Beethoven’s *Grosse Fuge*:
An Opera Without Words

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Abstract

Beethoven’s *Grosse Fuge*, originally conceived as the last movement of his *String Quartet in B-flat Major* (Op. 130) but ultimately published separately (as Op. 133), is a massive and complex piece of music. Spanning over 740 measures and lasting over fifteen minutes, the structure of the *Grosse Fuge* has been the subject of considerable analytical disagreement. Some theorists have chosen to understand this structure in terms of its connections to traditional single-movement forms (such as sonata-allegro and rondo), while others prefer to view the piece as several movements combined into one. But few, if any, have pointed out the how closely the form of the piece resembles that of an opera. This resemblance can be elucidated through an examination of Beethoven’s experience in the operatic genre and careful observation of the dramatic structure of the *Grosse Fuge*. 

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Beethoven’s *Grosse Fuge*, originally conceived as the last movement of his *String Quartet in B-flat Major* (Op. 130) but ultimately published separately (as Op. 133), is a massive and complex piece of music. Spanning over 740 measures and lasting over fifteen minutes, the structure of the *Grosse Fuge* has been the subject of considerable analytical disagreement. Some theorists have chosen to understand this structure in terms of its connections to traditional single-movement forms (such as sonata-allegro and rondo), while others prefer to view the piece as several movements combined into one. But few, if any, have pointed out the how closely the form of the piece resembles that of an opera. In this paper, I will attempt to present a comprehensive approach to the formal structure of the *Grosse Fuge*. In the course of this approach, I will take stock of the existing analyses of others, examine Beethoven’s relationship with the operatic medium, shed light on clues in the piece that support an operatic interpretation of its form, and offer my own views regarding the nature of this dramatic structure.

Variety Among Existing Analyses

The structure of the *Grosse Fuge* has been analyzed according to a number of models, the most common of which seems to be that of sonata-allegro form. As Daniel K. L. Chua points out, the strongest evidence in support of this interpretation is the key structure of the three main sections. As Figure 1 illustrates, the exposition (mm. 31-272) begins in the home key of Bb major and moves to the chromatic submediant. The development (mm. 273-532) is highly discursive and passes through both closely and distantly related key areas before culminating in the sort of dominant prolongation that would characterize a traditional retransition. And the recapitulation (beginning in m. 533) never substantially departs from the home key.
But this sonata interpretation is fundamentally flawed because the exposition ends in the home key, and such a closed exposition is a flagrant violation of the traditional sonata form. In addition, Chua notes that the sonata interpretation is incomplete because the first fugue (starting in m. 31) does not recur literally in the recapitulation.¹

In light of the closed exposition and the varied recurrence of the opening material, one might well be tempted to label the form of the piece a rondo. And, as Figure 2 shows, the proportionality of the three main sections (242, 260, and 209 mm., respectively) and the content and arrangement of their sub-sections (indicated by the capital letters in brackets) would seem to favor the tripartite nature of a rondo over the binary-blooded sonata scheme.

Joseph Braunstein uses the term rondo in his analysis of the piece, but not in quite the same way. To begin with, Braunstein divides the piece (which he considers a “quartet-within-a-

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quartet” 2) into three “movements” based on tonal regions and meter signatures. The resulting sections consist of 158, 73, and 510 measures, respectively. He then further breaks down the last of these sections according to tonal regions (and, presumably, thematic treatment as well) and arrives at the formal design reproduced in Table 1. Braunstein notes that this A-B-A-B-A-C-A design is clearly a rondo structure (although he hedges his bet by including sonata-form labels).

Table 1: Braunstein’s rondo breakdown of the last section of the Grosse Fuge

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exposition</th>
<th>B-flat non-fugal</th>
<th>meas. 232-272</th>
<th>A</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Development</td>
<td>A-flat</td>
<td>&quot; 273-413</td>
<td>B</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>E-flat</td>
<td>&quot; 414-442</td>
<td>AB</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A-flat</td>
<td>&quot; 453-492</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meno Mosso</td>
<td>A-flat</td>
<td>&quot; 493-510</td>
<td>C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bridge</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot; 511-532</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recapitulation</td>
<td>B-flat</td>
<td>&quot; 533-662</td>
<td>A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coda</td>
<td></td>
<td>&quot; 663-741</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sydney Grew suggests a similarly end-heavy interpretation, although none of his sections is as large as Braunstein’s rondo. Grew discounts mm. 159-272 (Braunstein’s second “movement,” as well as the subsequent segment corresponding to the end of Chua’s sonata exposition) as a pair of transitional divertissements. He then describes the relationship between the remaining sections (mm.1-158, 273-532, and 533-741) as A-B-Coda.3

While Braunstein’s lopsided proportions and Grew’s selective exclusion of material make their respective conclusions somewhat difficult to accept, the multi-movement structure that each proposes would seem to be a step in the right direction. John Daverio takes this concept one step

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farther in his analysis of the *Grosse Fuge*, which likens the piece to a four-movement symphony, in which the third and fourth movements are elided.\(^4\) Beethoven had employed this sort of elision in the past with great success (for instance, in the *Fifth Symphony*), so it is entirely plausible here. Figure 3 illustrates Daverio’s points of demarcation, which are based on both tonal and metrical characteristics.

Figure 3: *Grosse Fuge* – symphony model, derived in part from Daverio’s discussion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Intro</th>
<th>I. Allegro</th>
<th>II. Slow</th>
<th>III. Scherzo + Finale</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>mm.</td>
<td>1-30</td>
<td>31-158</td>
<td>159-232</td>
<td>233-272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>273-492</td>
<td>493-532</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>533-657</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keys</td>
<td>B(\upuparrows)</td>
<td>Bb/D#m/Cm/Bb</td>
<td>G#b/D#/Gb</td>
<td>Ab/Bb#m/Fm/Eb#m/Ab</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meter</td>
<td>(\frac{6}{8})</td>
<td>(\frac{4}{4})</td>
<td>(\frac{2}{4})</td>
<td>(\frac{6}{8})</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Still another perspective of the *Grosse Fuge* defines the structure of the piece in terms of themes with variations (where each theme takes the form of a fugue). Joseph de Marliave’s analysis involves such an approach and yields a total of six sections: an introduction, two fugues (each with its own brief set of variations), a development passage, and a new exposition-conclusion progression.\(^5\) This formal design, which is depicted in Figure 4, strongly parallels the rondo outline that I presented earlier. But the viability of the “fugue & variation” design is undermined by the fact that the last three sections contain neither a complete fugue nor a variation on either of the earlier fugues. It might, therefore, make more sense to consider this another sort of multi-movement form in which sections 2 and 3 adhere to the fugue & variation model, section 4 is a fantasia, and sections 5 and 6 comprise a binary form.

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While they reveal an interesting variety of opinions, these analyses do little or nothing to justify an operatic interpretation of the *Grosse Fuge*. In order to establish a basis for such an interpretation, one must understand Beethoven’s relationship with the operatic medium.

Beethoven’s operatic influences were both geographically and stylistically diverse, and chief among them was Mozart’s *Die Zauberflöte*, which not only shaped Beethoven’s ensemble writing, but also influenced his conception of form. Specifically, the arias and ensembles in Mozart’s *Singspiel* are tonally self-contained and linked together with spoken dialogue, and Beethoven employed this same practice in his sole attempt at opera, *Fidelio*.

Another notable operatic influence on Beethoven was Luigi Cherubini, an Italian-born composer who was particularly successful in the French genre of *opéra comique*. According to Michael Tusa, Beethoven was particularly interested in Cherubini’s *Les Deux Journées* and the French tradition of *mélodrame* (characterized by spoken dialogue with orchestral underscoring). This affinity reveals a desire on Beethoven’s part to maintain musical control over the dramatic motion of the piece (which was not possible with the unaccompanied dialogue of the *Singspiel*). But since *Fidelio* followed closely on the heels of Cherubini’s opera, the evidence of the latter’s

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influence is perhaps more readily apparent in Beethoven’s subsequent dramatic music. For example, his *Egmont Overture* contains a slow 8-measure section (mm. 279-286) that serves as connective tissue between the middle section (in F minor and triple meter) and the final *Allegro con brio* (in F major and duple meter). In the *Grosse Fuge*, mm. 658–662 appear to function in much the same way.

It is also worth noting that Beethoven was influenced by the works of Rossini, who enjoyed great popularity during the latter half of Beethoven’s life. Alex Ross points out a distinct connection between the operatic material Beethoven heard and the instrumental material he wrote:

In his later instrumental works, Beethoven sometimes played with vocal stylings, with arialike [sic] solos and recitativelike [sic] interludes. In the eighteen-twenties, the operas of Rossini were the rage, and Beethoven was both irritated and fascinated by the phenomenon. With the pseudo-operatic gestures of his late works, he seems to be paying half-ironic, half-sincere tribute to the popular music of his day. Beethoven and Rossini met in 1822, and, if Rossini’s report is to be believed, the old man expressed his delight with “The Barber of Seville,” while also making condescending remarks about Italians.⁷

In Beethoven’s eyes, Rossini’s *Barber of Seville* must have embodied a combination of the virtues found in the works of Mozart and Cherubini. On the one hand, Rossini’s ensemble writing was second to none (especially in finales, where Rossini would increase the texture and the resulting momentum by adding one character after the next — a practice not altogether unlike the exposition of a fugue), and Rossini’s individual sections were frequently connected (i.e., arias and ensembles with different meters and tempi are often elided).

Intriguingly, Beethoven was experimenting with such structural connectivity in *An die ferne Geliebte* during 1816, the same year that Rossini’s *Barber* was premiered. The former, which has become known as the first true “song cycle,” consists of six poems set in a highly discursive form: each new section grows out of the one before and brings about new motives,

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meters, and tempi (the only recurrence of musical material occurs in the final stanza of the last song, which returns to the opening key and incorporates the thematic material from the opening stanza, as well as a small portion of the text). An interesting parallel between *An die ferne Geliebte* and the *Grosse Fuge* lies in the two works’ closed “expositions” (a characteristic that, as noted above, is very much at odds with the sonata paradigm). These self-contained early subsections (mm. 31-158 and 159-232 in the *Grosse Fuge*, and songs 1 and 2 in *An die ferne Geliebte*) are illustrated in Figure 5 and suggest a series of dramatic episodes that run into one another, much like the subsections of Rossini’s opera. The fact that these self-contained episodes occur early in each work allows the more through-composed later part to build more tension (along the lines of a sentence structure, but on a much larger scale).

Figure 5: Closed Sections Early in *An die ferne Geliebte* and the *Grosse Fuge*

![Figure 5: Closed Sections Early in An die ferne Geliebte and the Grosse Fuge](image)

Beethoven’s penchant for connecting movements is also evident in his other late works and has resulted in notoriously ambiguous forms. For example, the Choral Finale of the *Ninth Symphony* is often labeled a symphony-within-a-symphony. But its sectional breakdown, which I have attempted to summarize in Table 2, suggests that the movement might be better labeled an oratorio-within-a-symphony, if not an opera-within-a-symphony. Especially notable is
Beethoven’s use of the *recitativo* style in the fifth section. The use of such a distinctly operatic technique suggests that Beethoven placed a higher value on the effective communication of emotional content than he did on the formal traditions of the symphonic genre.

Table 2: A breakdown of the Choral Finale of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>mm.</th>
<th>Indication</th>
<th>Contents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1-29</td>
<td>Presto</td>
<td>Orchestra Only</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-47</td>
<td>Allegro ma non troppo</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>48-76</td>
<td>Vivace / Adagio cantabile</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>77-207</td>
<td>Allegro assai</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>208-236</td>
<td>Presto / Recitativo</td>
<td>Baritone Recit.(?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>237-330</td>
<td>Allegro assai</td>
<td>SATB Soli &amp; Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>331-594</td>
<td>Alla Marcia (Allegro assai vivace)</td>
<td>Tenor Solo &amp; Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>595-626</td>
<td>Andante Maestoso</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>627-654</td>
<td>Adagio ma non troppo, ma divoto</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>655-762</td>
<td>Allegro energico, sempre ben marcato</td>
<td>&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>763-850</td>
<td>Allegro ma non tanto</td>
<td>SATB Soli &amp; Chorus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>851-940</td>
<td>Prestissimo</td>
<td>Chorus</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

John Burk points to the form of the C-sharp minor quartet (Op. 131) as an even more meaningful example of Beethoven’s dramatic proclivity. The piece, which was written immediately after the B-flat major quartet and *Grosse Fuge* and uses similar thematic material, consists of seven connected movements, of which the third (11 mm. long) and sixth (28 mm. long) are little more than written-out transitions. Burk suggests that these short, transitional movements are evidence that Beethoven was no longer limiting his music to conventional forms; rather, he had begun linking these forms together to form a continuous narrative, even in works with no overtly dramatic associations.  

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Clues That Support an Operatic Interpretation

While these observations reveal a predisposition on Beethoven’s part toward forms influenced by dramatic content, they offer little direct insight into the Grosse Fuge. For this we must examine the Grosse Fuge itself (and the quartet of which it was originally a part). To begin with, I suggest that a number of clues can be gleaned from the text that appears in the score. For instance, the movement of the quartet that precedes the Grosse Fuge is labeled Cavatina — a term that refers to a simple aria (usually in a 19th-century opera). But this is the only movement that bears such an operatic label; another inner movement is labeled Alla danza tedesca (which refers to a typical movement of a German Baroque dance suite). While the Danza Tedesca is clearly not related to opera, Warren Kirkendale points out that Beethoven’s use of Baroque tradition reveals a fundamentally dramatic aspect of the piece. Specifically, according to the Baroque conception of thematic organization, all music is derived from a finite set of theme-types. Kirkendale identifies the main theme of the Grosse Fuge as a major-key variant of the Hymnentyp, which, in vocal music, is “inseparable from words expressing sorrow, affliction, and grief.” Figure 6 illustrates the intervallic correlation between the main theme of the Grosse Fuge and the two common forms of the Hymnentyp described by Kirkendale.

Operatic clues can also be found in Beethoven’s stylistic expressions. For example, beklemmt (anguished) and ermettet (exhausted) are far from typical instrumental instructions. Rather, Beethoven is asking the players to take on human emotional states with their playing.

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Another interesting text reference is the term *Overtura* at the start of the *Grosse Fuge*.

Braunstein suggests that this designation applies to the whole piece,\textsuperscript{10} but the thematic summary presented in the first 30 measures would seem to imply that the term is more likely an

\textsuperscript{10} Braunstein, 309.
introductory one, on the same organizational level as the *Fuga* that occurs after the fermata in m. 30. Daverio seems to agree, playing up the likelihood of a direct allusion to the operatic overture tradition.\(^{11}\)

One other critical bit of text in the score is the description in the subtitle, *tantôt libre, tantôt recherché* (literally translated “sometimes free, sometimes sought out”). On the one hand, this description could be interpreted as a summary of the contrapuntal practices that Beethoven employs (i.e., sometimes in free imitation, sometimes in strict fugue). To this end, Kirkendale notes that one of Beethoven’s goals in writing the *Grosse Fuge* was to contrapuntally outdo his teacher, Albrechtsberger.\(^{12}\) On the other hand, the phrase *tantôt libre, tantôt recherché* could also be interpreted as a dramatic description. For instance, Daniel Gregory Mason suggests that the indication refers to two styles of playing, which respectively embody the opposing characters of freedom and necessity.\(^{13}\) These textual tidbits reveal that the operatic model was not merely in

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\(^{11}\) Daverio, 163.

\(^{12}\) Kirkendale, 17-18. The author goes on to suggest that the contrapuntal significance of the *Grosse Fuge* is underscored by Beethoven's decision to dedicate it to Archduke Rudolph, his own counterpoint student.

the back of Beethoven’s mind as he wrote the *Grosse Fuge*; rather, it played an active and influential role in the work’s construction.

*An Account of the Dramatic Structure*

I believe that the binary design suggested by this last textual reference is the key to understanding the dramatic structure of the *Grosse Fuge*. This dramatic structure is characterized by two opposing agents, but, unlike in the approach taken by Fred Maus to understand the opening of Beethoven’s Op. 95 quartet,\(^{14}\) the dramatic agency here cannot be attributed to the individual instruments because the fugue requires that they all play the same thematic material. Instead, I believe that the dramatic structure of the *Grosse Fuge* is best understood through the application of Gregory Karl’s structuralist approach to musical plot.

According to Karl’s approach, a musical plot can be defined by a series of functional sequences, which are abstract actions taken by one character with regard to another in a binary system.\(^ {15}\) Acting as foils to one another, these characters are introduced together, developed separately, allowed to conflict, and finally resolved. In the case of the *Grosse Fuge*, the most readily apparent binary system is that of the two main themes (one of which serves as the countersubject to the other). As Figure 7 illustrates, these two themes have distinctly different musical characters: theme A is the deliberate, pensive line derived from the *Hymnentyp*, while theme B’s dotted rhythms and sharp angularity denote a more playful and energetic character.

While these two themes do not always maintain their respective rhythmic values (they are augmented, diminished, and even alternate between duple and triple subdivision), their respective characters remain intact. In fact, these characters (and the reactions between them) are


\(^{15}\) Gregory Karl, “Structuralism and Musical Plot,” *Music Theory Spectrum* 19, No. 1 (Spring, 1997), 17. Karl uses the term “character,” though the two opposing entities are actually mental states in a single imaginary persona.
reinforced by Beethoven’s frequent changes in tempo. The two speeds that Beethoven uses in the
course of the piece (Allegro, usually molto e con brio, and Meno mosso e moderato) add another
dimension to the dramatic structure of the piece and help to illustrate the functional sequences I
alluded to earlier. In his article, Karl borrows several specific functional sequences from
structuralist literary theory, including subversion, enclosure, counteraction, withdrawal,
interruption, realization, and integration. The nature of each of these functional sequences is
relatively clear from its name. While there are other functional sequences besides these, and
while most of them can be applied on many levels (from individual thematic statements to
massive sections), my analysis will focus on the ones I have listed here, which I believe are
relevant at the largest level of organization.

The Grosse Fuge begins with the 30-measure Overtura, which I believe does not
contribute to the dramatic structure, but rather introduces the characters in the way an operatic
overture would (for the purpose of clarity, I will refer to the bright, energetic character
represented by the first presentation of theme B as “X” and the deliberate, pensive character
denoted by theme A as “Y”). Beginning at m.31, theme B is the subject of the fugue and theme
A is the countersubject, suggesting that X is the dominant character. This situation changes at m.
158, where Y takes over and the music moves to the chromatic submediant and the slower tempo
(this constitutes subversion of X by Y). X resumes control at m.233, returning the music to the original key and tempo, thereby effectively enclosing Y. When the middle section of the piece begins in m. 273 (corresponding to the development in the sonata model), a series of transient modulations, along with the fragmentation of theme B, gradually weakens X’s position of authority. At m.493, X gives up, so to speak, and withdraws (as illustrated by the nearly complete disappearance of theme B), leaving Y in control (hence the return to *Meno mosso e moderato*). But at m.533, X interrupts and returns the music to the original key. It is worth noting, however, that theme B has not returned yet; rather, theme A has been transformed (and is now expressed in shorter note values and at the faster tempo). The linking passage in mm. 658-662 represents a last-ditch effort on Y’s part (again, through tempo rather than theme), which results in failure (or realization, to use Karl’s term). And the final coda in the home key constitutes an integration of both characters (that is, the quicker note values at the faster tempo, with theme A in the lead and theme B in a subordinate role). Figure 8 provides an outline of this musical plot.

Figure 8: An outline of the dramatic structure of the *Grosse Fuge* using Karl’s functional sequences.

Although there is insufficient space here to fully account for the treatment of the two themes in the above outline, the structural significance of the transformation of thematic
materials should not be underestimated. Grew points to this thematic transformation as a means of formal demarcation, saying:

The work proceeds by perpetual modification of theme. As the "thought" develops, so the theme changes. This again is bad according to Bach, but good according to the law of the nineteenth century, which lives by "transformation of theme" – a kind of art that culminates in the leit-motiv of Wagner. In fact, the main theme of the Grosse Fuge is not a "fugue subject" at all, but a leit-motiv in the Wagnerian manner.16

Grew goes even further in his analytical article, likening this “applied fugue” to the “applied symphony” that characterizes Götterdämmerung and suggesting that the Grosse Fuge might actually be a precursor to Wagner’s operatic style.17 Chua, on the other hand, argues that what some see as thematic transformation is actually a process of thematic destruction, and that the entire Grosse Fuge is best understood as one big narrative of destruction.18 While this view might initially seem a bit far-fetched, destruction is actually a rather fitting descriptor for the emotional turmoil Beethoven must have experienced near the end of his life. In retrospect, this turmoil makes his choice of the Hymnentyp (with its implicit sorrow, affliction, and grief) an especially appropriate one.

Regardless of which position one subscribes to, one can rest assured that any formal assumptions he or she brings to the Grosse Fuge will be violated. Indeed, each movement of the B-flat major quartet includes some violation of its formal conventions (whether it be the opening sonata form, the dance and aria forms of the interior movements, or the fugal finale). According to Joseph Kerman, the fugue was simply one more set of constructs that Beethoven could manipulate.19 At the same time, however, Beethoven’s selection of the fugue as the genre for the

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18 Chua, 235-40.
finale was far from random. On the contrary, he was taking advantage of the intrinsic dramatic capacity of imitative counterpoint, which had served as an effective medium for finales in a number of earlier works. Such works included not only Beethoven’s own late compositions, but also Mozart’s famous five-voice invertible counterpoint in his “Jupiter” symphony and Rossini’s operatic finales (such as the one in *L’italiana in Algeri*). After all, fugue is simply a more strictly controlled manifestation of the strategy of sequential entrances that often characterized operatic ensemble finales at this time (a correlation I alluded to earlier).

There has been a great deal of speculation regarding why Beethoven ultimately agreed to replace the *Grosse Fuge* as the finale of the Op. 130 quartet. Some accounts suggest that he simply acquiesced to popular taste, but this seems unlikely given Beethoven’s ego. One cannot help but wonder whether he might have come to believe that, despite the symmetry and balance that the *Grosse Fugue* strikes with the quartet’s opening movement, the sprawling fugal finale was better off as a work unto itself. As I have shown, opinions regarding the precise nature of the work’s form vary widely, but all accounts seem to suggest that the *Grosse Fuge* encapsulates a complete musical journey. And there seems to be a great deal of evidentiary support for the argument that, while Beethoven never made a second attempt at writing opera, he had learned a great deal about it (both from others and from his own experience) and put that knowledge to use on his own terms.20 He did this when he set Schiller’s text in the *Ninth Symphony*, and I believe that he did it again when he composed the *Grosse Fuge*, an “opera without words.”

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20 Tusa, 217. Beethoven wrote a diary entry in 1816, after his last set of revisions to Fidelio had been completed and Rossini’s *Barber of Seville* had been premiered, which reads, “Leave aside operas and everything else; write only in your manner...”
Sources


