FUGUES AND CONTRASTING FORMS IN FIVE BEETHOVEN STRING QUARTETS

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Abstract

Although not common, fugues are sometimes found in Beethoven’s string quartets. More specifically, they can be found in op.18, no 4, op. 59, no. 3, op. 95, op. 131 and the Grosse Fuge. The fugues range from fledglings to fully developed fugues, and none can be said to be pure fugue. On the contrary, they are interacting with a contrasting form, either a sonata or ternary form. In order to understand the quartets better, it is important that we understand these interactions. Our intention is to make one of Beethoven’s little known and unusual techniques more available to music theorists and composers.

We call each of the movements experiments. Curiously, there was one in each of his early, middle, and late middle periods, and two in his late period. Although the experiments appeared only intermittently, Beethoven never forgot them. They were by no means exactly alike, and each one was stranger, and more complex, than the one before. Even so, they were not isolated events, and we were able to discern a pattern. In short, we found that fugue and contrasting form were progressively more entwined in each succeeding quartet, and increasingly difficult to pull apart. Moreover, the unique forms that emerged were progressively more complex, idiosyncratic, and even weird. Five new forms, each one different from the others, emerged. The work required a great deal of delicate maneuvering, and was not easy. In the essay, we see exactly how Beethoven went about it.

My string quartet was significantly influenced by the five quartets, and particularly by the Grosse Fuge. The idea that the present can only be
understood retrospectively, that is, once it has become the past, may be said to be the same in both quartets. Without an established sense of form, and with seemingly unrelated sections continuously juxtaposed one against the other, we experience an urgency to carry earlier material forward, in order to relate the past to events that can only be revealed as the quartets unfold. Understanding this helps us understand the tense, idiosyncratic form, independent of any established texture or style, that characterizes quartets, and is critical to keep in mind if we are to understand either one.
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Introduction

Although fugues are seldom found in Classical string quartets, there are some exceptions. For example, Mozart's K. 387 Quartet, three of Haydn's Opus 20 Quartets, and Haydn's Opus 50 No 4 Quartet, all have fugues. We also find fugues in five Beethoven quartets: Opus 18 No 4, Opus 59 No 3, Opus 95, Opus 131 and the Grosse Fuge. Like Mozart and Haydn, none of the Beethoven fugues are pure fugue, as in the Baroque, but are interacting with a contrasting form, either a sonata or ternary form. One example is found in each of Beethoven's early, middle, and late middle periods, and two in his late period, indicating that it was, for him, a life long interest. In the following essay, our concern will be with the five Beethoven quartets.

In 1953, Misch observed that the Grosse Fuge, and the last movement of Opus 59 No 3, were driven by an interacting fugue and sonata form. In both instances, he wrote, the interactions resulted in forms that were neither fugue nor sonata form, but a strange amalgam of both. (1) Although the essays were brief and, according to Misch, were never properly finished, his findings were persuasive. In 1967, Kerman, again only briefly, observed that a sonata form was interacting with a fugue in the first movement of Opus 131. (2) Following their lead, we found similar interactions in the second movement of Opus 18 No 4 and Opus 95. The discovery in Opus 18 No 4 was particularly exciting,

since it was one of Beethoven’s earliest quartets. Opus 59 No 3 was completed six years later, Opus 95 four years after that, and the Grosse Fuge and Opus 131 fifteen years later. Beethoven was clearly drawn to the idea, and kept coming back to it for the next twenty five years.

The five quartets were, in fact, experiments. In each one, Beethoven’s purpose was, clearly, the invention of a unique form, one that had never before been heard, and was never exactly repeated. The experiments were fresh and forward looking, and a Baroque interest in fugue was combined with a Classical sense of form in new, and daring, ways. Moreover, in each succeeding experiment, fugue and contrasting form were progressively more entwined, and the emerging forms were increasingly strange, and idiosyncratic. Although Haydn had used fugues in his string quartets, Beethoven differed, at least from early Haydn, in several important ways. The three Haydn Opus 20 fugues were almost pure fugue, with fluid and metrically irregular subjects that hardly fit into a typical Classical antecedent-consequent phrasing. Also unlike Beethoven, Haydn only embraced a homophonic style at the end of the movements. However, the fugues in the Mozart quartet, and Haydn’s Opus 50 No 4, were written in a more Classical style, with a metrically regular subject, and the fugal texture, as in Beethoven, was abandoned immediately after the exposition.

What exactly do we mean when we say that fugue and sonata form are contrasting forms? We mean that where fugue is typically fluid and continuous, sonata form sections are well defined, often with abrupt transitions; where sonata form expositions tend to move naturally from harmonic stability to tension, fugue
has a relatively flat and uninflected surface; where fugue has little modulatory
development or thematic contrast, sonata form themes are often neutral,
dependent on the tonic triad, and quick to establish the key; where sonata form
pushes forward, often ending in a rousing climax, fugue is fluid, endlessly
ruminative, and formally ambiguous, and where sonata form is dramatic, fugue is
endlessly contemplative. Also unlike fugue, ternary form is sectional, often static,
calm, straightforward, and stately, and generally uneventful in terms of dramatic
transitions. The interaction of fugues and contrasting forms, either sonata or
ternary form, was clearly challenging, and despite its inherent difficulties, offered
Beethoven an opportunity to make a movement off kilter, more dynamic, and
possibly more interesting. Of the many challenges, perhaps the most difficult
was determining how far one form could be developed without extinguishing the
other. For, if one or the other form was extinguished, the experiment would
clearly end. Clearly, a good deal of delicate maneuvering was required.

In the three earlier quartets, the experiments were confined to a single
movement. In Opus 18 No 4, Beethoven injected what appeared to be a fugal
subject, rather than merely fugal fragments, or fugati, into the first group of a
sonata form second movement. The sonata form remained more or less intact,
while the fugue was little more than a fledgling. Although fugue and sonata form
were loosely entwined and each was readily discernable, the movement was not
exactly a fugue, nor a sonata form, but an entirely unique, idiosyncratic form. A
fugue appeared again, in Opus 59 No 3, this time in the last movement. Now, a
longer and more developed fugue opened a sonata form movement, and the two
forms were more closely entwined. The movement, again, was neither fugue nor sonata form, but a unique, and more idiosyncratic, form. Then, in Opus 95, Beethoven abandoned the sonata form altogether, and injected two well developed fugues into the B section of a second movement ternary form. The two fugues, the fugal interlude between them, and the fugal fragments in the two A sections, created an entirely new sense of sections being connected to sections. The two forms were now more closely entwined, and the emerging form even more unusual. Although the movement was reminiscent of fugue, a sense of ternary form remained. In fact, the form was neither one nor the other.

In the last movement of Opus 130, later the Grosse Fuge, the scenario changed, and Beethoven injected a sonata form into a fugue, rather than the other way around. Fugue and sonata form were now inextricably entwined, and each was severely compromised. A unique form again emerged that was even more idiosyncratic, and strange. No trace an exposition, development, recapitulation or coda could be found, yet the spirit of sonata form remained, hovering mysteriously over the movement. The sonata form was everywhere, in the boundaries between sections, contrasting keys and rhythms, and heightened sense of drama. At the same time, the fugue, freed at last from the formal constraints of sonata form, was fully developed, contributing a contradictory sense of fluidity, stasis and ambiguity to the movement. Fugue and sonata form, oddly, were now more like one another. Remarkably, the fugue was nervous and edgy, and the sonata form flatter, more continuous, and less dramatic.
In Opus 131, the interaction between fugue and sonata form was expanded, and the entire quartet, for the first time, was involved in the experiment. From its strategic position in the first movement, the fugue was now able to profoundly influence the remaining movements, and blurred boundaries and nonexistent pauses, reminiscent of the fugal opening, gave the quartet a strange, fugue-like character. In the last movement, however, the sonata form broke loose, and the quartet, unexpectedly, ended in a brisk, rousing climax. A year later, in 1826, Beethoven severed the last movement from Opus 130, and it became the notorious Grosse Fuge, a one movement quartet. An entire quartet, again, as in Opus 131, was involved in the experiment, although now in an entirely different way. As Chua wrote, sonata form and fugue were utterly antagonistic, and the new, emerging form was fantastically abstract and disjointed. (3) The Grosse Fuge is a notoriously difficult quartet, both to listen to and play, and is often referred to as weird, even wacky. In Opus 131, on the other hand, the relationship between fugue and sonata form is entirely different, and, as Kerman observed, the two forms, rather than being discordant, are completely harmonious, forming a perfect union, and bringing a sense of cohesion to the entire quartet. (4) Even today, the two quartets continue to amaze listeners and performers alike. Nearly two hundred years later, Stravinsky famously remarked, about the Grosse Fuge, that it is “a contemporary piece of music that will be contemporary forever”. (5)

Over the years, many books and articles have been written about the Beethoven quartets. In the following essay, however, we intend to write about them from an entirely different perspective, one that has not previously been addressed. That is, we will analyze the interaction of fugues and contrasting forms in each of the five quartets, Opus 18 No 4, Opus 59 No 3, Opus 95, Opus 131, and the Grosse Fuge, with particular attention to the thread that ties them together. In short, each one will not only be seen as an isolated experiment, but as part of a larger experiment that went on, intermittently, for the last twenty five years of Beethoven’s life. We will analyze the interactions of fugues and contrasting forms in each quartet; how unique forms resulted from the interactions; how the two contrasting forms became progressively more entwined, in each succeeding quartet, and more difficult to pull apart, and how the emerging forms were increasingly idiosyncratic, and even weird. In this context, even the notorious Grosse Fuge no longer seems wacky, but simply extraordinary.

The last experiment, Opus 131, was completed only two years before Beethoven’s death, and, in many ways, was his most revolutionary. The notion of distinct, bounded movements, for the first time, was left behind, and the string quartet became an organic whole, ushering in a new Romantic era, and leaving the Classical style behind. Had Beethoven lived longer, it is likely that there would have been many more experiments. Like the five earlier experiments, each one would have been different, and unique, and increasingly strange forms would again have emerged. As it was, five new forms sprang from the
interaction of fugues and contrasting forms in the five quartets. Each was different from any of the others, had never before been heard, and was never exactly repeated. To see how this happened, we turn now to the first experiment, Opus 18 No 4.
Quartet in C Minor Op 18 No 4

Allegro ma non tanto
Andante scherzoso quasi allegretto
Menuetto allegretto
Allegro-prestissimo

In 1798, Beethoven began work on his first string quartet, and three years later the six Opus 18 quartets were completed. He clearly welcomed the opportunity to exercise his strong contrapuntal interests, and we find canons, double-counterpoint, and fugati everywhere. In Opus 18 No 4, he went even further and included a fugue as the first group in a sonata form second movement. The fugue, however, was little more than a fledgling. It had neither the length nor complexity of a fully realized fugue, and was immediately abandoned after its exposition. However, although only a fledgling, the fugue was more developed than a mere fugato and, as a first group, was a pillar in the surrounding sonata form. The intersection of sonata form and fugue was strange and wonderfully exciting and an odd amalgam of the two forms.

As the movement opens, a fugal subject, its conclusion left hanging, appears in the second violin. (Ex.1) In the fifth bar the tonic pitch C appears on the second beat, the weakest beat, followed by the pitch A, marked sforzando, creating a syncopation that offsets a clear sense of ending, as is usual in fugue. The momentum at the end of the phrase pushes forward to the answer in the viola without a break, and the subject then continues in a roughly sequential
manner, wedding the end of the first phrase to the beginning of the next phrase, again in fugal fashion. By extending the end of a phrase, the continuity develops the last few notes of a phrase, rather than ending one phrase and starting another. As we will see later, this device appears over and over again, here and in the later experiments. Later, not only phrases, but beginnings and endings of sections are connected, boundaries between movements are blurred, and beginnings and ends of movements are connected.

Example 1

The initial subject suggests a cadence on C, while the parallel spot in the answer, which also accents the third beat, avoids G altogether. (Ex. 2) Instead, the cadence consists of the remaining pitches of the dominant seventh of C, namely B, D, and F. G then appears, now in the first violin, marking a return of the subject an octave above the initial statement, after a shorter four-measure interval, eliding the end of the answer and the return of the subject. The second violin then forms a sequence that sounds less like an arrival than a connecting measure, undermining the sense of arrival on C. Again, the continuity is what we would expect in a fugue.
Example 2

After a shorter interval of three measures, a decisive cadence on the tonic is further deflected when a false entry in the cello is weakened by *sforzandi* in the next measure on beats two and three. (Ex. 3) The cadence is further undermined by the two sequences that follow. These sequences are both a point of arrival and in retrospect a point of departure, embuing the cadence with a sense of ambiguity, and demonstrating that fugal structure is the result of a polyphonic process, rather than a conventional template.

Example 3

Beethoven’s opening statement is characterized by irregular, overlapping phrases and a lack of strong, structural landmarks. Thematic extension,
avoidance of unambiguous cadences and regular periodicity, the most common Baroque means of intensification, are used. Subject and answer are extensible, and the end of one phrase is wed to the beginning of the next. Rather than balancing one half of a phrase with another, the end of each phrase leads imperceptibly and urgently to the next phrase in irregularly spaced intervals. Although there is a subject and answer pattern the fugue then stops, and to our surprise, is not further developed.

The first break in texture appears when the fugue ends in a concerted arrival on G, halfway into the exposition. (Ex. 4) The point of arrival is followed by two clearly articulated four-measure phrases, alternating dominant and second inversion harmonies. It then becomes obvious that the texture is profoundly different from the opening, and that this is no ordinary fugue. As we have seen, the artifice of strict counterpoint is abandoned immediately after the fugal exposition; instead, we abruptly find ourselves in the galant idiom more characteristic of sonata form.

Example 4
In the next break, a bridge, consisting of material that recalls the opening fugue subject, unexpectedly appears, and it is now reasonable to suppose, although puzzling, that we are in sonata form. (Ex. 5) Starting on low E in the cello, the bridge serves as a harmonic resolution of sorts, and continues as a *stretto* in a four-measure phrase through the remaining voices. In a six-measure phrase, a D pedal is alternately harmonized as the tonic of D7 and the fifth of a second inversion of G. The bridge, and what appears to be a first section, comes to a full stop on D7, a chord that is weakened by the absence of F#, the leading tone of the dominant G. Beethoven has harnessed the excitement of a fugal *stretto* to create a dramatic transition, and a change in texture and rhythm marks the arrival of the second group. The break, like the earlier one, contrasts the fluid, seamless fugue that opened the movement with the clearly articulated, well-defined phrases typical of sonata form, creating a unique combination of textures. We now look forward to the remaining sections of a sonata form until the end of the movement.

Example 5

![Example 5](image-url)
In a sonata form exposition, modulation requires preparation, and cannot be arrived at through sequence, as in fugue. The dominant is conceived of as a dissonant tonality, and establishment of V as a new tonic must be reached through the establishment of its dominant, and perhaps even through mention of the dominant’s dominant. Here, however, although there is a dominant preparation of the dominant in the bridge, there is no tonicization of D, and the final D7 chord is missing its third, F#, the leading tone of G, the new harmonic center. (Ex. 6) The start of the second group, therefore, is not strongly in the dominant, and there is no G in the next measure. Instead, the chromatic sixteenth-note figure, which is barely a melody, avoids G, perhaps because it would provide an undesirable cross relation with the G# in the following measure. A one-measure chromatic figure is repeated a fifth lower, harmonized as the root of E7. Sequencing through A7 and D7, the figure arrives at the first inversion of G and a new melody.

Example 6
This passage of imitative counterpoint, a device that is found in the opening fugue and bridge section, has a curious effect. Instead of providing a decisive modulation and a definitive start to the second group, as in a more usual sonata form, there is a sense of treading water. The sequence itself, however, brings forth C#, the leading tone to D, followed by F#, the leading tone to G, as the bridge section and its conclusion did not. There is, nonetheless, a sense of suspended motion that holds the music poised and immovable. The arrival of the new melody then brings the motion back to a plane of real time for four measures, at which point the imitative counterpoint found at the beginning of the section returns. (Ex. 7) The chromatic sixteenth-note figure is now in thirds and the circle of Fifths motion repeats. This time, however, the phrase continues to a root position G harmony and, instead of the new melody found in the parallel spot in the earlier measure, the chromatic figure continues on, extending forward to another cadence on G, now in first inversion.

Example 7

At this point, the chromatic figure, resting on the first inversion chord, continues. (Ex.8) Starting with all voices joining in sixteenths, it leads to a six-measure phrase, finally cadencing on a root position G chord. The harmony in
the remainder of the exposition alternates between D7 and G, once again with
imitative counterpoint, but this time in larger phrases. The harmonic rhythm
accelerates as the final cadence is reached, with G and D7 harmonies alternating
within a single measure. A final pause then marks the end of the second group,
rounding off the exposition. It is noteworthy that Beethoven, following the norms
of sonata form, chose to repeat the exposition, thereby repeating the fugal
opening as well. Fugue is generally a through-composed form, but here the
aesthetics of sonata form prevail.

Example 8

The development is made up of imitative counterpoint, rapidly modulating
sequences, extension of themes, fragmentation, avoidance of cadences, and
irregular periods, and welcomes the fugue in a way that the exposition was not
able to. Beethoven normally reserved fugal writing for the development, thereby
avoiding both the decisive modulations of the exposition and the stability of the
recapitulation section. Here, because of the placement of the fugue in the
opening group, references between sections abound, both in terms of motivic
material and types of continuity, and bring a profound richness to the material not usually found in sonata form.

In the second phrase, the cello enters with a repeated low Bb rising up a fourth to Eb, imitating the opening fugal motif. (Ex. 9) A descending sixteenth note scale, found in the last section of the exposition, as well as in the fugue subject, follows. In a passage of imitative counterpoint, the phrase is passed initially to the first violin, where the descending scale then points to C harmonic minor. The viola, entering on G, follows, and continues with another descending C harmonic minor scale. Two measures later, it is imitated in the second violin. The second measure of the scale, instead of continuing its descent, then moves up a semitone to Db. The first violin joins with an Eb, thereby forming an Eb7 harmony resolving to Ab. At this point, we may recall that rapidly modulating sequences are also present in nascent form in the opening fugue. As we see below, rapid modulation, namely three key areas with dominant preparation in ten measures, characterizes the development, as well as the opening fugue.

Example 9

The first group returns, marking the start of the recapitulation. In sonata form, the recapitulation and exposition are characterized by a fundamental
difference in continuity. Instead of a clearly articulated move away from stability, such as placing the second group in the dominant, the recapitulation moves towards a large-scale stability that is found with the return of the second subject in the tonic key. It is here, before reaching the second group, and amidst the sequences, fragmentation, and avoidance of cadences characterizing the fugue in the opening group, that we find the most exquisite counterpoint in the movement. (Ex. 10) The fugal subject, again initially in the second violin, is set against the two lower countersubjects in the viola and cello. As the answer appears in the viola, the countersubjects are found above, in the violins, in a passage of triple counterpoint. The cello has a pedal G, and the subject begins, eliding with the end of the answer.

Example 10
Unlike the fugue in the opening group, we now find countersubjects, an elongation of the central phrase, and an avoidance of a root position C cadence. Faced with the task of raising the intensity of a fugal passage, Beethoven changed the details of the passage, but not its fundamental continuity. Complexity is reached through increased contrapuntal means, postponing the expected points of arrival and increasing the rate of imitation. The rest of the movement proceeds more or less as expected. A bridge section leads to the tonic, rather than the dominant, and a second group resolves the “dissonance” of its earlier dominant material to the tonic. By these means, the movement moves to large-scale stability.

The coda opens with an unexpected chord. It then returns to unresolved material from the development section, and concludes with a reference to the opening group, bringing forth the fugal subject in its entirety. (Ex. 11) However, rather than a dazzle of contrapuntal glory, the subject does just the opposite: unexpectedly, we find a waltz-like accompaniment that leaves bare the simplicity of the subject. This is just the right stroke, revealing the subject in a new light as the movement gradually winds down.
Even in this early experiment, the movement is unusual. Where a second movement is usually slow, even lyrical, here it is marked both scherzo and andante scherzoso quasi allegretto, indicating a lighthearted, even playful character. The choice of key, C major, supports this mood, especially in contrast to the tragic C minor of the surrounding movements. Strangely, the movement is in sonata form, rather than the usual ternary form, presenting difficulties in achieving a scherzando effect. It is further distinguished by including a fugue, although only a fledgling, rather than merely fugal fragments or fugati. While there are indications of strong structural boundaries, and other characteristics of sonata form, the feeling that fugue and sonata form are constantly at odds, each vying for ascendancy, is utterly overwhelming. As a result, the drama of sonata form is diffused, and Beethoven achieves the scherzando effect he clearly desired. Although still tentative, the experiment resulted in a unique form, one that was neither fugue nor sonata form, and had never before been heard. The contrasting forms, however, are not yet completely merged, and it is still fairly easy to pull them apart. As we shall see, this will become progressively more difficult in each succeeding experiment. Even so, the movement is tremendously exciting, and lays the groundwork for the later experiments.
Six years later, Beethoven completed Opus 59 No 3. Once again, the experiment involved injecting a fugue into a sonata form, this time in the last movement, and the result was even more dramatic. Like Opus 18 No 4, the movement is unusual, and deeply affecting. Rather than being delicate and restrained, the fugue is now fully blown, nearly hysterical, utterly fantastic, and probably the fastest fugue ever written. The sonata form is looser, more blurred, and more ambiguously defined, boundaries between sections are more porous, and sections are less clearly defined. However, an exposition, development, recapitulation and coda can still be discerned. In this less demanding context, counterpoint abounds, and the fugue is more developed and influential than before. In fact, it is so overwhelming, and has such momentum, that the exposition, of which it is a part, is not repeated. In the earlier quartet, the fugue was more tentative, and tractable, and subject and answer were elided, making each one progressively shorter. Now they are the same length, and the fugue is more developed, and longer and more influential. Previously, the fugue subject was laid bare of counterpoint at the end of the movement, and left only with a
waltz-like accompaniment. Now, under the influence of a more developed fugue, the fierce, driving quality of the subject fragment ranges freely, and the sonata form reaches a rousing climax. The fugue is balanced by a sonata form that is more accommodating, yet more idiosyncratic, and, as each form takes on characteristics of the other, it becomes less like itself.

The movement begins with a phrase in the viola that has all trappings of a fugue subject, although it is now sprawling, ungainly, and full of interior repetition and sequence. (Ex. 1)
With a turn towards the dominant, and the appearance of the answer in the second violin, our supposition is confirmed. The viola continues with a countersubject, although it is soon reduced to outlining chordal tones in quarter notes. After a divergence, the answer returns again in the tonic, and the subject appears in the cello with the countersubject in parallel sixths. The subject, again in the tonic, appears in the first violin in octaves with the second violin. As it expands, the viola and cello have the countersubject, also in octaves, changing from quarter notes to half notes.

If we consider the opening a fugue exposition, rather than an opening group in a sonata form, we are confronted with several anomalies. There is little counterpoint, and the countersubject is soon reduced to outlining chordal tones rather than continuing as an independent voice. With the appearance of the subject in the cello, the countersubject is in parallel sixths, keeping the number of independent voices to two. Most pointedly, the final appearance of the subject in the first violin, along with a countersubject, is doubled in octaves. At this point, when the polyphonic texture is usually the most complex, we find two independent voices, and the texture seems hardly fugal at all. A further anomaly occurs with the final appearance of the subject in the tonic, rather than the more usual dominant. While a dominant presentation would search for a resolution, and push towards a subsequent episode, here the tonic subject simply rounds off the fugal exposition.

Following the arrival on the tonic, there is a series of homophonic statements that eradicate any trace of fugue. (Ex. 2)
As we proceed to a cadence on the dominant of the dominant, a connecting passage in the first violin leads to what may be a second group of the exposition of an underlying sonata form, with the homophonic material providing the modulating material. (Ex. 3) Other than being full of imitation and repetition, the passage appears to bear no direct resemblance to fugue. However, the ending is blurred and full of ambiguity, not like sonata form, and the exposition, with its exact ending undefined, is not repeated. A return of the fugue, devoid of contrast or modulatory development, coupled with its sheer length and complexity, would destroy the forward motion of a sonata form. Therefore, what we have is neither sonata form nor fugue, but a combination of both.
Next, a series of upward sequences head towards G, which becomes the dominant seventh of C. Before this path can be explored further, the harmony turns abruptly to Bb, the dominant of the later Eb. (Ex. 4)

Example 4

As we have seen, the movement opens with a fugue. The fugue has a characteristically flat, uninflected surface devoid of contrast or modulatory development. It is very fast and fluid, and proceeds pell mell, without any sense of harmonic, thematic, or textural opposition. The fugue’s role, however, is unclear. Its placement and length belies both its functioning as a *fugato* texture within a development section, or as thematic elaboration within a sonata form exposition. Another possibility is to regard the fugue, as we did earlier, as a first group in a sonata form. Several characteristics support this notion, the most important being that the final subject appears, unusually, in the tonic. If the fugue is a first group, a move to the dominant would be saved for the second group, and if it became too contrapuntal, the sense of forward motion, or the drive to a cadence on the tonic, might be undermined. Despite all this, the weight of the evidence is that the fugue, although its placement is unusual, remains most easily understood as a first group.
After an ambiguous start, the section following the putative second group explores the contrapuntal and thematic potential that was latent in the fugue subject and denied with the entrance of the homophonic texture. (Ex. 5) Inversion, *stretto*, pedal point, and fragmentation are used freely, although the subject itself does not appear in its entirety. Instead, as we see below, there is an amalgam of imitative counterpoint, rapid modulation, sequential motion, and chromaticism, resulting in a sense of instability. This type of continuity is reminiscent of a development section, establishing that we are in a sonata form.

Example 5

We continue to find a variety of textures and harmonies. For example, a return of the homophonic texture is interspersed with a figure based on a fragment of the fugue subject, and a passage in d minor, coupling the fugue subject with an *obbligato* accompaniment, is transposed to Bb, f, and c, and so on. However, while the section is filled with contrapuntal devices, no full fledged fugal writing is found, and while there is often something close to a fugue subject, there is nothing close to a fugue texture. Further, while there is no sense of a
stable key area, there is a lingering sense of stasis due to sequences both within and among the quasi subjects.

The return of the fugue subject, again in the viola, marks the start of a recapitulation (m. 210). The subject and answer progress in the same manner as the exposition, with the addition of a half note countersubject, initially in the first violin. While outlining a circle of fifths harmonic motion, the countersubject places the sound of d minor in the context of C, by the use of C# and B♭, a point that will be taken up later. In addition, although there are countersubjects, as in the exposition, the number of independent lines never exceeds two.

Next, we find a cadence on V7, where there had been a cadence on V7/V in the parallel spot in the exposition. (Ex. 6) This leads to a transposition of the second group from the dominant to the tonic, creating a clearly articulated movement towards large-scale stability. This second group, like the one in the exposition, is much shorter than the first group. Although also not clearly defined at the end, and with no memorable thematic material, the transposition places it squarely in sonata form.

Example 6
After this, the transposition in the recapitulation continues past the point that began the development section. This further blurs the line between the second group and the development section, and leads to a cadence on Eb, as the dominant of Ab. (Ex. 7) The transposition in the recapitulation continues with a move towards G, with hints of the minor, to a boisterous cadence on G7, ending with a high F trill in the first violin.

Example 7

The coda that follows is longer than the exposition and counterbalances the length of the development. Nevertheless, as is increasingly the case in Beethoven’s middle period, the coda is not simply a postscript, or an afterthought, but a culmination of what has come before. The high F trill in the first violin rises to F#, and finally to G. (Ex. 8) At this point a fragment of the countersubject returns in the viola and repeats. The second violin enters with a fragment of the subject and is followed by another fragment a major second down. Instead of continuing the subject, however, the fragments simply repeat, and, as the registers of the various components change in relation to one another, the entire texture then repeats in invertible counterpoint.
The phrases hover around C, with an eighth note accompanying figure derived from the end of the fugue subject.  (Ex. 9) The section then reaches a climax, after an ascent to high C and a descent in contrary motion to low C. The arrival is undermined by the Bbs that follows and then by a descent to d.
Beethoven is clearly preoccupied with d, and his interest is played out here. After a fermata, the first violin continues with an F-F#-G ascent (mm. 389-391) reminiscent of the beginning of the coda, and, once again, with the eighth note figure from the fugue subject. The figure continues the chromatic inflection of Bb and C# (mm. 399-402), now in four-measure groups, in the context of C. Soon all the voices join in eighths, and a lengthy forte passage, descending in the cello and ascending in the first violin, leads to a rousing, insistent arrival on C, and the movement ends with a fortissimo flourish.

The movement is erratic and strange, and an exciting ending to the quartet. An exposition, development, recapitulation, and coda can still be discerned, although only barely. The movement ends with the rousing climax typical of sonata form, completely unlike the lilting, waltz-like accompaniment of the fugue in Opus 18 No 4. Even so, the influence of sonata form is less, and there is less interest in keeping boundaries tidy, less dichotomy between the first and second groups, and less drama with the return of the second group to the tonic in the recapitulation. Given the weight of the opening fugue, the exposition is not repeated, and the lengthier development and coda that follow allow for the imitative counterpoint, fragmentation, and irregular phrases that fugue inspires. The fugue is extremely fast, and, although now longer, is shorter in actual time. At least one fifth of the movement is devoted to fugal writing, and much of it rises to the level of fugue. Nevertheless, the fugue is still constrained by the sonata form, and, while more than a fledgling, is not yet fully developed. The form is, once again, unique and idiosyncratic.
In 1810, Beethoven completed Opus 95, also known as the *Quartetto Serioso*. It may be the most uncompromising of the quartets, and the second movement is exceptionally complex and full of energy. This time, a fugue is injected into a ternary form, rather than a sonata form, and the result, once again, is exciting. Unlike a conventional ternary form, however, the B section contains two fugues, and while one would be unusual, two are even more unusual. The B section, unexpectedly, is twice as long as the first A section, giving added weight to the fugues. Both fugues are now longer and more developed, and the fugal writing is more substantial. In addition, *fugati* are scattered everywhere throughout the movement, and references to fugal material appear in the opening measures of the first A section, in an interlude between the two fugues in the B section, and the second A section. Although nearly half the movement is devoted to fugue, or fugal writing, the movement is still usually considered a ternary form.

As the B section begins, a fugue subject appears in a chromatically inflected descending four measure phrase. (Ex. 1)
Example 1

The phrase recalls the opening four measures of the first A section. (Ex.2)

However, harking back to earlier material is unexpected and creates a sense of wholeness that will not be seen again until Opus 131.

Example 2

There is a sudden swerve to g minor in the A section, and the Bb it contains, after the opening diatonic descent in D major. Bb also figures prominently in the fugue subject in the B section, thereby confirming its minor mode. At the same time, a strong dose of g minor is infused into the fugue subject, reminiscent of the start of the A section. Typically Beethoven, the relationship between the two openings is complex, and their similarities are compromised by equally strong contrasts. For example, the function of the
chromatically inflected four measure phrase in the B section is radically different from the opening of the A section, and it soon becomes obvious that the B phrase is a fugal subject. As such, it is not merely an introduction, as it was in the A section, but the direct thematic basis of what follows. By projecting the chromatic nature of the fugue subject into the harmony of the B section, a completely different harmonic palette is created. In the A section opening, the harmony, like the descending scale itself, is primarily diatonic.

As the fugue continues, the subject concludes with a chromatic descent from Eb to C natural, the last note heard against the D of the answer. (Ex. 3) What follows then wonderfully illustrates how Beethoven projects the chromaticism of the fugue subject into the harmonic nature of the fugue. As the subject winds down, we expect the answer to appear in the dominant. However, there is no strong harmonic motion towards A and, instead, the harmony implied in these last eighth notes is ambiguous, with the descending chromatic line of the subject leading the way and telling us that modulations primarily occur according to the chromatic implications found in the subject. Uncertainty is everywhere, as to when the cadence will occur, and at what pitch. It permeates the fugue and the movement itself.

A tonal answer in A enters, following the subject and standing against the contrary motion in the chromatically ascending countersubject (m. 39). The chromatic nature of the answer and its inherent modal ambiguity is evident in the third measure of the answer, where the raised third of D major is followed by the lowered third of d minor. The extension of the answer results in special
emphasis being placed on the chromatic movement from G# to G natural. Together with the low A, this provides a solid cadence heralding the return of the subject in the tonic and contrasting with the more ambiguous entrance of the answer, clearly demonstrating the complex, unusual nature of the fugue.

Example 3

The fugue subject that follows is accompanied by a countersubject in invertible counterpoint, and is entirely different from fugues in the earlier experiments. (Ex. 4) By the use of contrapuntal devices, the fugue is now more fully developed and no longer constrained by the forward motion required by sonata form. The subject is now below the countersubject, and its chromaticism leads the way. It lands on C, harmonized first as the tonic of a dominant seventh chord and then sustained over the bar line to form a second inversion F major chord, which, for the first time, is marked *sforzando*. The harmonies that follow are constantly shifting, and roving from F major to G# diminished, from C7 to A7, and D major to a *forte* Bb6. The next measures are in triple counterpoint, creating an elongated phrase and an increase in harmonic complexity. The fugue forms a sea of shifting, complex harmonies and snippets
of earlier material, without any sharp delineations and form-defining contrasts. Indeed, there is an almost seamless continuity that even the most distant harmonies cannot overwhelm, thereby strengthening the notion that while there is contrast between the larger sections, there is little contrast within the fugue itself.

Example 4

The subject is then accompanied above by the now familiar countersubject, developed in *stretto* fashion and followed by a complex, accelerating, chromatic texture over an unexpected Eb pedal. (Ex. 5)
Example 5

The fugue ends abruptly with a stepwise descent from Ab, a tritone away from the figure that began the section. It is now obvious that the fugue is complex and idiosyncratic. A number of references are made to the earlier A section, here and later, creating a sense of connectedness that is unusual in ternary form. The fugue is now more fully developed, and has an elaborate subject and answer pattern, advanced contrapuntal writing, and continuity based on the chromatic structure of the subject.

Rather than a second A section, the first fugue is followed by what we take to be an interlude, creating another unusual event. (Ex. 6) The descending scales, starting on the remote Ab, surprisingly, are reminiscent of the first A section opening, while the chromatic line above it recalls the fugue subject in the immediately preceding B section. The interlude contrasts descending scales from the opening of the first A section with fugal material from the B section, and an unexpected sense of wholeness is once again created.
Here the similarities end, however, for the larger scale continuity of the interlude differs dramatically from what has happened earlier. In the fugue, the chromaticism of the subject is inextricably linked to the harmony, and modulations, rather than being discrete events, are part of an intricate, seamless and even slippery motion. In contrast, the interlude proceeds through exact sequence. The entire first phrase is transposed down a major second and down a major second again. The four measure phrases are boldly and discretely juxtaposed and the remoteness of the first Ab is simply stated rather than fully integrated.

The interlude ends as the cello descends stepwise from Fb to Bb and then continues the slide chromatically down to A. (Ex. 7) As the cello reaches Db, the second violin enters with an enharmonic C#, which becomes the third of the subsequent dominant. A lone Bb, its relationship to the preceding A7 ambiguous, is again unexpectedly heard, instead of going directly to the tonic. As with the earlier Bb, the Bb here descends to A, recalling the earlier fugue, as well as the earliest measures of the A section, and marking the beginning of the
second fugue. By these means, Beethoven once again connects the normally discrete sections.

Example 7

The second fugue subject appears, accompanied by a countersubject made up of three one-measure phrases in sixteenth notes all similar in contour. (Ex. 8) We immediately become aware that the complex and lively nature of the figure contrasts with the earlier countersubject. Still later, the second fugue is presented in inversion, further revealing its greater development (m. 88). As the subject progresses, it omits the chromatic descent that forms the harmonies of the first fugue, instead abruptly shifting to A without any cadence. The lack of preparation is a marked conceit of a more developed fugue, where events occur spontaneously leaving connections to the listener.

Example 8
Accompanying the answer, the countersubject is transposed up a perfect fifth, forming a dialogue with the first violin that continues between the viola and the second violin. (Ex. 9) As the fugue becomes more developed, contrapuntal techniques become more available and we can no longer ignore the freedom that Beethoven now brings to the fugue. A transposition of the subject, beginning with an altered ascending G-C# tritone, then elides with the answer, after only two measures. This break with the first fugue occurs at a point where the answer increases in length to five measures, and clearly sets up the return of the section in D major. Next, C# descends chromatically to B, and the use of *stretto* overlaps the return of the initial statement. The subject is altered and heads more clearly to A minor, with a B natural and a G# not found earlier. Meanwhile, the descending chromatic line from D# to C natural is clearly reminiscent of the chromaticism at the end of the first subject, now in augmentation.

Example 9

For the first time, Beethoven uses inversion, a type of thematic modification, signaling that his methods of manipulating the subject are
expanding. (Ex. 10) For example, a cadence on A minor is reached and with it an inversion of the subject. The answer, reduced now to two measures, enters, and a countersubject emphasizes the A-Bb-B natural line of the preceding inverted subject. The accelerating echoing of the chromatic motion of the subject and use of inversion in both subject and countersubject once again creates a sense of connectedness between phrases, at the same time revealing the thematic development of the fugue elements.

Example 10

The last part of the second fugue is characterized by an imitation of its opening, now occurring within a single measure (m. 96). The figure is varied and instead of an ascending fourth, it is a descending fifth here and an ascending tritone there, and so on. However, we can still recognize the figure as the beginning of a fugue subject. The figures finally come together with an A pedal accompanied by a descending chromatic line, creating complex and chromatically shifting harmonies. After a D pedal on the off beats, there is a return of Bb, reminiscent of the opening, and then a resolution to D major as the
second fugue ends (m. 112). The ending, with its chromatic motion, intricate harmonies, and thematic and contrapuntal development of the subject, again creates a dramatic sense of immediacy.

The second A section returns to the D scale, repeating the beginning of the first A section (m. 112). However, as the section continues, it is different in register and instrumentation, and by no means is simply a repeat. Instead, after reaching approximately the same number of measures as the first A section, an important, form-defining, event occurs. Rather than concluding on the tonic D, the fugue subject slips in, completely unexpectedly, and, without pause, cadential material connects it with the second B section (m. 144). The subject then continues in stretto fashion, with overlapping entrances of varying lengths, and repeated As and Bbs, occurring in a dotted quarter and eighth rhythm and then again in straight eighths. Before we can entirely adjust to this new event, the figure slides, almost imperceptibly, into what appears to be a return to the second A section (m. 153). The persistent blurring of boundaries and cross-referencing of sections make even more evident the idiosyncrasy of the ternary form. Mystery and ambiguity are everywhere.

The second A section continues and a climax on A7, the first forte we encounter, appears (m. 165). A chromatic figure, C to A, is introduced in the cello, and repeated later. This is again reminiscent of the B section chromaticism (m. 172). Then, despite the requirement of ternary form that sections be distinct from sections, we find instances of chromatic motion in the first violin, viola, and the second violin. (Ex. 11)
Example 11

All instruments come together on a C# diminished seventh chord, with a Bb sustained in the cello. The figure is repeated an octave lower, but this time Bb is lowered chromatically to A forming an A7 chord. It then resolves to D, and the movement ends.

It is obvious that ternary form is more accommodating to fugue than sonata form ever can be. The fugue, now, is longer and more fully developed and, without the forward motion so important to sonata form, it is more fluid and introspective. In short, it is more like a proper fugue. We easily find a developed subject and answer pattern, as well as various thematic devices common to fugue, such as inversion, countersubject, pedal point, invertible counterpoint, and *stretto*. The chromatic motion of the fugue subject influences the larger shape of the fugue, dictating its overall harmonic motion, and richly intricate and boldly juxtaposed harmonies abound. No longer constrained by the sharp delineations and contrasts of sonata form, the fugue has an air of seamless continuity that even the most distant harmonies cannot overwhelm, and fugal writing is everywhere. Sections are bounded, but are no longer discrete. Now, sections
refer to other sections, whereas, earlier, only phrases referred to phrases. A feeling of wholeness pervades, creating a strange, new texture.

As the B section opens, a fugue subject appears in a chromatically inflected, descending phrase, recalling the opening measures of the first A section. We realize that the first A section foreshadowed the opening measures in the B section, further complicating matters. Then, the two long fugues in the B section reinforce the feeling of a B section filled with fugal material. Neither fugue is fully developed, since that would seriously weaken, if not completely destroy, the ternary form. The interlude between the fugues provides another opportunity to recall the descending scales of the first A section, as well as material from the opening of the first fugue, thereby increasing the amount of fugal material without increasing the length of the fugues. Similarly, after the second A section is underway, reference is made to the two fugues, as well as to the fugal material in the first A section, contributing, again, to the fugal material, and a sense of connectedness over sections.

Strictly speaking, the movement is neither a fugue, nor a ternary form or, at least, no ordinary ternary form. Although there is a pronounced sense of order, symmetry, and balance, there is also a lack of straightforwardness that is typical of ternary form. Feelings of uncertainty, as alien to ternary form as they were to sonata form, linger on and continue to trouble us. We are constantly kept on edge, and tension, even excitement, is everywhere in the air. Expectations are raised and dampened. We expect to hear one thing, and we
hear another. This is not normally engendered by ternary form, and suggests that, again, we have a strange, unique form.
In 1825, fifteen years after Opus 95, Beethoven completed the Grosse Fuge. Originally the finale of Opus 130, the movement was later severed from the quartet and renamed Opus 133, the Grosse Fuge. The finale, thereafter, became a twenty minute one-movement quartet, breaking with tradition in this, and other ways, and becoming the most unpredictable, raucous and insane quartet ever written.

Since the Grosse Fuge was written a few months earlier than Opus 131, we will discuss it first. Although both quartets address similar issues, they do so in profoundly different ways. The interaction of fugue and contrasting sonata form, in the first movement of Opus 131, results in an erratic, but continuously moving stream marked by few climaxes. In the Grosse Fuge, the result is a series of discrete sections, with the only common thread being the fugue subject. The primary concern is rhythmic contrast and development, strong structural boundaries and contrasting keys. This continuity, strangely, is placed in the context of fugue, a form that has entirely opposing characteristics. The challenge
was enormous, and with sonata form now in its full maturity Beethoven was able to experiment even more freely. The result was two quartets, both concerned with sonata form and fugue, but otherwise diametrically opposite.

As we shall see, the contrasting forms in Opus 131 cohere in perfect union, not only in the opening movement, but also in their projection into the remaining movements, creating, for the first time, a quartet that is an organic whole. In the Grosse Fuge, however, just the opposite happens. The essence of both fugue and sonata form are found, but now their relationship is primarily antagonistic, and they appear together in a fantastically disjointed and abstract manner. Instead of synthesizing, they are constantly undermining one another, and the quartet, as a result, is as abrasive and jarring as it is contradictory and confusing. The homogenous texture and fluidity of harmony that characterizes fugue constantly vies with the dramatic, contrasting nature of sonata form. In a struggle to retain its integrity, each form stands unflinchingly opposed to the other form, thereby creating an endlessly complex succession of events. To many listeners, the Grosse Fuge seems nonsensical at times, but this is only because the violent, contradictory nature of its structural elements were, and always remain, entirely novel. This is discussed by Kerman in *The Beethoven Quartets*, as well as by Chua in *The “Galitzin” Quartets of Beethoven*.

The jarring nature of the quartet is immediately foreshadowed by the stark presentation of the fugal theme in the *Overtura*. An unusual and almost incomprehensible series of versions of the theme is blithely set forth, divergent in key, rhythm and time signature. (Ex 1)
Example 1

The jagged notion of continuity sets the stage for the remainder of the quartet, often characterized by abrupt harmonic and motivic shifts. It is also a model for the obsessive use of texturally, and harmonically, disparate sections.
linked through the use of thematic relationships, as well as for the strong interest in rhythmic drive that is often used almost to the exclusion of contrapuntal development.

The *Fuga* section, following this bewildering introduction, begins as a proper double fugue. (Ex. 2) As it continues, however, it becomes clear that the fugue has an entirely different type of continuity than the *Overtura*, from which it takes its motivic identity, and is also different from any typical fugue. Instead of the harmonic fluidity characteristic of fugue, each of the fugal episodes remains in the key of Bb major. Thus, although there are short excursions to the keys of Eb major (m. 58) and d minor (m. 109), accompanied by new rhythmic transformations, there is essentially no significant harmonic motion for almost 130 measures.

![Example 2](image)

Following the *Fuga* in Bb major is a second section in Gb major, more *fugato* than fugue, marked *meno mosso e moderato* and arrived at in an abrupt and utterly disconnected manner. (Ex. 3) This section, too, stays rooted in its
key, and springs from one of the versions of the fugal subject, with counterpoint, found in the *Overtura*.

Example 3

While it is possible to construe the opening Bb *Fuga*, clearly fugal in its texture and clearly non-fugal in its harmonic stasis, and the Gb *fugato*, also relatively static harmonically, as stable contrasting groups in a sonata form, this denies many aspects of the quartet. On the one hand, the harmonic stability required of the opening *Fuga*, if it is to be understood in the context of sonata form, undermines the very essence of its fugal nature and leads paradoxically to a fugue without characteristic harmonic fluidity. On the other hand, the section’s fugal elaboration undermines the contrasting nature of sonata form, creating a putative first group that is simultaneously both harmonically static and motivically obsessive. Here, unlike the earlier experiments, sonata form and fugue are locked in a contradictory co-existence that does not allow them to merge. Each form constantly undermines the other, and any attempt to unify them is doomed to failure.
After the lengthy Gb fugato, a short, almost playful passage of almost 40 measures, marked allegro molto e con brio, is introduced. (Ex. 4)

Example 4

Although barely developed contrapuntally, the section is pivotal, marking the return of the tonic, Bb major, and presenting material that will reappear later in an emphatic and lengthy manner. In addition, the motivic manipulation combines sonata form development with fugal development. More specifically, while a variant of the initial fugal theme begins the section in a manner suggestive of fugue, the theme itself is broken into smaller fragments, as in a sonata form development. Fugal technique is thus merged with sonata-like elaboration in a section that could be construed as the development section of a sonata form. But here, difficulties similar to the opening Fuga in Bb and the following Gb fugato arise. Elements of sonata form and fugue exist, but in a contradictory manner that does not allow them to merge, let alone synthesize into a coherent whole. Although there are elements that point toward an interpretation of this as a development section, such as the use of thematic fragmentation of the principal subject of the opening Fuga, there are equally
compelling characteristics that defy this notion. Among other things, the section is extremely short, less than a third the length of either of the preceding sections, and, thus, without the usual weight of a development section. Then again, it is harmonically static, like the opening *Fuga*, rather than contrasting, and stays close to home harmonically, unlike a typical development section. The conflicting fugue-like and sonata form-like characteristics of the section, as well as its uncertain role, is a familiar aspect of every section of the quartet, and creates a tense, uncomfortable and complex sense of disjointedness.

As the section comes to an end, an abrupt shift from Bb major to Ab major is introduced, and the fugue theme found in the *Overtura* now appears in the cello in an even more intense, emphatic form. (Ex. 5) Simultaneously, a motif is heard in the second violin that is roughly an inversion of the beginning of the fugal theme.

Example 5

![Example 5](image)

Several measures later, the first violin takes over this inverted motif, while the second violin continues with opening snatches of the fugal theme in its original form. (Ex. 6)
This section, approximately in the middle of the quartet, is the longest. It is motivically disjointed and harmonically far flung, and, again, does not make use of the purely contrapuntal aspects of fugal form. In fact, although versions of the fugal theme from the *Overtura* are used, there is, strangely, virtually no fugal treatment of the theme. About halfway through the section, after a seemingly endless series of *forte* trills and canons, a surprising cadence, suddenly marked *piano*, arrives on Eb. (Ex. 7)

As the section continues, snatches of the opening of the main motif from the *Fuga*, and other melodic elements from earlier in the quartet return without
proper fugal development. Joining these elements are new motifs and a passage of dense *strettos*, which lead, ultimately, to a return to Ab major in a section marked *meno mosso e moderato*. (Ex. 8) This section, which has the same tempo marking as the third section, is filled with a series of emphatic *sf* and *f* markings, dramatically contrasting with the *pianissimo, legato* markings of the earlier section in Gb. It also contains various earlier versions of the fugal theme and counterpoint, but again, as in the *Overture* and afterward, these versions exist discretely, rather than coming together in a unified whole.

Example 8

As we struggle to understand the relationships between these sections, several possibilities come to mind. The Bb dance of the fourth section, although completely unfugue-like in character, and quite short, by virtue of its key may represent the return of the opening *Fuga* in a sonata rondo form. Or, perhaps the next Ab major section, long and harmonically far flung, is a development section. Or, perhaps the surprising Eb modulation in the middle of this section,
with the return of motifs from the Bb Fuga, is even a “false” recapitulation. Then again, through a different lens, these sections may be understood as single connected movements within a larger, multi-movement, form, each of which is based on a transformation of themes first introduced in the Overtura.

Not unexpectedly, these possibilities present various complications and contradictions. Regarding the Grosse Fuge as a series of discrete thematically connected movements, while tempting, fails to reflect the strange, even bizarre, mix of fugue and sonata form found everywhere in the quartet, with neither form ever completely resolved. For example, the section following the Eb cadence, discussed above, never makes it back to the tonic, Bb major, as it would in sonata form. Instead, it circles back to the key of the putative development, Ab major. In addition, the section does not retain the sort of motivic integrity typical of a recapitulation; instead, the fugal elements are limited to three-note fragments, and new motifs and a passage of dense strettos lead, ultimately, to a return of a dramatic version of the meno mosso e moderato section, now in Ab major. This section, although marking a return to the key of the development, also strongly refers back to the third section, in Gb major. Again, although it contains various earlier versions of the fugal theme and counterpoint, these are not brought together in any cohesive manner. Instead, they continue with a sense of coexistence rather than intermingling that springs from the Overtura and continues forward. As we have seen, circling back to Ab major further delays the return of the tonic, Bb major, and reinforces the sense of vastness that the key area has assumed. Almost three hundred and fifty measures have been
devoted to Ab major, while less than half that has been devoted to sections in Bb major, the tonic. At the same time, however, the much shorter sections in Bb tend to be rigidly, even obsessively, in that key, while the more sprawling Ab sections are fantastically free ranging.

At this point, we begin to realize that we are no closer to understanding the relationship between the sections than we were at the beginning, and perhaps we never will be. It suddenly occurs to us that it is this --- the mystery, the unknowability of the quartet --- that makes it so profoundly unique. In other words, the relationship between the sections is ambiguous and contradictory, and always will be. In order to better understand the Grosse Fuga, therefore, we must celebrate these complexities and contradictions, rather than forcing cohesion upon it.

Following the lengthy section in Ab, the quartet returns to the tonic, Bb major, and the dance-like fourth section. (Ex. 9)
Significantly, the return of the opening group is not coordinated with the return to the tonic. In fact, there is no return of the *Fuga* section, only an abbreviated recapitulation consisting of short references to the *Overtura* and the fugal theme. (Ex. 10)

Example 10

These starkly juxtaposed, widely differing, sections bring to mind the *Overtura*, but the sections are now in retrograde order. While the opening felt profoundly disjointed, even incomprehensible, here there is an important difference, namely, that the sections are all in the tonic key of Bb major. The version of the fugal theme that opened the quartet is now last in order, and the most fully developed, leading the quartet, at the end, to a rousing climax.
Nevertheless, the feeling is not simply a matter of triumph of order over chaos, but something more complex. As different as they are, the themes have come together, and, in some mysterious way, coalesced. At the same time, they remain starkly separated, and unable to form a cohesive, unified whole. Each is forever isolated.

Although we find no evidence of an exposition, development, recapitulation, or coda, the essence of sonata form remains in the use of textural contrast and harmonically stable juxtaposed groups. At the same time, elements of fugue, however idiosyncratic, are everywhere, most notably in the long opening section marked, in its entirety, *Fuga*. Neither fugue nor sonata form dominate, and, try as we may, the quartet can only be understood through the lens of both. Rather than the more usual flat, contemplative fugue, we now have, oddly, an edgy, dramatic fugue, and rather than an edgy, dramatic sonata form, we now have, equally oddly, a flat, contemplative sonata form. In short, the Grosse Fuge is a strange, even bizarre, mixture of both. Each is determined not to cohere, or even intermingle, and is so contradictory that neither adequately describes the conflicted, anguished sounds that we hear.

Only a mind free of preconceived ideas can properly understand the quartet. When it was written, the traditional notion of form was still relevant, and, rather than abandoning the forms, Beethoven used them in a new way, allowing their particularly unusual, and intricate interactions, and constant vying for ascendancy, to give the quartet its distinctively harsh, and often confusing, character. Thus, Beethoven created a unique form, reveling in internal
contradictions. In order to make sense of the form, we must celebrate its relentlessly jarring and discordant manner, rather than criticize its lack of synthesis. As Stravinsky remarked, it is this that makes the quartet forever contemporary.
Three months later, Beethoven completed Opus 131, the last of the five experiments. Other than the Grosse Fuge, the fugue is the longest, lasting approximately ten minutes. Again, a sonata form is embedded in a fugue, and, again, only in spirit. Here, too, there is no evidence of an exposition, development, recapitulation, or coda, yet the same feeling remains, that the sonata form is everywhere --- in the boundaries between sections, contrasting keys and rhythms, and heightened sense of drama. At the same time, these characteristics are, again, compromised, and the fugue, freed at last from its constraints, is now more developed, contributing a sense of fluidity, stasis and ambiguity to the movement.

The fugue appears only in the first movement. From this strategic position, however, the fugue profoundly influences the remaining movements in the quartet. Not only are keys repeated, but fugal elements are projected forward, introducing melodic motifs, types of continuity, and a sense of scale that integrates the quartet in an entirely new way. Blurred boundaries and
nonexistent pauses between movements lend a smooth, unruffled feeling, recalling the first movement fugue. This notion is discussed at length in Kerman’s *The Beethoven Quartets*.

Our discussion begins at the center of the first movement. It is here, in the two part canons in A (m. 66) and D (m. 74), that the seminal event of the movement occurs. (Ex. 1) The canons are stately and imperturbable and entirely unique in terms of mood, texture, and harmony, and may be best described as an oasis of calm surrounded by hectic and complex episodes. This passage, as with much of the movement, is characteristic of the contrapuntal writing found in fugues (as episodes), and as the more typical classical textures found in sonatas (as imitative passages). As such, it represents an inextricable intertwining of the two forms, from individual phrases to larger textural shifts.

Example 1

In the language of fugue, the passage would normally be understood as motivically bound, filled with ambiguity and completely static. Even the return to
the tonic, c# minor (m. 83), that follows, may be seen as without drama, preceded, as it is, by a harmonically flat slide from A to G#7 (m. 81).

Here and elsewhere in the movement, harmonies are often simply juxtaposed, rather than using modulatory development to lead one section to the next. However, if the presence of a vestigial sonata form is hypothesized, an entirely different interpretation becomes possible. To begin with, the canons may be seen as inexorably and dramatically approached, in a most unfugal fashion, as far back as the modulation to Eb minor in m. 45. (Ex. 2) Here, the rising sequences, though ambiguous in their harmonic destination, create an air of tension and expectation increased by the motivic and harmonic acceleration that follows, starting in m. 50.

Example 2

Paradoxically, the passage is also quintessentially fugal. Throughout, the fugue motifs are connected, disconnected, sequenced and inverted. This is done simultaneously, one above or one below the other, and in far-reaching keys. In this example, the first motif of the fugue subject in the second violin is
joined above by the second motif in the first violin. It is then followed by the first motif in the viola accompanied below by the second motif in the cello. Moreover, the first motif is in the major mode, and is a type of thematic variation, demonstrating that fugue and sonata form may exist together and may even enhance one another. In this case, the forward motion, which begins with the Eb minor section, becomes not just a series of sequences, but, through the use of fugal writing, is rooted to the larger context through simultaneous multiple references to the opening subject.

Approaching the canons, eighth notes are introduced in the fugue for the first time in m. 54, where a cadence of sorts is reached. Rather than the introduction of a new rhythmic value defining a discrete episode, the fugue has become a mass of twisting and tumbling fragments, pushing forward through far flung harmonies at an ever increasing rate. By m. 57, sequences, comprised of ever diminishing fragments of the fugal subject, again dramatically push the motion forward in decreasing increments towards an unclear harmonic, rhythmic, and melodic destination. (Ex. 3)
Here we find elements of both fugue and sonata form, with the lines between them blurry. The endless sequences, the seemingly ambiguous structural boundaries, and the sense of stasis caused by the lack of an overall goal, are all characteristic of fugue. On the other hand, the increasing rhythmic and harmonic motion, the sense of stability leading to tension and climax, and the presence of boundaries, however weak, are distinctly reminiscent of sonata form.

Once the eighth notes have stopped in m. 63, an A in the cello, the longest sustained note so far, begins. (Ex. 4) Above this A, a high E in the first violin begins the first motif of the fugue in its original rhythmic value. It is now in the major mode, and set off by half a measure. Meanwhile, starting with the upbeat to beat four, the viola has the same motif in the relative minor, f#, in double diminution. Then, in a dotted quarter and eighth rhythm, the second violin imitates the viola’s E#-F#-D motion. The first motive is found in three layers of rhythmic value, and, simultaneously, in both major and minor keys, creating, in true fugal fashion, a counterpoint consisting entirely of the first motive.

Example 4
This passage sets up the canons in a unique way. Instead of racing pell mell into the climax, or, more precisely, the anticlimax, of the movement, Beethoven takes a step back, composing a purely fugal passage much like the earlier Eb minor section. The passage dramatically slows the rhythmic motion which has long been building, and finally brings the fugue subject back to its original rhythmic value. The canons are thus set off initially, in mm. 63-64, by a fugal texture that is completely the opposite of their simple, uncomplicated nature. Ironically, it is a remnant of this texture, the repetition of the latter half of the subject, which turns into the start of the canons, thus connecting the two sections.

The canons are a central event and are followed by a return to the tonic in m. 83. This is marked by several measures of tonic/dominant harmonies and a reappearance of a subject fragment. The purpose of the earlier hurried sequences and pell mell phrases now becomes clear, pushing, as they do, inexorably forward to the canons. The canons, although calm and stately, are, at the same time, dynamic, tense, climactic, and even breathtaking. Finding these characteristics in the context of suspended motion, obsessively familiar motivic material, and a predictable form is particularly impressive. In the language of pure fugue, the canons now form an idiosyncratic episode that is essentially static, structurally ambiguous, and with fluid boundaries. But strictly speaking, this is not true. Only against the backdrop of a vestigial sonata form, expressed in textural boundaries, contrasting keys and rhythms, and a powerful dramatic sense, can we understand the canons in their fugal context.
In contrast to the canons, there are sections that are purely fugal and form a unique counterpoint with other sections that contain elements of sonata form. (Ex. 5) The movement begins with such a fugal section and has an air of ambiguity that is completely unlike a sonata form opening. An opening in sonata form is characterized by a quick establishment of key, clear boundaries and harmonic stability. One of the ways that Beethoven accomplishes a sense of ambiguity is by having the fugal subject in the tonic and the answer in the subdominant, rather than the more usual dominant. The subdominant answer requires the alteration of three of the seven diatonic pitches of the tonic, including the leading tone, and creates a series of cross-relationships that undermine the tonic. In the example, the E#-F# ascent in the answer raises the third of the tonic, and is boldly juxtaposed with the E natural-F# ascent in the same register in the subject. In a similar way, the B natural accompanying the answer forms a relationship with the B# leading tone in the subject, thereby pointing away from C# as the tonic. The D natural of the answer, marked sf, is both the lowered sixth of f# minor and the Neapolitan of c# minor. Its appearance in this ambiguous context foreshadows the later events.

Example 5
This also demonstrates Beethoven’s use of dangling, unresolved lines, a technique that pushes the fugue forward in an effort to resolve them. For example, the first violin, while accompanying the answer, leaps up an octave to E#, leaving the lower pitch unresolved and introducing the E#-F# motif in a new upper register.

The end of the movement is essentially fugal in nature, exploiting the ambiguity between tonic and subdominant, and, unlike a sonata form, ultimately leaving the ambiguity unresolved. (Ex. 6) Here, and throughout the movement, the use of a picardy third, along with an emphasis on the Neapolitan, creates a tonic major that is in danger of sounding like a dominant. The balance between C# as the tonic major and the dominant of the subdominant is precarious. This is not unusual in codas of sonata form first movements, where the subdominant pull is preparatory, giving way to the inevitable tonic/dominant resolution. Instead, the role of the tonic remains ambiguous, leaving the end of the movement with a curiously unsettled feeling. This is completely unlike the definitive, often rousing conclusion of a sonata form movement.

Example 6
Loosely speaking, the movement begins and ends with a sense of stasis and ambiguity. The climactic event is found in the center, which, as we have seen, is made up of contrasting forms, a fugue and a more abstract sonata form counterpart. Although there are significant sections that are essentially fugal --- for example, the opening and end of the movement --- it is the relationship between contrasting and non-contrasting forms, that makes the movement so powerful, so strange and exciting, and explains the fugue’s peculiarly conflicted nature --- static yet dynamic, fluid yet controlled, sad yet restless.

The movement clearly is idiosyncratic. Although first movements are usually fast, here the movement is slow. Again, although first movements are usually in sonata form, here the movement is clearly not, or at least not in the usual sense. Interestingly, a review of the two preceding Beethoven quartets, Opus 127 and Opus 130, reveals first movements that are also unusual, and contain a loosening of sonata form. This observation was also made by Kerman, in *The Beethoven Quartets*. We may, therefore, consider Opus 131 as yet another step in a progression of increasingly nonconformist Beethoven first movements, with one important difference. In the two earlier quartets, a lessening of dramatic contrast and modulatory development, as well as a flattening of closely juxtaposed, yet distant key relationships, indicated a more fugue-like sonata form. In Opus 131, however, the sonata form itself has given way to the fugue, and the fugue assumes sonata form characteristics. In every sonata form, the issue of contrast is central, but, in Opus 127, it is the lack of contrast that predominates. The first and second groups, while in disparate
keys, connect seamlessly, discouraging any sense of contrast. At the same time, the return of the opening *maestoso*, in three different keys, is also flat, although in a different way. Rather than providing a sense of modulation, the transpositions feel immovable, and seem arbitrarily inserted instead of forming a purposeful progression. The recapitulation is perhaps the most extreme example of the lack of contrast. (Ex. 7)

Example 7

This mild mannered statement clearly differs from the preceding material, slipping in so inconspicuously as to be almost a non event. The hierarchies and divisions characteristic of sonata form no longer seem relevant, and the sonata form is advanced in ways that are distinctly fugue-like. The pervasive lack of contrast, blurring of structural boundaries, and direct transposition of themes, all hallmarks of fugue, strain the fundamental nature of sonata form.

In the first movement of Opus 130 the contrast between the first and second group in the exposition is especially evident. The second group is in the
distant key of bVI, Gb major, and is approached by a bridge made up of a simple two measure ascending octave chromatic scale that is startlingly in its bareness and deeply odd despite its references to the chromaticism of the opening of the movement. (Ex. 8) The scale then proceeds without interruption to Db, the dominant of the new key, reaching a figure that gingerly leads to the tonic of the second group.

Example 8

The nature of the modulation, if it can be called that, changes the traditional relationship between the first and second group, thereby altering one of the traditional hallmarks of sonata form. Rather than providing a contrast to the first group, the approach to the harmonically distant Gb group abandons traditional modulation, and, ultimately, integration, and instead presents a harmonically flat, sequenced and non-integrated approach that leaves the group static and isolated. The start of the second group creates a simple juxtaposition with the first group, rather than a true contrast fortified by harmonic preparation and resolution. The process is positively fugal, and is also found in other examples.
Undoubtedly, Beethoven was influenced by fugal models in string quartets by other composers. Among the most famous, and surely known to him, were the fugal finales in three of Haydn’s Opus 20 quartets. The finale in Opus 20 No 6, like the others, is pure fugue, fluid, yet irregular, with a double subject and many fugal techniques such as canon, invertible counterpoint, and pedal point, ending in a rovescio, or inversion. (Ex. 9)

The fugue contains no break in continuity or sense of dramatic arrival; however, it is not uninteresting, but rather full of surprises and harmonic and melodic gems. Neither is it dramatic, and there is no modulatory development or strongly articulated boundaries. In general, the Haydn fugues are strict. They are pure fugues, and contain virtually nothing but fugal elements, including a seamless, almost flat continuity, as well as ambiguous, irregular phrasing and boundaries. Nevertheless, they are far from straightforward. While finales, in the Classical tradition, are usually simple, regular and even rigid in their phrasing, here they are looser, less square, and more fluid.
It may seem odd to regard the fugues as precursors to Opus 131, since they were left pure, and virtually intact, while, in Opus 131, fugue and sonata form are increasingly entwined. Moreover, while Haydn adapted the fugue to a finale, often characterized by a squareness and clarity of rhythm and phrasing, Beethoven adapted it to a first movement sonata form, an entirely different harmonic and formal context. However, in a larger sense, both fugues were alike, in that they were both used as counterpoint to a traditional form, in one case a simple, even rigid, finale, and in the other a dramatic sonata form. In Haydn, the interaction of fugue and finale resulted in a unique, off-kilter interplay of forms, while, in Beethoven, the interaction of fugue and sonata form resulted in their being entirely entwined, and creating a new, idiosyncratic form, a mixture of the two original forms. Both were equally exciting.

Opus 131 was profoundly influenced by the Grosse Fuge as well. Completed only three months apart, they were written at the height of Beethoven’s maturity, and benefited from the experience of the three earlier experiments. In both quartets, a sonata form was injected into a fugue, rather than the other way around, and the result was, once again, entirely new forms. However, the two new forms, and the roles they played in their respective quartets, were radically different, even antithetical. This was inevitable, since the experiment, in Opus 131, was in the first movement, while, in Opus 130, it was in the last movement, later the Grosse Fuge. In the Grosse Fuge, the interest was mainly in a lack of cohesion between fugue and sonata form. In Opus 131, however, the goal was just the opposite. From its strategic position in the first
movement, the fugue was able to influence the quartet in a way that the Grosse Fuge, as a last movement, could not. Rather than being discordant, fugue and sonata form were now in perfect union. Moreover, fugal elements from the first movement were projected forward into the remaining movements, initiating melodic motifs, types of continuity, keys, and an overall sense of scale that tied the quartet together in an entirely new way. As a result, the movements were less like usual movements, and more like sections in a fugue. Boundaries were blurred, and ends connected to beginnings, just as phrases and sections had been connected in the Grosse Fuge. Many of the keys, such as c# minor, D major, E major, A major, and G# major, were explored in the remaining movements. The repetition of keys, the irregular length and unusual number of movements, the short pauses and blurred boundaries between movements, the canons, the general feeling of fluidity, the smooth, unruffled surface, and the sporadic feeling of inner turmoil, were echoed over and over in the remaining movements. In short, Opus 131 is like a fugue ---- until the last movement, when the sonata form emerges from the shackles of the fugue, full blown, with an opening of great intensity and harmonic certainty, at last resolving the issue of the tonic that had remained since the subdominant answer of the fugue in the opening. The unyielding, defiant mood, at the end, presents a perfect counterpart to the sad, brooding fugue at the beginning, and brings the quartet to an unexpected, rousing climax. The quartet is incredibly complex, and its strategy utterly amazing. Among string quartets, it forever remains the Holy Grail.
Afterword

What have we accomplished? Most importantly, we discovered that a fugue is interacting with a contrasting form, not only in Opus 59 No 3, the Grosse Fuge and Opus 131, but also in Opus 18 No. 4 and Opus 95. This meant that such an interaction appeared in each one of Beethoven’s early, middle, and late middle periods, and two in his late period. It was obvious that it was a life long interest, and something that Beethoven kept coming back to again and again. As in Mozart and Haydn, the fugues were not pure fugue, but were interacting with a contrasting form. Instead of one form being subsumed in the other, however, five new, unique forms emerged that were a strange mixture of the two original forms. The new forms were progressively more idiosyncratic, even weird, and they had never before been heard. We concluded that each of the five quartets was an experiment, whose purpose was, simply, the creation of new, unique musical forms. They began in 1800, with Opus 18 No 4, continued with Opus 59 No 3 and Opus 95, and ended with the Grosse Fuge and Opus 131, in 1825, two years before Beethoven’s death. Each experiment, clearly, was a step in a larger, ongoing experiment. In each succeeding experiment, the two forms were progressively more entwined, and, in the Grosse Fuge and Opus 131, the new forms that emerged were a perfect amalgam of fugue and sonata form. At this point, the experiment went in an entirely new direction. Rather than the fugue being injected into a sonata form, as in the earlier quartets, the sonata
form was injected into a fugue. The formal constraints of sonata form were abandoned, and only the essence of sonata form hovered over the fugue. Now, the sonata form was more like a fugue, and the fugue was more like a sonata form. In Opus 131, moreover, Beethoven expanded the experiment, and the entire quartet was, at last, involved. For the first time, the string quartet was an organic whole, and a harbinger of a new Romantic era.

Did the experiment end with Opus 131? Had Beethoven done all there was to do, or all that he wanted to do, with the interaction of fugues and contrasting forms in a string quartet? Was Opus 131 the last in a long, twenty-five year experiment with fugues and contrasting forms, or had Beethoven lived longer, would it simply have taken a new direction? Unfortunately, we will never know the answer.
Bibliography


