



For the B major theme above, the commonplace pattern would have been:



or in outline:



In the six-bar phrase this structure augments the rhythm:



This gives a commonplace pattern a greater breadth and more intense character, and accounts for the effect of a line sustained beyond the listener's expectations.

For Beethoven, the four-bar rhythm takes on an even greater effect of motor energy than for the composers of the previous generation, propelling the music forward; his deviations from it seem almost always like an act of will: they require an effort. Nonetheless, we should abandon the general prejudice that the deviations are more important than the formidable stretches of conformity. It ought to seem odd that deviating from the four-bar system should be considered more creative than using it imaginatively—as if we were to reproach a composer for not throwing a few five- or three-beat measures into his standard 4/4 or common time.

On the whole, it is clear that by the 1820s the four-bar period has extended its dominion over musical composition. The large-scale structure may no longer be said simply to organize the rhythm shaped by the periods: it is now the four-bar periods themselves which have become the basic elements of musical material, as attention is deflected away from the bar and to the whole phrase as a unit. Deviations from the four-bar grouping tend, therefore, to develop very different aspects from those I have sketchily summarized for the late eighteenth century. Chopin's G Major Prelude has a fine example of the new technique:

No. 3. *Vivace.*  
*leggieramente.*

5

9

13

After the two bars of introduction, only bar 11 is an exception to the four-bar pattern, and interrupts the regularity set up by bars 3–6 and 7–10. Bar 11 is not, however, an extension in the classical sense, either echo or further development. It simply prolongs the harmony of bar 10, acting as a fermata over the upbeat back to the strong bar that opens the next phrase. Bar 11 is a kind of rubato, an expressive suspense.<sup>1</sup>

A similar example may be found in the Scherzo in B flat Minor by Chopin. The middle section opens with a new twenty-bar *sostenuto* theme, repeated immediately with one extra bar:

*sostenuto*  
*sotto voce*

p

1. Carl Schachter has interestingly analyzed bar 11 as an augmentation of the important motif of the melody E–D in bar 3, in *Music Forum V* (New York, 1980), pp. 202–210.



delicatissimo

1 pp

The extra bar does not, in reality, affect the periodic structure: it is only a rubato. The orchestra waits briefly while the singer adds a little expressive decoration. The operatic origin of this passage is obvious, particularly in its later appearance, where the decoration becomes more elaborate:

delicatissimo

1 pp

What these examples show is that the suppleness of the four-bar phrase under Haydn and Mozart gives way to a certain rigidity: the four-bar period is no longer so malleable, so easily extensible, but it can still be inflected by a rhythmic freedom which does not alter the basic shape.

The danger of periodic phrasing (in four bars, or, more rarely, in three) is, of course, monotony, above all the sense of the invariable downbeat on bar 1. It is when the system is employed with understanding, or when the deviations are not merely local eccentricities but contribute to the larger plan, that the music tends to be most successful. When the phrase lengths are uniform, the sense of monotony may be countered by varying the accent of the bar, and avoiding the relentless alternation of strong and weak bars. The interplay between phrase length and accent allows the composer to organize his structure with freedom.

We can see this in the simplest but most spectacular form in the famous *ritmo di tre battute* from the Scherzo of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony:

173 *ff* *ff* *ff* *p<sup>re</sup>* *Rhythmus von 3 Takten. Ritmo di tre battute.*

180 *p* *p sempre staccato e p*

189 *f* *p* *slower*

197 *f* *p* *f* *p* *f*

205 *p* *sempre stacc. dim.*

214 *pp* *pp*

The musical score is for a piano piece in 3/8 time, specifically the 'ritmo di tre battute' from the Scherzo of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. It consists of six systems of music, each with a treble and bass staff. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The score includes various dynamic markings: *ff* (fortissimo), *p* (piano), *f* (forte), *pp* (pianissimo), *p sempre staccato e p*, *f*, *p*, *f*, *p*, *f*, *pp*, and *pp*. There are also performance instructions: *Rhythmus von 3 Takten. Ritmo di tre battute.*, *sempre stacc. dim.*, and *slower*. The score is marked with measure numbers 173, 180, 189, 197, 205, and 214. The notation includes various rhythmic values, including eighth and sixteenth notes, and rests. There are also some editorial markings like '8....:' and 'E'.



223 *Rhythmus von 3 Takten*  
*Ritmo di tre battute*  
*sempre pp*

231 *Rhythmus von 4 Takten.*  
*Ritmo di quattro battute.*  
*pp* *pp*

239 *sempre pp e stacc.*

At the beginning of the passage, the emphasis, defined by the motto, lies on the first of the three-bar groups (bars 177–206). Then the emphasis shifts, and the motif is found on the second of the three-bar sets (bars 207–224), and then shifts again back to the first bar (225). Putting the accent on the second of three bars is a destabilizing force, and Beethoven creates a miniature ternary structure of stability–instability–stability. The return to four-bar grouping (bar 234) is achieved by placing the motto on each of the four bars in succession, and the quadruple rhythm is defined by shifts of harmony. It is typical of Beethoven that each shift of rhythm is determined almost solely by the way the principal motif is placed. I have chosen this exceptional three-bar rhythm as its suppleness characterizes Beethoven's practice with the more common four-bar form.

A passage from the finale of Schubert's Sonata in C Minor, D.958, written shortly before his death in 1828, shows a very different interplay between accent and phrase length, but one of equal mastery:

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*pp*