

# Beethoven and 'the tie that binds'

**Anton Kuerti** gets to the bottom of Beethoven's mysterious fingered tie and the enigmatic stroke

In a number of pieces, Beethoven has a bizarre marking which seems to be a contradiction – two notes tied together, but with the fingering 4,3 over them. If we respect the tie, silently changing fingers on the note might strike some as being a bit precious, and perhaps too petty a detail for Beethoven to bother notating. If, on the other hand, we repeat the note – no matter how softly – it defeats the intent of the tie.

The most flagrant occurrence of this is in the third movement of the Piano Sonata, Op.110 (example 1). It never ceases to amaze (and irritate) me to hear that profound *Adagio* marred by this senseless deluge of 26 consecutive A naturals, as though an apprentice piano tuner had hijacked the movement in mid-air. True, Bach managed to make sense of a motive of 24 repeated notes in his Cantata No. 8, symbolising the relentless ticking of time (through

all 24 hours), but aside from its extra-musical import, it is done with a certain charm and cleverness that vividly fits and permeates the movement's character. But in Op.110 it appears as a grotesque non-sequitur, like a cipher, as it is called when an organ pipe goes haywire and won't stop bleating out its pitch.

Was this a sudden *petit mal* of the ageing composer, or is it perhaps we, his executors, who are to blame, for assuming that a mere fingering can over-ride a tie?

The best place to start the proof – and one could almost finish there too – is the *Scherzo* of the A Major Cello Sonata, Op.69 (example 2). The piano starts with two crotchets (both E) tied together over the barline, with that same mysterious 4,3 fingering inscribed over them. But eight bars later the cello echoes the

theme, and as the notes are indisputably tied and there is no cello fingering (to indicate changing strings, perhaps?) or other indication aside from the tie, lo and behold, every cellist will play it as one note. Surely the two entries are meant to be the same.

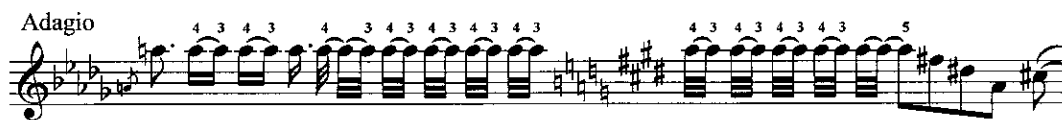
Tied semi-quavers with the trademark 4,3 fingering over them occur again later in the finale of Op.110, bars 124/125 (example 3); repeating them trivialises this sacred moment to my ears.

A similar passage appears in the slow movement of the *Hammerklavier* Sonata, bar 164 (example 4). The passage is loud and climactic, and the notes strongly syncopated, serving in effect as a diminution of

the longer tied octaves of the preceding bar. To repeat the semi-quavers here would destroy the syncopation, and with it the dramatic tension.

Shedding further light on these passages are numerous places where Beethoven ties unfingered notes or chords to each other, which could much more easily be written as single notes of longer value. Turning ahead to the next page in the *Hammerklavier*, we have what I call the 'time-bomb' passage leading to the fugue (probably Beethoven's longest bar, by the way, with 16 crotchet beats). In this bar, Beethoven went to the labour of notating 38 extra notes (the semi-quavers tied to semi-quavers) rather than simply writing quavers.

The same occurs throughout the *Grosse Fuge* (example 5), with its innumerable pairs of tied quavers, and in the famous *Cavatina* of the Quartet Op.130. I don't believe it would occur to anyone to repeat any of these.



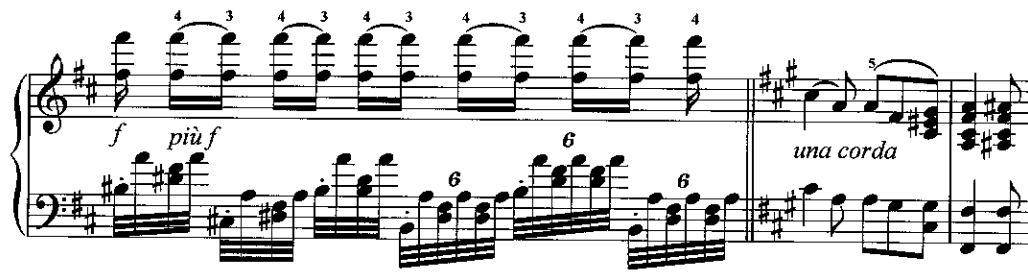
**Example 1. Piano Sonata Op.110, Adagio, bar 4**



**Example 2. Cello Sonata in A Major, Op.69, Scherzo, 1-10**



**Example 3. Piano Sonata Op.110, last movement, bars 124/125**



Example 4. Hammerklavier Sonata, Adagio, bar 164



Example 5. Grosse Fuge, bars 26-30

Let us return now to the passage in Op.110, and analyse it rhythmically. Assume for the moment that the tied notes should not be repeated, and examine the effective length of the successive notes. (Expressed in semi-demi-quavers – why don't you Brits learn to call them 8ths, 16ths, 32nds – so much easier and instantly comprehensible?!) The lengths become, in succession, 6,4,4,3,3,2,2,2,2,2,2,2,2. Logical, isn't it? – the notes gradually speed up until the change of key, whence the last five will slow down because of the *ritardando*. If, on the other hand, you repeat the tied notes, it becomes 6,2,2,2,2,3,3,2,1,1,1 etc., far more arbitrary (and far too many repeats) – and it still leaves open a further question as to what to do with the one group of three notes tied together: does one respect the first tie and not the second?

If Beethoven did not mean to have such notes repeated, why did he write them this way? My guess is that it means a sort of super-tenuto, hold and press against this note to the bitter end, giving at least yourself the illusion that you can thereby make the note sustain and even swell slightly, which is probably what string players should do. Allow the composer thus to be poetic not only in the essence of his music, but also in the way he communicates it to us. He is trying to tell us, graphically, rather than writing some pedantic footnote, to treat these notes in a very special way. So let us paraphrase Gertrude Stein, and say: A tie is a tie is a tie!

**Stroke of luck**

Turning now to another controversial interpretative subject, a tie may be a tie, but a stroke is not a dot [see also Anton Kuerti's article dealing with strokes and dots in Mozart, 'Inside Evidence', Jan/Feb 1999], and it is unfortunate that in this respect even the finest editions do not serve us well.

The preface to the new Beethoven complete works edition, signed by the eminent Joseph Schmidt-Görg, states that, 'As shortening symbols [*Kürzezeichen* – an expression which already begs the question] Beethoven used strokes and dots variably and inconsistently. They are therefore all reproduced as dots in the Complete Works Edition. When, on the other hand, Beethoven uses strokes as symbols of accentuation (usually recognisable by

their being diagonal), then they are reproduced as a *Keil* (wedge)'.

But who is to decide when the strokes are meant to indicate shortness, and when they indicate accentuation? While they are indeed often diagonal, every possible variation of angle can be found, and they often change their angle in the course of a passage or at analogous spots. Furthermore, Beethoven writes far more strokes than dots, so it would have been truer to the text to reproduce everything as strokes, rather than everything as dots.

Unfortunately Beethoven's handwriting requires a cryptographer to decipher even the notes, let alone distinguish between the articulations, even aside from the fact that he is very inconsistent. Sometimes a figure will have dots in one instrument and strokes in another that is doubling it, or strokes in one place and dots in an analogous place. A fascinating exception is that when he writes *portato* (dots under slurs), he invariably

makes perfectly-formed little dots.

It is indeed an exceedingly challenging task to make sense of all this in a published edition, for the dot-hood or stroke-hood of a good percentage of the marks will inevitably remain ambiguous and arguable. Still, it is better to try than to totally homogenise and obscure the distinctions. Some of the Universal *Wiener Urtext* (the Variations, but not the Sonatas) do try, but not the old Breitkopf *Complete Works* – you will not find a single stroke there. Thankfully the Baerenreiter editors have attempted to reproduce faithfully the corresponding marks in Mozart, whose manuscripts present similar problems, but to a lesser degree.

Who am I to challenge the Beethovenhaus covey of distinguished scholars on this point? Well don't believe me, but look at what Beethoven and Nottebohm (the earliest prominent Beethoven scholar) have to say about it:

In a letter to Karl Holz, Beethoven writes: 'For heaven's sake impress on Kempel [the copyist] to copy everything just as it stands ... when a dot [.] is placed over a note, a stroke ['] is not to take its place, and vice versa.'

Nottebohm, in *Beethoveniana* (p.107), first gives examples from the seventh Symphony, showing that Beethoven made numerous corrections which explicitly changed dots to strokes. Then, after first saying how nigh impossible it is to make an edition that would correctly distinguish between dots and strokes (because of Beethoven's unkempt hand and his inconsistency), he writes: 'To maintain the authenticity of Beethoven's works we must take note of everything he took note of, no matter how trivial it may be, such as the differentiation between strokes and dots.'

Nottebohm follows this with about 60 examples from 26 different works drawn from the autograph manuscripts, or in some cases the earliest editions, which demonstrate the distinction between strokes and dots. Drawing on several authorities, including Clementi and Czerny, Nottebohm concludes that 'one cannot doubt that in Beethoven's works, a note designated with a stroke is meant to be played shorter and more sharply than one with a dot.' (All the translations are by the writer.)

Here I part company with Nottebohm and the other authorities, basing my opinion entirely on evidence from the scores themselves. Inspecting

## INTERPRETATION FEATURE

Nottebohm's examples, it is apparent that strokes are consistently found on longer and louder notes than the dots. Does this not imply that the strokes themselves are also longer than the dots – just as the mark is longer, graphically? Of the 765 articulation marks reproduced in Nottebohm's treatise, 466 are strokes and 299 are dots (not counting *portato* notes which are always dots under slurs). Minims vote 21-0 for strokes over dots; *sforzatos* favour strokes 13-0. In fact, I would be surprised if you could ever find a dot on a *sforzato* or a minim.

As to crotchets, 163 have strokes and only nine have dots. But when we get to semi-quavers, this is reversed, 139 get dots and only 67 have strokes – and those last are mainly isolated notes which clearly need a special accent, like the series of chords interrupted by rests in the *Adagio* of Op.31 No.2. If it is so consistently used on longer notes, it is almost inescapable to conclude that the character of the stroke is indeed longer than that of the dot.

Beethoven's strokes seem to exude an impatient energy that dictates intensity, not extreme shortness. Is it too far-fetched to imagine that as the composer becomes more impassioned in the act of writing, an elongated line, and a heavy one at that, is more satisfying to his emotional state than carefully affixing a fussy, bald dot? Look, for example, at the choral entry of 'Seid Umschlungen, Millionen' in the Finale of the ninth symphony. Here Beethoven slashes long heavy strokes above the minims; they obviously want to be sustained, barely separated; dots could only mislead the performers into a silly caricature of this noble outpouring of joy.

An interesting passage to illuminate this matter is in the cello part of the recapitulation of the fourth Symphony's first movement. The leaping, airy theme had up to this point consistently been notated as quavers separated

Allegro vivace



Example 6. Fourth Symphony, First movement, recapitulation, cello part

by quaver rests, without any articulation marks. But, in an enlightening slip of the pen, Beethoven suddenly switches in mid-theme to crotchets with strokes (example 6), though there is no possible reason for the length to change at this spot. So there you have an instant lesson from the composer defining the length of the stroked crotchets, at least in a rapid tempo, as half of their value. There will of course be differing views on how short the quavers should be in the first place, but a very short *staccato* would have been notated as semi-quavers separate by rests equivalent to three semi-quavers.

Perhaps this is getting a little too medieval, akin to certain notorious ancient theological debates – say, how many angels can stand on the head of a dot? I am sure they would prefer a wide, heavy stroke for their footholds, especially to sing such a boisterous, ecstatic song as 'Seid Umschlungen, Millionen'. I urge the reader to examine facsimiles for countless similar examples, and come to his or her own conclusions as to the long and short of this question, which is indeed not 'trivial', but often of the highest importance in giving an ideal interpretation to a masterpiece.

◆ Information on Anton Kuerti's recordings, which include all of Beethoven's *Sonatas and Concerti*, can be found at [www.jwentworth.com/kuerti/index.htm](http://www.jwentworth.com/kuerti/index.htm)