

Although at times he was viewed as a type of transitional figure between the Classical and Romantic periods, Ludwig van Beethoven had a compositional style which has often been a source of debate in relation to these two eras. Upon examining the first movement of his Eighth “Little” Symphony, some have argued that both Classical and Romantic elements are present within this piece, while others have argued that this composition resides more within one genre than the other. While it could be said that upon first listening, his eighth does employ a definite classical form, this piece also contains various innovative factors which demonstrate it to be also aesthetically Romantic in nature when examined in further depth.

To begin this discussion, one might point out that Beethoven’s life could be described as very much Romantic in nature itself. He was an individual who viewed himself as an artist with great dedication and focus. Yet, despite his brilliance, he led a troubled existence, plagued by physical and personal problems, leading him to often express emotion over reason, seeming even irrational at times.¹ He also had a unique relationship to both religion and nature throughout his lifetime like other Romantic composers and artists.² With this stated, however, not all of these factors are clearly evident in his Eighth Symphony. Despite having a turbulent relationship with his brother during its period of conception, the Eighth appears to have a definite sense of humor and an overall light-hearted pleasantness, heavily contrasting the turbulent events during this period of his life.

While Beethoven’s Eighth Symphony could be argued to reside within early Romanticism (being written during 1812 and premiered in 1814)³, it should be noted that the concept of periodization is undoubtedly not a clear cut way to determine a piece’s compositional form and style. With this in mind, being an innovative piece written in Classical form, one could argue that the Eighth Symphony could be described as a type of transitional piece bridging the Romantic period, or possibly a work of Early Romanticism. While the piece may have a lightness and simplicity in the manner of the Classical period, with a definite

influence of Haydn evident, the symphony also employs some unusual techniques making it a work to embrace various Romantic qualities.

Aesthetically, some have argued that Beethoven's even-numbered symphonies such as this one mark a retreat to Classical attributes, yet his Eighth employs a number of forward-thinking compositional techniques. While the first movement utilizes the sonata form which was typical of the classical period, it is unique in that it essentially lacks an introduction. Its subordinate theme also employs innovative modulation, traveling skilfully from D major in its exposition, to C major, with its recapitulation in B-flat, and finally being restated in F major. Symphony No. Eight also reaches its dramatic climatic point at the implementation of its recapitulation as opposed to during its development phase. During the recapitulation, the middle four measures are also not present, giving a rather dramatic effect, much more romantic in nature. In a similar manner to his previous two symphonies, a large crescendo is also formed through the concluding measures of the development, with the return of the opening measures designated as *fortississimo*; illustrating a more avant-garde compositional form than typically found in earlier works of the Classical era.

With these examples mentioned, one could apply a number of Romantic descriptives from *Lewis Rowell's Thinking About Music* to this symphony. This piece has a certain humor present, rejecting the aesthetics of reason, and serious rationalism which Rowell described as Classical.⁴ This is illustrated through examples of experimental modulation and the omission of an opening theme mentioned earlier. According to Broyles, this particular symphony was also unique in being that it was consciously anachronistic.⁵ Its lack of an opening theme and removal of measures during the recapitulation also reject a concrete notion of formal clarity from the Classical era, and fit within the *disordered*, Dionysian aesthetic of Romanticism.⁶ One might also apply these two attributes to the unusual non-thematic elements occurring during the sixth to eighth measures which could be said to be Romantic rather than classical for whatever

reason Beethoven ultimately decided to implement them. While *color*, a Romantic aesthetic (7) is a prevalent theme in the eighth with its many accented notes, these particular instances stand out during the sixth to eighth measures in respect to individual sonorities to an even greater degree. With this said this piece not only *dynamic* in nature, but also has a *continuous* motion, satisfying both of these Romantic qualities. By applying the use of *fortississimo*, this piece also exudes the intensity of the Romantic period quite elegantly, even despite the form being very much Classical in nature. According to Newman, Beethoven's Eighth Symphony revives the extraordinary intense rhythmic elements of his Seventh Symphony most notably within the first movement.⁸

Finally, this symphony also appears to express what Rowell described as *emotion* (9), *the ambiguous* (10) and *the primitive*.¹¹ While one might not describe this piece as emotional in the same sense of some of Beethoven's other works, it could be said that certain techniques employed during this symphony express happiness, humor or even joy to a certain degree, evoking certain emotions among both the performers and listeners. Beethoven considered F major to be a humorous key, and attempted a sublime expression of it here (12), and this piece is a fine example of his attempts to express this idea. With the various unusual elements mentioned previously such as the omission of measures, lack of an introduction, non-thematic elements and so forth, there is a certain *ambiguity* present in this piece, despite its relatively traditional form. This work also utilizes what Rowell described as *the primitive* with its use of many accented notes that could even be described as "loud" as times, with the first bar literally leaping at the audience, contrasting the more reserved, chordal texture present within the Classical period. This also illustrates a move towards a more expressive, and less balanced compositional style to be experienced by the listener. Lastly, one could argue that this work also expresses what Rowell referred to as *the inner*, as Broyles describes this symphony as a means of retrospection for Beethoven back to a world which he knew he could no longer inhabit.¹³

In context, the first movement of Beethoven's Eighth Symphony is an interesting compositional piece to examine. While its form is very much commonplace of the Classical period, his compositional techniques are still innovative enough to set it apart from the works of many of his earlier predecessors, giving the piece enough Romantic aesthetics to be considered a piece of Early Romanticism, or a type of transitional piece, bridging the Classical and Romantic periods depending upon which scholar's periodization is utilized. Nonetheless, this piece is a fine example of Beethoven's ability to embody aspects of both periods as an important transitional figure of his time.

Works Cited

1. Kinderman, William. *Beethoven*. University of California Press. 1997. P. 6.
2. Kinderman, William. *Beethoven*. University of California Press. 1997. P. 162.
3. Pauly, Reinhard. *Music in the Classic Period*. Prentice Hall. New Jersey. 1988. p. 8.
4. Rowell, Lewis. *Thinking About Music: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music*. University of Massachusetts Press. Amherst. 1985. p. 116.
5. Broyles, Michael. *Beethoven: The Emergence and Evolution of Beethoven's Heroic Style*. Routledge. 1987. p. 250.
6. Rowell, Lewis. *Thinking About Music: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music*. University of Massachusetts Press. Amherst. 1985. p. 116.
7. Rowell, Lewis. *Thinking About Music: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music*. University of Massachusetts Press. Amherst. 1985. p. 118.
8. Kinderman, William. *Beethoven*. University of California Press. 1997. P. 159.
9. Rowell, Lewis. *Thinking About Music: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music*. University of Massachusetts Press. Amherst. 1985. p. 118.
10. Rowell, Lewis. *Thinking About Music: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music*. University of Massachusetts Press. Amherst. 1985. p. 119.
11. Rowell, Lewis. *Thinking About Music: An Introduction to the Philosophy of Music*. University of Massachusetts Press. Amherst. 1985. p. 119.
12. Kinderman, William. *Beethoven*. University of California Press. 1997. P. 159.
13. Broyles, Michael. *Beethoven: The Emergence and Evolution of Beethoven's Heroic Style*. Routledge. 1987. p. 94.

Bibliography

1. Broyles, Michael. *Beethoven: The Emergence and Evolution of Beethoven's Heroic Style*. Routledge. New York. 1987.
2. Grout, Donald. *A History of Western Music*. W.W. Norton. Toronto. 2002.
3. Hopkins, Anthony. *The Nine Symphonies of Beethoven*. Scholar Press. New York. 1996.
4. Kinderman, William. *Beethoven*. University of California Press. 1997.
5. Lockwood, Lewis. *Beethoven: The Music and the Life*. W.W. Norton. Toronto. 2005.
6. Martin, Russell. *Beethoven's Hair*. Broadway Press. New York. 2000.
7. Randel, Don. *The Harvard Dictionary of Music*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press. 1986.
8. Pauly, Reinhard. *Music in the Classic Period*. Prentice Hall. New Jersey. 1988.
9. Ringer, Alexander. *Early Romantic Era Between Revolutions*. Prentice Hall. New Jersey. 1991.
10. Rowell, Lewis. *Thinking About Music*. The University of Massachusetts Press. Amherst. 1985.
11. Solomon, Maynard. *Beethoven*. Schirmer. New York. 2001.