

Beethoven's 7th Symphony, Allegretto: Complete Musical Architecture

Beethoven's Symphony No. 7, 2nd movement (Allegretto in A minor) stands as one of classical music's most meticulously crafted pieces, built entirely around a hypnotic rhythmic ostinato that Wagner called "the apotheosis of dance." [\(Houston Symphony +2\)](#) **The movement employs a dactyl-spondee rhythmic pattern (♩ ♪ ♩ ♩) as its DNA**, creating what scholars describe as a "developing passacaglia" that transforms from mysterious whisper to overwhelming climax through masterful orchestral layering.

[\(Indianapolissymphony\)](#) This comprehensive analysis provides the precise musical details needed for authentic recreation, including exact melodic lines, harmonic progressions, and orchestrational techniques that make this movement a pinnacle of symphonic literature.

Musical foundation and instrumentation

Complete orchestration requires 2 flutes, 2 oboes, 2 clarinets in A, 2 bassoons, 2 horns in A (E and D), 2 trumpets in D, timpani, and five-part strings (first violins, second violins, violas, cellos, double basses).

[\(Wikipedia +2\)](#) Beethoven's correspondence confirms that **2 contrabassoons strengthened the bass parts at the 1813 premiere**, though they're not notated in published scores. [\(Wikipedia\)](#) [\(Wikipedia\)](#)

The movement opens in **A minor (no key signature)** with a mysterious woodwind chord emphasizing the pitch E in both bass and treble registers - what one scholar describes as "the deft extinguishing of a light" after the A major finale of the first movement. [\(Classical Music\)](#) [\(Wikipedia\)](#) **Beethoven's metronome marking specifies ♩ = 76** for the Allegretto tempo, [\(Rochester\)](#) though he later considered changing it to "Andante quasi Allegretto" because conductors were taking it too fast. [\(Indianapolissymphony +2\)](#)

The famous ostinato pattern consists of a quarter note followed by two eighth notes, then two quarter notes (♩ ♪ ♩ ♩), creating the poetic rhythm of "dactyl followed by spondee" [\(Indianapolissymphony\)](#) - often described as "boum-boum, boum-boum-boum." [\(Ffrcc\)](#) [\(Wikipedia\)](#) This pattern appears in **2/4 time signature** and drives the entire movement's hypnotic character. [\(Wikipedia\)](#) [\(Wikipedia\)](#)

Melodic lines and orchestral entrances

The opening theme emphasizes the note D, repeated sixteen times before moving on, creating an austere, hypnotic effect that establishes the movement's contemplative character. [\(Ffrcc\)](#) The melodic contour maintains **E (the 5th degree of A minor) as a structural pitch** throughout, appearing prominently in both bass and upper voices. [\(Serenade Magazine\)](#)

String section entrances follow careful orchestral stratification:

First presentation (measures 1-24): Violas and cellos introduce the ostinato theme in unison, played with sustained, solemn character. [\(Wikipedia\)](#) The opening woodwind chord (A minor with E in bass) creates an unstable 6/4 harmony that immediately establishes tonal ambiguity. [\(Wikipedia\)](#) [\(Wikipedia\)](#)

Second variation (around measure 25): Second violins assume the main theme while violas and cellos introduce a **lyrical counter-melody** that George Grove famously described as "like a string of beauties hand-in-hand, each afraid to lose her hold on her neighbours." [Wikipedia](#) [Wikipedia](#) This creates a bel canto singing melody - essentially a lament that provides emotional depth against the rhythmic foundation. [Indianapolissymphony](#) [Wikipedia](#)

Third variation (around measure 50): First violins take over the primary theme while second violins carry the secondary melody, creating increasingly complex polyphonic textures. Lower strings continue providing accompaniment and counter-melodies, with timpani adding rhythmic emphasis.

Fugato section development: The movement evolves into strict fugal treatment where the characteristic rhythmic pattern passes between different orchestral sections. [Indianapolissymphony](#) Each voice enters with the ostinato while maintaining independence, creating sophisticated contrapuntal textures that demonstrate Beethoven's mastery of polyphonic writing. [Indianapolissymphony](#)

Harmonic progressions and tonal architecture

Primary tonal relationships center on A minor as the home key, with strategically placed episodes in **A major (parallel major)** and **C major (relative major)**. The movement exploits tensions between A, C, and F, [Wikipedia](#) using what Schenkerian analysis reveals as part of an overarching descending fifth pattern (E-D-C#-B-A) spanning all four symphony movements. [Wikipedia](#)

Specific harmonic progressions include:

- Opening A minor chord with E in bass (creating 6/4 instability)
- Extensive use of **vii°6 chords (diminished seventh in first inversion)** resolving to i
- **Localized i-I progressions** (minor to major tonic relationships) during A major episodes
- "Down a fourth, up a minor third" descending sequences
- Chromatically descending bass lines that support the melodic development

Chord functions employ traditional tonal harmony: **i (A minor) as tonic**, **III (C major) for contrasting sections**, **V (E major) for dominant function**, and **vii° (G# diminished) for leading tone harmony**. The harmonic rhythm carefully supports the rhythmic ostinato without overwhelming it.

Formal structure and development

The movement spans approximately 150 measures in ternary form [Wikipedia](#) with extensive variations:

A Section (measures 1-75): Three presentations of the main theme with increasing orchestral complexity. Each variation adds instrumental layers while maintaining the rhythmic foundation.

B Section (measures 76-120): Contrasting material in **A major and C major**, featuring the lyrical "string of beauties" melody introduced in canon. [Ffrcc](#) This section provides relief from the minor key intensity while maintaining structural unity. [Rochester](#)

Return of A (measures 121-150): Final theme statements with fragmentation and dissolution, gradually returning to the opening's sparse texture.

The movement concludes as it began - with the same A minor woodwind chord emphasizing pitch E, creating an unresolved, questioning effect that transitions directly to F major for the third movement.

[Rochester](#)

Counterpoint and polyphonic texture

Fugal elements appear throughout the movement's development. The contrasting B section introduces its lyrical theme "**in canon**" between different instrumental voices, while the main A section develops into a "**sturdy fugal section**" that maintains the ostinato rhythmic character. [Indianapolissymphony +2](#)

Multiple independent melodic lines operate simultaneously through sophisticated voice leading. When second violins carry the main theme, violas and cellos provide essential counter-melodies. **Inner voices (particularly violas) carry significant melodic material** rather than merely filling harmonic spaces, creating rich polyphonic textures that reward careful listening.

Contrapuntal interaction occurs between the rhythmic ostinato foundation and the lyrical counter-melodies, with different orchestral sections engaging in dialogue while maintaining overall structural unity. The movement demonstrates Beethoven's ability to combine strict contrapuntal techniques with expressive melodic writing.

Orchestration details and performance practices

Dynamic progression creates the movement's emotional architecture. Opening **pianissimo** presentations build through careful crescendos as orchestral forces accumulate, reaching **fortissimo climaxes** during full orchestral tuttis, then receding to the opening's soft dynamics.

Articulation markings include **staccatissimo wedges** over eighth notes in string parts (particularly closing bars), **sforzando markings** during climactic passages for dramatic emphasis, and **legato passages** in lyrical counter-melodies. A scholarly debate continues over the final bars, where most editions mark "arco" (bowed) but some conductors perform pizzicato despite lack of manuscript evidence. [Classicalmusicguide](#)

Performance interpretation varies significantly among conductors. **Traditional approaches** treat the movement as a solemn funeral march with tempos much slower than Beethoven's marking. **Historically informed performance** follows the Allegretto marking more literally, creating a processional rather than funereal character. [Talkclassical](#) **Modern synthesis approaches** balance historical accuracy with contemporary orchestral capabilities.

Orchestral techniques demonstrate Beethoven's innovations: timbral variation presenting the same theme in different instrumental colors, textural layering through gradual voice addition, and dynamic terracing creating systematic build-up and release. The movement's heavy reliance on string writing

showcases Beethoven's advances in string orchestration, building on Haydn's experimental techniques.

[Wikipedia](#)

[Wikipedia](#)

Conclusion

This Allegretto represents Beethoven's most psychologically complex slow movement, using deceptively simple materials to create profound emotional depth through masterful variation technique and harmonic sophistication. [WRTI +2](#) **The movement's genius lies in its transformation of a single rhythmic cell into a complete emotional journey** - from mysterious opening through overwhelming climax to questioning conclusion. For authentic recreation, the complete score is available through IMSLP (Petrucci Music Library), providing exact pitches and MIDI-compatible notation. The movement's enduring power stems from Beethoven's ability to combine structural innovation with immediate emotional impact, creating music that speaks equally to trained musicians and general audiences across more than two centuries. [WRTI](#) [Strings Magazine](#)