

The Elements of Surprise in Beethoven's Opus 95, Movement I

Movement I of Beethoven's String Quartet Opus 95 in F Minor is a brilliantly interwoven fabric of fragments of seemingly incongruent material. The piece has several surprises which derail the listener from an expected input of musical language, and, if the piece is played at very fast tempo, the listener has the experience of not knowing what is occurring until after it has already occurred. This "roller-coaster ride" is achieved through surprisingly smooth, and yet jolting, gestural and dynamic shifts and shifts between its distantly-related key centers: F minor, Db major, and F major. The harmonic grounding is simultaneously established and obscured by the recap, a duplicity which creates an ironic ambiguity and discomfort to the listener and leads to a surprise clarification and ending in the coda. This article will examine the musical language of the piece, and, in the pursuance of understanding its design, chronicle, and then later elucidate the collective importance of, several "contrivances" which "conspire" to disarm the listener for the coda's surprise.

To understand how the composer achieves these brilliant shifts and deviations while still creating a coherent musical statement in a very economical 3 minutes and 50 seconds, we must first look closely at the opening musical language and its rich complexities. In the first 17 measures, the exposition introduces or alludes to all the thematic material that the piece will explore. This opening material can be described as being comprised of four motives: *the head motive*, *the octave motive*, *the +1 motive*, *the interruption motive*, and a brief "summing up" section which could be called *the composite motive*. This composite motive can be seen as a very brief development section which portrays how the material from the previous four motives will be used later in the piece.

From measures 1-2 is the *head motive*, in F minor:



In profile, this motive outlines F minor and Db major. It has two sections: a fast, 16th note section, and a staccato 8th note section on the notes Db, C, D natural, and E natural. This head motive is played in octaves and unisons and is aggressive and simple. Because of its lack of “F-tonicization” and resulting bi-tonal implications, its melodic cells can be used for other elusive harmonic purposes.

Next, at measure 3-5, is the *octave motive* on the implied dominant:



This octave motive uses a different kind of rhythm: bouncy and resolute. The head and octave motives together illustrate a call-and-response in a very isolated setting: they have a direct causal relationship with perfect temporal economy. These two motives constitute nearly the extent of the F minor material that the listener is given in the exposition, and there is no harmonization of any melody: everything has been set in unisons or octaves. The octave motive is also unique in that it is more of a gesture or texture than a melody, and it has the effect of impressing upon the listener the dramatic element of the section rather than any specific harmonic or melodic statement. The octave motive also does not lead to an F minor harmony but leads deceptively to Gb major (we will examine this in the *+I motive* below). This lack of the octave motive’s implied dominant harmony “acting properly” further weakens the F minor tonic as our home tonality.

It must be noted here that measures 9-13 and 15-17 do act as dominant to F minor and that measure 14 does land on an F minor tonality, but this music is in a very brief setting and its harmonic purpose is confused by the other “tricks” that are so prevalent in this opening section. Aside from measures 13-14’s brief statement, which feels more like a passing harmony, the listener is not given an actual V-I harmonic progression until measure 17 leads to the restatement of the head motive at measure 18. However, the restatement of the head motive is also quite brief and the exposition quickly moves on to a different key center and does not return to F minor or C dominant. The lack of harmonic grounding, the brevity, and the constitution of the head and octave motives as the most prominent F minor material are significant in creating an elusive harmonic language and will collectively be called *Contrivance 1* of the piece’s musical elements that “contrive” to trick the ear and disarm the listener for the surprise ending in the coda.

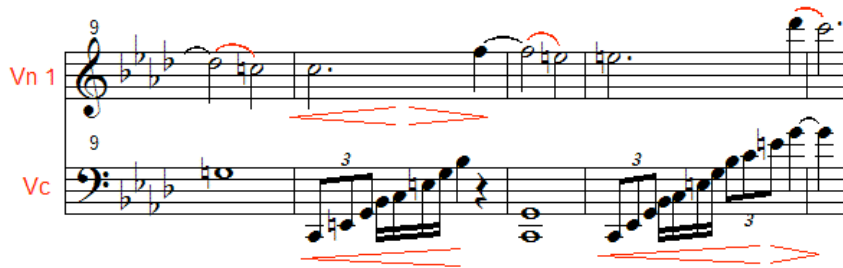
Moving on to measures 6-9 we now have a surprise passage on Gb major, which will be called the *+1 motive*:

The image shows a musical score for measures 6-9. The top staff is for Violin I (Vn I) and the bottom staff is for Violin C (Vc). The key signature is G-flat major (two flats). Measure 6 starts with a treble clef and a key signature of two flats. The Violin I part has a melody that begins with a half-step appoggiatura on the second beat of measure 9. The dynamics are marked with *sf* (sforzando) and *p* (piano). The Violin C part has a rhythmic accompaniment consisting of eighth notes and quarter notes.

This is the head motive but set up a minor second (hence *+1*) and in a major key. This motive also introduces a very frequently used element in the piece: the accent on the second beat of the measure (the motive’s title has a dual purpose: beat 2 could be called the downbeat *+1* beat). Violin I’s melody in the *+1* motive also alludes to the more lyrical melodic nature of the second theme of the exposition which starts at measure 24. The half-step appoggiatura at measure 9 in Violin I is also an important element and will

be used throughout the piece. In addition, the passage in the cello from measures 7-9 which chromatically weaves around the G natural is an element that is used extensively.

The next passage from measure 9-12 is the *interruption motive*:



It features two fast, aggressive, ascending runs in the Cello in the context of a more lyrical melody. These intensify the harmonic weight of this section and are a surprise to the ear while still referring to the gestural quality of the head motive. These ascending scales also use 8th note triplets which are somewhat foreign to the strict 8th and 16th note rhythmic nature of the music up to this point. The triplets are heard at quite a fast clip and could arguably be collectively considered merely a “passing gesture” rather than an actual musical element to be developed later. However, their rhythmic distinction from the rest of the music help to create a somewhat floating and ambiguous rhythmic feeling in this brief section and aid to the jolting or “interrupting” effect these scales have on the ear.

Measures 13-17 is a section which uses elements from the head, octave, +1, and interruption motives and could therefore be called the *composite motive*. The composite motive has the effect of summing up the music thus far so that the listener is prepared for a restatement of the head motive at measure 18. It uses the first cell of the head motive in the Viola part transposed to a dominant setting, in profile we have octave displacement from the octave motive in Violin I from C5 to C4, and the Violin I part also “leans” on the Db to lead into the C, a motion that was introduced in the head motive. The composite motive also features the +1 motive’s accent on beat 2 throughout the motive

and the harmonic shifting from the dominant C to Db major at measure 16 in the Viola, and the motive continues the call-and-response nature of the interruption motive with the lead melody in Violin I and the response in the Viola. In addition, the composite motive elongates the lead melody from measures 13-14 in measures 15-17, an element which will be important later in the piece. This motive also has one key ingredient, a *standalone segment*, which is measure 17. This measure doubles the harmonic rhythm from the 1-per-bar motion that had been present since measure 9, and prepares the ear for the return to the head motive at measure 18. Seemingly separate from any other gesture, this standalone segment is a critical element in creating a smooth transition, while, at the same time, helping to surprise the listener by making the restatement of the head motive in measure 18 feel more like a consequent gesture than an antecedent one. Measure 17 will be referred to later in the development just before the recap, and its significant effect in helping to create surprise deems that it be called *Contrivance 2*.

Examining the movement with a more summarized view as a way to understand the hidden “agenda” of the recap and coda, let us now examine each section of the piece with the following parameters in mind: *Harmony, Gesture or Emotive Quality, Surprises, and Voice Leading*.

In an unusual move, the exposition shifts from the first theme’s F minor key to the key of Db major for the second theme (the second theme would more commonly be in the relative major key of Ab major). This choice illustrates the half-step-up quality of the +1 motive mentioned above, as Db can act as an augmented 6th chord to the dominant C of F minor, and Db also has Gb in its major scale, which is a half-step up from, and therefore has a Neapolitan relationship to, F. The exposition states and restates the F minor head motive, but it does this so efficiently that there is very little F minor music throughout,

and, therefore, the listener hears the Db major tonality as more of a “home” tonality in the long section that follows rather than hearing the actual home tonality of F minor.

After the statement and restatement of the head motive, the exposition features the movement’s second theme in a long development of Db as a tonal center. This section can be seen to refer to material in the opening 4 motives mentioned above: it uses triplets throughout from the interruption motive, has the lyrical quality of the +1 motive, and features the octave motive’s octave displacement by changing the registers and leaving the lower register empty until the Cello enters with a section of the second theme at measure 25. Octave displacement is also used with the transposition of the Violin I’s lead melody at measures 55-58, and this section features the +1 motive’s accent on beat 2 at measures 34, 36, 40-42, and 51-53. The +1 motive’s chromatic approach to G is also recalled in the second theme with its chromatic approach to Db in measures 25 and 28. Very importantly, it features references to the interruption motive’s surprise ascending scales at measures 38 and 49. Both of these come at a half-step up, using the +1 motive’s objective. These two surprises are jolting to the ear and help substantially to create the elusive harmony that prepares the coda’s surprise ending. They will collectively be called *Contrivance 3*. The first surprise, an A major ascending scale landing on octave D’s isolates the Violin I’s D in the harmonic “ether” and allows it to be reinterpreted as an accented leading tone for the Eb II⁶ tonality at measure 40. The idea of this accent is then reinterpreted as an A natural appoggiatura to the Db I^{6/4} harmony at measure 41 (recalling the appoggiatura in the +1 motive). Coming where a I tonality would be expected, the A natural surprise, and the harmonic ambiguity that follows, confuses the ear from understanding Db major as a tonic. The second surprise, the D major scale at measure 49, is like a decaying echo of the previous one, and it elegantly helps to further obfuscate the Db harmony and disarm the listener for more surprises later.

The development section employs another surprise jolt: a dramatic shift from the tonicized Db harmony to III of Db at F major, and, therefore, the listener is misled from hearing that this F is in fact the root pitch of the first theme. This shift from the minor tonality of the first theme to the major tonality of the beginning of the development is significant in creating the surprise ending in the coda and will be called *Contrivance 4*. This very concise development section makes an unusual modulation from F major to the F minor recapitulation at measure 82. It uses material from the head and octave motives throughout measures 60-71 and has the most direct of any references to these motives thus far in the piece. The last five pitches of the head motive, C, Db, D natural, E natural and F are used in Violin II at measures 77-80, and the octave motive is used in the Ab's and C's in Violin I in measures 72-81. The development section also features another *standalone segment* which is measure 81. 81, which will be called *Contrivance 5*, refers to measure 17 and acts similarly in doubling the harmonic rhythm and making a smooth yet surprising transition into the recap at measure 82. This measure also features the first five notes of the head motive transposed and on the second and fourth beats of the measure, which help to push the motion towards measure 82. The effect of this measure has been introduced by measure 17, and it makes the listener pause for a moment to wonder if the recap heard at 82 is really a new section or just a consequent of the development's measure 81 antecedent gesture. The change from dominant to tonic harmony is the only significant clue that we have entered a new section of the piece.

The recap begins at measure 82 and carries on in exact repetition of the exposition's measures 18-26, but it then has a surprise twist from the Db harmony back to the development's F major harmony at measure 93. This surprise twist is followed by a highly correlative repetition of measures 24-59 of the exposition, but, in the recap, it is transposed up a major third from Db major to F major. Differences, of course, do

abound, and the F major arrival at measure 112 is stronger than the correlating Db arrival at measure 43, but the recap's overall effect is to tonicize F major in a similar gestural and harmonic fashion as Db major was tonicized in the exposition. It is significant to note the recap's absence of recapitulating measures 1-17, making the original tonic of F minor still more elusive. This absence will be called *Contrivance 6*.

Aside from the unquestionably determinative choice to transpose the Db exposition to F major in the recap, other important differences between the recap and exposition are numerous. Measures 93-97 are a twist on the exposition's measures 24-28 and are a kind of repetition of measures 89-92 transposed from Db major to F major. The recap features a more prominent development than did the exposition of the interruption motive's triplet rhythm in measures 98-100. The recap recalls the +1 motive's accent on beat 2 with measure 103 which recapitulates the exposition's measure 34. Measure 103, however, is stronger harmonically as the accented chord is in root position rather than first position. This helps to support F major in more stable a fashion than was Db supported by the corresponding measure. The recap also features similar surprise ascending scales at measures 107 and 118 that the exposition presented, but rather than being played at a half-step up from the current harmony, they are a whole step up, and are a harmonic minor scale rather than a major one. This minor harmony, built on G, develops the agenda of the +1 motive and helps to support the F major tonality. The harmonic implication of the shift from a half-step up to a whole-step up is significant and will be called *Contrivance 7*.

The recap has two seemingly contrasting goals: to simultaneously obfuscate the home tonality of the piece while elegantly tonicizing the root pitch of F. Ironically, the recap achieves these goals using material that was once used to lead the ear *away* from the tonic of F. The listener may not be aware that the piece has arrived again at F in

measure 112, although the harmony sounds eerily familiar. The listener will recall the lilting melody at 109 as being a restatement of the same at measure 40, but, upon first listening, may hear that measure 103 is in the same Db major key. By the end of the recap, it might be fair to say that the listener has no grasp of the home tonality of the piece and is eagerly waiting for clarification.

At this point it will be useful to review the “contrivances” as way to understand how the surprise material in the coda has been prepared:

1. The lack of harmonic grounding, the brevity, and the constitution of the head and octave motives as the most prominent F minor material
2. Measure 17 – the standalone segment which creates a smooth transition, while at the same time creating the surprise when the next bit of material occurs
3. The two ascending scales in the exposition which have the effect of obscuring the Db harmony
4. The shift from the F minor tonality of the first theme to the F major tonality at the beginning of the development
5. The standalone measure 81, introduced by, and acting like, measure 17
6. The recap’s absence of recapitulating measures 1-17
7. The recap’s reinterpretation of the half-step-up ascending scales from the exposition as whole-step-up scales, which support the F major tonality

The importance of these musical elements is that each helps to weaken F minor as a home tonality. At the end of the recap, the listener may have almost no recollection of F minor as a key center, and may feel more comfortable with Db as a home tonality. The ear is prepared for the “punctuation” of the piece and longing for harmonic clarity. Acting as “the great clarifier,” the coda begins with an aggressive return to the Db harmony using two repetitions of the head motive and extensive use of the 8th note motion of the second half of the head motive in octaves between Violin I and the Cello to push the dramatic tension much further. Contrivance 7’s significance is elucidated here in that it helps to tonicize F *major*. This tonicization clarifies the Db at the beginning of the coda to be nothing more than an *augmented 6th* chord leading to the dominant of the ensuing F minor. Now, Db no longer feels like a key center, whereas it had felt like

home only one minute previous at the beginning of the second theme's restatement in the recap. It has been reduced in status to its actual harmonic purpose.

After the reinterpretation of Db as an augmented 6th harmony, F minor is elegantly tonicized through several diminished 7th chords acting as dominant to F minor, a subdominant V of V, the subdominant IV, and several aggressive V-I progressions. The coda uses much of the material introduced in measures 1-17: the head motive and segments of it, the +1 motive's accent on beat 2, and the octave motive's parallel octaves. The reader will remember the elongated melody of the composite motive: the coda now features a similar gesture in Violin II and the Viola from measures 129-137, although the elongation happens in reverse so that the rhythmic activity is increased to quarters from whole notes. The coda also elegantly reaches closure of register with the high F in Violin I in measure 144 and the low F in the Cello on the downbeat of the very last measure.

Beethoven's first movement is a fast ride through distantly-related key centers which are craftily reinterpreted to create harmonic ambiguity. The coda of this piece is, in fact, the only clear harmonic statement, and truly places F minor as the center of importance in the piece. Db is like a recurring "dream" - strong in its delivery but continuously obscured by devious harmonic and gestural means or "contrivances." It is not until the listener "awakes" at the beginning of the coda that F minor and Db major are understood to be the simple tonic harmony and augmented 6th chord that they are. The listener feels the effect of delirium or scattered emotional turbulence as a result of the piece's harmonic and gestural surprises, and one wonders if Beethoven himself felt these experiences in his everyday life.