketches relate to works across a whole spectrum of genres, from keyboard works to opera, so it is no surprise that Beethoven sketched ideas for many more symphonies than his nine completed ones. Gustav Nottebohm, the eminent nineteenth-century Beethoven scholar, claimed that at least 50 ideas for symphonies appear amongst the composer's sketchbooks¹. While Nottebohm's number may have been an exaggeration, Lewis Lockwood's recent monograph on the Beethoven symphonies includes a list of 33 separate instances in the surviving sketches where Beethoven noted preliminary ideas for symphonies². Lockwood's list includes some sketches that are now very well known, including an early outline of the *Eroica* Symphony from 1802 and a verbal description of a «symphony in the old modes» from 1817 or 1818, as well as numerous brief notations for symphonies that have otherwise received little or no attention even within the literature on Beethoven's sketches.

Although Beethoven sketched preliminary ideas for symphonies across the whole span of his compositional career, at only one point did he explicitly indicate an intention to compose a set of three symphonies. In 1812, while he was in the process of composing the

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¹ «Hätte Beethoven so viel Symphonien geschrieben, als in den Skizzenbüchern angefangen wurden, so besässen wir ihrer wenigstens fünfzig», NOTTEBOHM 1875, p. 429

² LOCKWOOD 2015, pp. 231–234.

Seventh and Eighth Symphonies, Beethoven notated several ideas in various keys for what was to be a «third» symphony in a projected set of three. With the composition of a new symphony typically occupying him for around six months, embarking on a third symphony project would have been a momentous undertaking, particularly at a time when, as David Wyn Jones has demonstrated, the symphony in Vienna was in general decline³. Furthermore, with limited opportunities for performing such works, and comparatively little demand from publishers, Beethoven could expect far greater financial returns from composing sonatas and other chamber works rather than symphonies. Whereas Beethoven's preliminary sketches typically indicate only very basic details such as the projected key, metre, and basic thematic material, some of the sketches for the projected «third» symphony provide clues about his conception of the overall form and character of the projected work, including indications of possible instrumentation. This essay examines the «third» symphony sketches, some of which are here transcribed for the first time in published literature, and considers what might have motivated Beethoven's consideration of a three-symphony project at this particular moment in his career.

Beethoven composed the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies in quick succession, starting work on the Seventh around September 1811 and completing the Eighth by the following October⁴. Most of the sketches for the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies are contained within the so-called Petter Sketchbook, which Beethoven used between 1811 and 1812⁵. The Petter Sketchbook also includes a large number of ideas for unfinished works, and many of these

³ WYN JONES 2006.

⁴ LvBWV, p. 599.

⁵ D-BNba (Beethoven-Archiv, Bonn), HCB Mh 59. For the chronology of this sketchbook see BRANDENBURG 1979.

ideas are clustered around the point when the Seventh was reaching completion and work on the Eighth had not yet begun (between folios 35 and 44)⁶.

Beethoven evidently vacillated between composing a new symphony, a piano concerto, or a work in some other orchestral genre as a companion work to the Seventh Symphony, since concept sketches for a variety of different works are found towards the end of work on the Seventh. These include symphonies (concept sketches in a range of keys appear on folios 23, 29v, 35r, 42v stave 5 and stave 13, and 44r); concertos (sketches for a «Concert in g» and a «Concert in g oder E moll» appear on folio 42r); and even an idea for an overture on Schiller's *An die Freude* (folio 42r). Folio 42r also includes a sketch for a polonaise for solo piano in G major («Polonaise allein für Klavier»). The polonaise reappears in sketches four pages later, on folio 44r, this time in a version for piano and orchestra (as indicated by «tutti» and «solo» indications)⁷. The work with which Beethoven progressed furthest during this period of preliminary sketching was a piano concerto in F major, as was first identified by Sieghard Brandenburg: several lengthy drafts of a first movement of this work were sketched between folios 35v and 40v⁸. The concerto was abandoned but the drafted material was reworked into the first movement of the Eighth Symphony, with sketches for the symphony first appearing on folio 44v. Beethoven had by now settled on the symphony as his next project, and from folio 44v onwards the remainder of the Petter Sketchbook is mostly devoted to sketches for the Eighth Symphony.

In a letter to Breitkopf and Härtel of 25 May 1812, Beethoven alluded to a plan to compose a set of three symphonies:

⁶ BRANDENBURG 1979, pp. 134–141; see also COOPER 1990, pp. 120–121.

⁷ BRANDENBURG 1979, pp. 139–140.

⁸ BRANDENBURG 1979, pp. 135–139.

I am writing three new symphonies, one of which is nearly finished, [and] have also written something for the Hungarian theater – but in the sewer in which I find myself here, all of this is as good as lost.

(ich schreibe 3 neue sinfonien, wovon eine bereits vollendet, habe auch für das Ungarische Theater etwas geschrieben—aber in der Kloacke, wo ich mich hier befinde, ist das alles so gut, wie verloren⁹.)

The «nearly finished» symphony was obviously the Seventh, since Beethoven had begun work on the autograph score on 13 April¹⁰. The phrase «something for the Hungarian theater» is a reference to his incidental music for two plays by August von Kotzebue, *Die Ruinen von Athen* and *König Stephan*, which had been commissioned in 1811 for the opening of the new theatre in Pest. Both works had been premiered in Pest in February 1812, but the music had not yet been performed in Vienna. Beethoven may have mentioned his completed incidental music and the proposed symphonies to Breitkopf and Härtel to hint at a possible future publication, since the rest of the letter is concerned with the publication of the Mass in C. However, in writing that all of this is as good as lost «in the sewer in in which I find myself here» the implication is that he wished to present these works in Vienna, but believed that he stood little chance of being able to secure an opportunity to do so. Beethoven's pessimism was well founded, since he was unsuccessful in his attempts to organize a benefit concert at which to premiere his two newly-completed symphonies in the spring of 1813¹¹. The Seventh Symphony was eventually premiered in December 1813, forming part of the programme of two charity concerts co-organized with Ignaz Maelzel which also featured the newly-

⁹ *Briefwechsel*, vol. ii, no. 577.

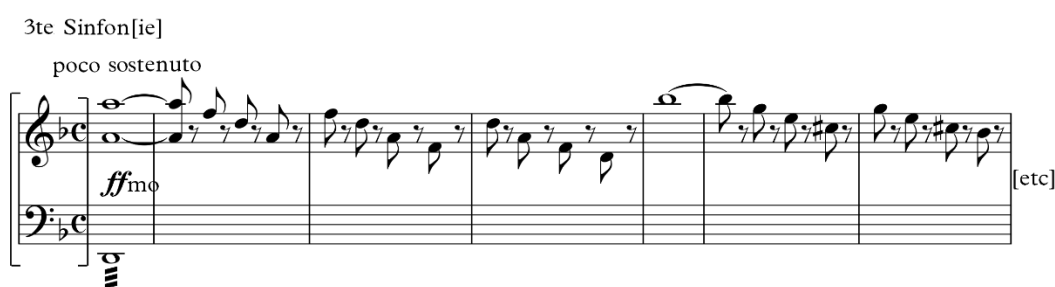
¹⁰ LvBWV, p. 586.

¹¹ THAYER-FORBES, pp. 556–557.

completed *Wellingtons Sieg*, and the Eighth Symphony received its first performance in Beethoven's benefit concert of February 1814.

Although several concept sketches for symphonies appear in the Petter Sketchbook amongst the latter stage of sketching for the Seventh¹², the plan to compose a set of three symphonies is first explicitly indicated at the point in the sketchbook where Beethoven first began to work on the Eighth. On folio 45r of the Petter sketchbook, directly opposite the first sketches for the Eight Symphony on the facing page, Beethoven sketched an idea for a symphony in D minor, which he labelled «3te sinfon[ie]». The sketch indicates a movement that begins with a «poco sostenuto» with a fortissimo dynamic indication (Example 1a), which then continues with a march-like Allegro (Example 1b). Sketches for a D minor symphony in fact appear at two previous points in the sketchbook, on folio 29v and on folio 44r. On folio 29v the D minor sketch is labelled «2te Sinfonie», indicating that it was initially sketched as a possible second symphony to form a pair with the Seventh. On folio 45r it has become «3te sinfon[ie] », with the F major symphony now intended to form the second symphony in projected set of three.

Example 1a—HCB Mh 59 (Petter Sketchbook), folio 45r



Example 1b—HCB Mh 59 (Petter Sketchbook), folio 45r

¹² Beethoven had also notated concept sketches for symphonies in C major (folio 35v) and B flat major (folio 42v).



Of the various preliminary sketches for symphonies in the Petter Sketchbook, those in D minor have attracted the most attention. Nottebohm considered the choice of key to be «prophetic», foreshadowing that of the Ninth (composed a decade later)¹³. Peter Cahn also singles out the D minor sketches in a study which identifies several motivic features in them that point forward aspects of the first movement of the Ninth.¹⁴ Of the «3te sinfon[ie]» sketch on folio 45r, for instance, Cahn points out that the tonic pedal tremolo in the opening bar is suggestive of the opening sextuplets of the Ninth Symphony (Example 1a). The falling broken-chord figures in the initial «poco sostenuto» also bear some resemblance to the contour of the main theme in the first movement of the Ninth¹⁵. The march-like nature of the main theme in the sketch, marked «allegro» (Example 1b), furthermore anticipates the character of the Ninth's first movement.

Although the D minor sketches were taken no further, Beethoven continued to make sketches for a possible third symphony during the composition of the Eighth. One such sketch, for a «Sinfonia» in E minor, appears on a loose leaf (BH 119) that originally belonged to the Petter Sketchbook¹⁶. The «Sinfonia» sketch opens with an angular theme in a low register (Example 2a), and after 16 bars a new theme enters that Beethoven underscored with no fewer than six «8[va] » indications, suggesting a vast orchestral unison passage (Example

¹³ NOTTEBOHM 1887, pp. 101–118 at p. 111.

¹⁴ CAHN 2005.

¹⁵ CAHN 2005, pp. 124–125.

¹⁶ D-BNba (Beethoven-Archiv, Bonn), BH 119. According to Alan Tyson's suggested reconstruction, it would have appeared directly after folio 52 (JOHNSON 1985, pp. 216–218).

2b). At this point Beethoven seems to have been working on the second movement of the Eighth Symphony since there is a brief sketch for that movement on stave 14.

Example 2a—BH 119, folio 1r



Example 2b—BH 119, folio 1r



Although the thematic material of the E minor sketch is new, it also shares some similarities with the D minor movement sketched on Petter folio 45r, such as an initial introductory section with relatively slow harmonic rhythm followed by a more dynamic, forward-moving theme. The unison statement of the theme furthermore points forward to the scoring of the first theme of the Ninth Symphony, which is initially presented as an orchestral unison spanning four octaves (though the theme itself is quite different). The retention of the minor mode is also significant. In Beethoven's sets of three works he usually cast two in the major and one in the minor mode, as is the case in the Piano Trios Op. 1, the Piano Sonatas Op. 2, Op. 10 and Op. 31, the Violin Sonatas Op. 30, and the String Quartets Op. 59. Since by this point he already had a completed symphony in A major and was well underway with one in F (representing both sharp and flat keys, another feature of multi-work sets), the presence of

sketches for a minor-key symphony supports the idea that Beethoven was still thinking in terms of a set of three works.

The E minor symphony sketched on BH 119 was taken no further than this preliminary idea. In fact, there are preliminary sketches for other possible works on the same page, indicating that alternatives to a third symphony were also being considered. On staves 7-8, for instance, there is a two-bar cadenza-like passage that was evidently intended for a pianistic work. Towards the bottom of the page, on staves 12–13, there is also a brief sketch for a «requiem», also in E minor.¹⁷ A comment at the very top of this page, however, provides an insight into Beethoven's compositional plans at this point. The comment, which appears directly above the sketch shown in Example 2a, reads «gar keine Klawir sachen als Konzerte andere bloß wenn ich drum angegangen werde» («absolutely no piano things like concertos[;] others only if one is requested from me»). Given that he had made a number of preliminary sketches for pianistic works within the Petter Sketchbook, and again on this page, Beethoven's comment suggests a new and conscious decision to turn away from the concerto genre. His last appearance as a concerto soloist had been the premiere of the Fourth Piano Concerto in 1808, and he never performed his Fifth Piano Concerto (composed in 1809). The decision to turn away from virtuoso concert works may be linked with his declining hearing, perhaps indicating his realization that his deafness had reached a point where further concerto performances would be impossible.

Another verbal notation in the Petter Sketchbook supports the idea that Beethoven's hearing had recently taken a turn for the worse. On folio 1r he wrote the following: «baumwolle in den ohren am klavier benimmt meinem Gehör das unangenehm Rauschende» («[putting] cotton in the ears at the piano protects my hearing from the unpleasant noise»).

¹⁷ RONGE 2015.

This comment suggests that playing the piano was becoming increasingly problematic and even unpleasant for Beethoven due to the further deterioration of his hearing, which had now been declining for more than a decade. From 1812 onwards he continued to make occasional appearances as a performer in a chamber music context: as late as April 1814 he premiered the «Archduke» Trio, Op. 97, though the young Ignaz Moscheles, who was present at the occasion, was unimpressed with the lack of «clearness and precision» of Beethoven's playing¹⁸. Yet with the distortion he was now apparently experiencing when performing at the piano, as indicated by his comment in the Petter Sketchbook, he may have realized that further concerto performances were now out of the question. In light of his declining hearing, a third symphony project may therefore have been particularly appealing for Beethoven at this point, since his increasing deafness would not hinder any possible future performance opportunities.

Beethoven turned twice more to the idea of a «third» symphony as the Eighth Symphony was nearing completion. A brief concept sketch for a «Sinfonia in c moll» appears at the bottom of folio 61v of the Petter Sketchbook, amongst sketches for the finale of the Eighth (Example 3). The sketch clearly shows an opening, introductory gesture, which shares some similarities with the earlier sketches in D minor: the rhythmic organization is reminiscent of that in Example 1a, and the rising scalar patterns resemble those in the theme shown in Example 1b.

Example 3—HCB Mh 59 (Petter Sketchbook), folio 61v

¹⁸ MOSCHELES 1873, vol. i, p. 12.

Sinfonia c moll
Al[legr]o



A much more substantial sketch from around the same time, however, was made for all four movements of a symphony in E flat major (Examples 4a–d). This plan appears on a loose leaf (HCB Mh 86) that also contains advanced sketches for the finale of the Eighth Symphony on the reverse¹⁹. This leaf has the same paper and staff ruling as the Petter Sketchbook, though appears never to have belonged to the sketchbook since it lacks any sign of stitch holes²⁰. The entire recto of the leaf is devoted to the plan for the projected symphony.

Example 4a—HCB Mh 86, folio 1r



Example 4b—HCB Mh 86, folio 1r



Example 4c—HCB Mh 86, folio 1r

¹⁹ D-BNba (Bonn, Beethoven-Archiv), HCB Mh 86.

²⁰ JOHNSON 1985, pp. 209–211.



Example 4d—HCB Mh 86, folio 1r



This sketch is a rare example of a preliminary sketch in which Beethoven mapped out ideas for the projected sequence of movements in the work as a whole (as opposed to sketching only one movement, as was his more usual practice)²¹. At their most succinct, such plans consist only of brief concept sketches for the different movements, or even a verbal description of the basic characteristics of each movement. Several multi-movement plans are well known to the Beethoven sketch literature, including an early plan for the «Eroica» Symphony and several plans for the overall structure of the Quartet Op. 131²². Most of Beethoven's known multi-movement plans are connected with completed works; this again sets them apart from concept sketches, which were frequently abandoned without being developed any further. The presence of a multi-movement plan for a «third» symphony in E flat therefore indicates a much more advanced conception of the work than is usually represented in Beethoven's preliminary sketches.

The plan outlined in Examples 4a–d provides details not only of the thematic material of individual movements, but also of the projected instrumentation. The symphony was to have a first movement in 2/4, with a theme based on a dotted rhythm motif, with prominent

²¹ BUURMAN 2013.

²² LOCKWOOD 1981, pp. 460–461; WINTER 1982, pp. 116ff.

use of the piccolo («Mit fl[auto] piccolo», Example 4a). The second movement, marked «tempo di Menuet», was to have a trio section featuring the piccolo, as indicated by a comment on staves 9–10 («trio mit f[lauto] piccolo»). This was to be followed with an adagio in A flat, in which the clarinets would evidently have a prominent role (Example 4c), and the proposed finale was a rondo with fugal elements with the theme first presented in the basses («fugirtes Rondo wo die Bässe anfang[en] », Example 4d).

The level of detail and systematic layout of the plan on HCB Mh 86 may indicate that it was sketched in order to preserve ideas that could be returned to at a later date. Beethoven had done something similar for both the «Eroica» and Fifth Symphonies. In the case of the «Eroica», Beethoven had sketched a preliminary plan for the first three movements of the symphony in the Wielhorsky Sketchbook in late 1802. After sketching the plan, Beethoven then laid it aside for around six months before starting detailed work on the symphony²³. For the Fifth Symphony, Beethoven similarly sketched preliminary ideas for the different movements long before he began detailed work on the symphony. Although main work on the Fifth Symphony began in 1807, preliminary sketches for the different movements can be found within two sources dating from 1804. The first of these is the so-called Eroica Sketchbook, which contains drafts of the first and third movements as well as brief notations for the other movements²⁴. The second is a group of leaves now forming part of Autograph 19e, which includes brief drafts of the first, third and last movements²⁵. William Meredith proposes that the principal purpose of the Autograph 19e multi-movement plan may have been «to preserve Beethoven's initial thoughts in the manner of an extended mnemonic

²³ LOCKWOOD 1981.

²⁴ For a transcription and discussion of these sketches see LOCKWOOD 2013.

²⁵ NOTTEBOHM 1872, pp. 10–16; MEREDITH 1991, pp. 105–112.

device», allowing the composer to continue from where he left off at a future date²⁶. A similar purpose may have been intended for the multi-movement plan from 1812 for the symphony in E flat. This notion is supported by the fact that the leaf HCB Mh 86 apparently never formed part of a larger sketchbook; Beethoven may have deliberately notated the plan on a loose leaf that could be easily kept aside for later use, rather than burying it within a sketchbook.

Unlike the «Eroica» and Fifth Symphonies, the projected «third» symphony in E flat did not progress beyond this preliminary stage of sketching. With the exception of a brief finale sketch on the reverse of the sketchleaf, Beethoven seems not to have made any further sketches for the symphony (though it is possible that sketches have been lost). By October 1812, when the autograph score of the Eighth Symphony was written out, Beethoven had been occupied with composing symphonies for an entire year. With no performance or publication of the new symphonies yet secured he was perhaps unwilling to spend further time on a venture that did not guarantee monetary reward. His next significant project instead became the Violin Sonata Op. 96, composed for Pierre Rode who came to Vienna in December 1812 and premiered the sonata at the end of that month. Beethoven did briefly return to the idea of a symphony in E flat many years later, however, as he made a number of sketches for a possible tenth symphony between 1822 and 1825. Barry Cooper in fact draws a link between the motivic figure at the very opening of the multi-movement plan of 1812 (Example 4a) and a number of sketches for the «tenth» symphony, which similarly stress the interval G—A flat²⁷. As outlined above, therefore, aspects of both the D minor and E flat major symphony sketches of 1812 can be seen to have resurfaced in symphony sketches around a decade later.

²⁶ MEREDITH 1991, pp. 106–108.

²⁷ COOPER 2003, pp. 18–19.

As a group, Beethoven's sketches for the «third» symphony reveal certain insights about his intentions for the work at this preliminary compositional stage. The sketches in D minor, E minor and C minor suggest that a modal contrast was important in his conception of the symphonies as a set of three, mirroring his usual practice within sets of three sonatas or other chamber works. While modal contrast did not underpin the detailed E flat major multi-movement plan, the plan nevertheless includes some striking features that would have set the work apart from its predecessors in other ways, notably the prominent use of piccolo and the projected fugato finale. The multi-movement plan in E flat is especially valuable as an insight into Beethoven's preliminary ideas for large-scale works, as it provides a concise yet detailed overview of the overall sequence of movements. The plan reveals that features such as key, basic instrumentation (such as use of piccolo or clarinet), and movement-type (such as minuet or rondo) were present in the composer's initial conception of the different movements, even where the length, proportion, and (in the case of the A flat major adagio) thematic material of individual movements was not yet established. The level of detail in the plan, and the fact that it was sketched on a loose leaf of paper, furthermore suggests that its purpose may have been to preserve ideas for future use.

The symphony sketches also invite speculation about Beethoven's longer-term ambitions at this moment in time. 1812 was, of course, the year of Beethoven's letters to the «Immortal Beloved», which signalled a moment of great personal turmoil and a turning point after which he apparently never again sought a lasting, loving relationship with a woman. More directly significant to his compositional career, however, was the issue of his ever-worsening deafness. As the verbal notations amongst his sketches show, he was now apparently experiencing discomfort when playing the piano. His comment on the loose leaf BH 119 regarding «absolutely no piano things like concertos» may indicate his realization

that his career as a virtuoso pianist was now effectively at an end. Beethoven would therefore have had good reason to want to immerse himself in the composition of symphonies, which he could present to the Viennese public in a future concert programme without being required to perform himself.

Beethoven's conception of the projected symphony as the third in a set is also especially significant in the context of Viennese concert life, as the city did not yet have a firmly-established culture of regular symphonic concerts. There were occasional opportunities for symphonies to be performed at charity concerts or benefit concerts for other performers, though Beethoven's best hope for presenting several new works to the Viennese public was to organize a benefit concert at his own expense. Did he intend for all three symphonies to be presented in a single programme? To date he had only presented three benefit concerts in Vienna, in the years 1800, 1803 and 1808 respectively, and each of these programmes included a piano concerto (which he performed himself) and two complete symphonies²⁸. Given that he was now no longer able to perform as a concerto soloist, any future concert programme would have to adopt a slightly different pattern. His sketches for a «third» symphony may, therefore, have indicated a plan for a concert programme in which the usual concerto was replaced with an additional symphony. Beethoven's previous concerts were already exceptional in their focus on grand multi-movement instrumental works,

²⁸ In 1800 the full programme was as follows: Mozart, Grand Symphony; Haydn, aria from *Die Schöpfung*; Beethoven, Piano Concerto (probably no. 1); Beethoven, Septet; Haydn, duet from *Die Schöpfung*; Beethoven, improvisation; Beethoven, Symphony no. 1. The 1803 programme consisted of Beethoven's First and Second Symphonies, Third Piano Concerto and *Christus am Ölberge*. The 1808 programme was as follows: Beethoven, Symphony no. 6; Beethoven, Aria, *Ah! Perfido*, Op. 65; Beethoven, Gloria from Mass in C; Beethoven, Piano Concerto no. 4; Beethoven, Symphony no. 5; Beethoven, Sanctus from Mass in C; Beethoven, improvisation; Beethoven, Choral Fantasy Op. 80. See THAYER-FORBES, pp. 255, 329 and 446.

particularly at a time when Viennese concert life was dominated by «miscellaneous» programming practices which favoured a variety of shorter works in a mixture of vocal and instrumental genres²⁹. A programme containing three symphonies, all by the same composer, would have been unprecedented in its homogeneity. The recognition that two new symphonies were already more than enough to form the basis of a concert programme, as well as the lack of any immediate performance prospects, may well have contributed to Beethoven's abandonment of the third symphony.

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²⁹ WEBER 2008.

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