

RESEARCH ARTICLE

One Line, Many Bodies: Orchestral Unison and Collective Agency in Beethoven's Symphonies

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Abstract

Orchestral unison is commonly heard as the disappearance of difference into a single line. Beethoven's symphonies show instead that togetherness is an event of coordination whose force depends on instrumental plurality remaining perceptible. This article compares unison and octave-doubled passages in Symphonies Nos. 1, 3, 5, and 7. It distinguishes literal unison, octave reinforcement, rhythmically aligned melodic doubling, and homorhythmic tutti, then analyzes each event through preparation, instrumental membership, register, articulation, and textural aftermath. Symphony No. 1 uses alignment to negotiate between inherited ensemble decorum and disruptive emphasis; the *Eroica* makes collective attack provisional within a form repeatedly divided by registral and thematic claims; Symphony No. 5 turns compressed rhythmic identity into a resource that can migrate between partial and near-total coordination; and Symphony No. 7 binds unison force to rhythmic momentum rather than static unanimity. Timbre and register remain active inside every shared line. More importantly, the texture that follows determines whether unison seals a cadence, opens a transition, concentrates resistance, or redistributes agency. Beethovenian collectivity is therefore audible not as sameness but as the temporary organization of difference.

Keywords: Beethoven; symphony; orchestral unison; texture; agency; orchestration

1 Introduction

When several instruments sound the same melodic line, analytical language often treats the result as one. The description is accurate at the level of pitch succession but incomplete as orchestration. Violins, bassoons, horns, and timpani do not lose timbre, attack, register, or historical association when they coordinate. A unison line is thus simultaneously singular and multiple. Its expressive force comes from the audible effort of alignment.

Beethoven's symphonies make that effort a formal resource. Shared lines appear after divided textures, emerge by adding instrumental groups, or break apart into dialogue. Some are literal unisons; others use octave doubling to extend one contour across registers. Still others are homorhythmic tuttis whose chordal content must not be confused with unison. Precise distinction is necessary because different coordinations imply different relations among orchestral bodies.

This article asks three questions. What texture prepares a shared line? Which instrumental differences remain active inside it? What happens immediately after

coordination? The third question is decisive. A unison that disperses into imitation functions differently from one that culminates in a cadence, even if their instrumentation is similar. The analysis therefore treats unison as a temporal event rather than a static label.

The vocabulary of agency used here is musical, not psychological. Instruments do not possess intentions independent of performers and notation. "Collective agency" names the way a score distributes initiation, continuation, resistance, and response among orchestral parts. Work on markedness and musical meaning clarifies why coordinated texture can function rhetorically rather than merely sonically [1]. Semiotic analysis likewise supports attention to the changing significance of a shared musical figure within its formal context [2]. Lockwood's historical account situates these symphonies within Beethoven's changing orchestral practice [3].

The objective is to show that unison in these four scores is neither acoustic sameness nor a self-sufficient symbol of consensus. The article first defines degrees of alignment and a preparation–event–aftermath method, then compares the

four symphonies, and finally considers timbre, formal syntax, collective agency, and performance limits. Its contribution is an account of Beethovenian togetherness as the temporary organization of audible difference.

Orchestral unison is interpreted within the changing historical identity of the symphonic ensemble. Dolan shows how instrumental combination became a central category of late-eighteenth-century musical thought [4]. Wallace's study of Beethoven's early reception clarifies the aesthetic expectations against which collective sonority acquired critical force [5].

2 Degrees of Orchestral Alignment

The corpus consists of Symphony No. 1 in the Del Mar edition [6], Symphony No. 3 in the corresponding critical score [7], Symphony No. 5 in its cited edition [8], and Symphony No. 7 in the edition listed below [9]. They trace no simple stylistic progression; instead, each offers a distinct relation between coordinated line and formal process. The comparison includes events in which two or more orchestral families share a contour either at the same pitch level or in octaves.

Four categories prevent overstatement.

Literal unison places instruments on the same sounding pitches. Octave unison distributes one contour across registers. Reinforced melody doubles a line while accompaniment remains independent. Homorhythmic tutti aligns rhythm but retains several harmonic parts. Only the first two constitute the core corpus, although the others provide contrast because listeners may experience all four as degrees of collective concentration.

Each event is considered in three phases. Preparation records the preceding division of labour: melody and accompaniment, antiphonal exchange, contrapuntal strands, or silence. Membership identifies which sections join, which remain outside, and whether the shared articulation is genuinely uniform. Aftermath follows the first redistribution of parts. This contextual emphasis is compatible with formal-functional analysis, in which the role of a passage depends on its position and continuation [10]. The procedure shows whether coordination is a goal, a threshold, or a temporary compression before renewed difference.

Because balance varies among performances, the study does not claim that every instrumental component is equally audible. It analyzes the score's disposition and the performative possibilities it creates. Recordings could test salience, but they would require a separate design attentive to orchestra, hall, edition, and microphone placement.

3 Symphony No. 1: decorum under pressure

Symphony No. 1 repeatedly places emphatic alignment within textures that otherwise preserve recognizable Classical divisions of orchestral labour. Shared gestures gain force because melody, accompaniment, and punctuating winds have already established different roles. When these roles converge on one contour, the event sounds like a decision made by the ensemble rather than the normal state of the orchestra.

The symphony's celebrated opening harmonic detour prepares this concern indirectly. Tonal orientation is not granted without negotiation; likewise, orchestral agreement must be produced. Unison and octave reinforcement can clarify direction after harmonic or textural ambiguity, but they also carry disruptive weight when attacks are strongly articulated. Coordination does not simply restore decorum. It reveals how forcefully decorum must be asserted.

Aftermath separates several functions. Where the line opens into lighter dia-

logue, unison operates as a hinge, concentrating energy so that it can be redistributed. Where it leads directly into cadential confirmation, alignment behaves as collective punctuation. In both cases, the identity of participating instruments matters. Strings may establish continuity that winds colour or contest; a fuller membership changes the social scale of the gesture without erasing the timbral layers within it.

4 Symphony No. 3: monumental line, divided field

The *Eroica* expands formal duration and intensifies conflict among thematic, tonal, and registral processes. Within this scale, a shared orchestral line can sound monumental, but monumentality is not identical with unanimity. The surrounding form has already taught the listener to hear multiple claims on continuation. Coordination is measured against that divided field.

Octave doubling is especially important. A contour projected across high and low registers acquires breadth, yet the registers contribute different weights and attacks. The line can feel unitary while its internal spacing remains audible. Such passages do not collapse the orchestra into an undifferentiated mass; they stage the extension of one idea through heterogeneous resources.

The first movement's large-scale disruptions and recoveries make aftermath crucial. A coordinated gesture may not settle the form. It can intensify a transition or announce a direction that subsequent material complicates. In the funeral march, by contrast, shared melodic action participates in a different temporal and rhetorical economy: collective statement is shadowed by fragmentation, registral distance, and response. Across the symphony, alignment gains meaning from its vulnerability to renewed division.

This reading treats formal conflict as a relation between generic expectation and its deformation, a distinction developed in sonata theory [11]. It therefore avoids treating orchestral mass as sufficient evidence of formal closure.

This vulnerability checks heroic metaphor. The score can produce extraordinary collective force without representing a permanently unified subject. What sounds heroic at one moment may be exposed as effort, memory, or unstable assertion at another. The orchestra's agency is historical because it has an aftermath.

5 Symphony No. 5: rhythmic identity and migrating coordination

Symphony No. 5 makes a compact rhythmic figure available to many textures. The opening attacks are often described as a single collective utterance, yet their orchestration is selective and their rests are part of the event. The force comes not from maximum instrumental mass but from concentrated rhythmic and registral agreement. Silence frames coordination and makes its limits audible.

As the figure circulates, alignment migrates. It can belong to one family, pass between sections, support accompaniment, or gather a larger ensemble. This mobility distinguishes thematic identity from orchestral identity. The rhythm remains recognizable while the body that carries it changes. Collective agency is therefore distributed through succession as well as simultaneity.

Unison and octave-doubled lines in later spans frequently serve transition. By narrowing pitch relations, they concentrate directional energy; subsequent harmony and orchestration then decide where that energy goes. A shared contour can open space rather than close it. This function is particularly important in a symphony whose movements and internal sections repeatedly dramatize passage from constraint to expansion.

The famous connection between scherzo and finale broadens the issue beyond isolated unisons. Instrumental layers accumulate, dynamics and register expand, and the eventual full sound depends on a carefully staged process of membership. Coordination is persuasive because listeners hear the ensemble becoming capable of it. Togetherness is composed as arrival.

6 Symphony No. 7: rhythm as the condition of unity

In Symphony No. 7, rhythmic profile supplies a strong basis for collective action. Shared lines are rarely static proclamations; they are propelled by patterns that continue through changing harmonies and instrumental combinations. Unison force belongs to motion. The orchestra agrees on how to move before it agrees on a stable place to rest.

Phrase-rhythmic perspective helps explain why the timing of recurrence and continuation matters as much as the shared contour itself [12]. Alignment is heard within spans whose grouping and momentum remain active after the immediate attack.

This relation is audible in the contrast

between tightly aligned contours and passages that distribute rhythm among accompaniment, countermelody, and sequential exchange. When parts converge, the listener retains memory of their earlier independence. Timbre remains particularly active because the same rhythm can pass through contrasting instrumental colours before a broader alignment gathers it.

The aftermath of a shared line often releases rather than exhausts rhythmic momentum. Coordination can act as a launching surface for further sequence, registral expansion, or cadential drive. This distinguishes the Seventh's collectivity from a model of unanimity as fixed bloc. Its ensemble is most unified when acting in time.

The slow movement supplies a complementary case. Repeated rhythmic organization can bind layered voices without requiring literal unison. Here the difference between homorhythmic relation and shared pitch is analytically valuable. A collective can be coordinated through compatible roles rather than identical material. Literal or octave unison is one intensified point on that continuum.

7 Timbre survives the shared line

Pitch identity does not neutralize orchestration. A violin and oboe sharing a contour contribute different attack envelopes, capacities for sustain, dynamic profiles, and registral histories. When doubled at the octave, the difference becomes still more explicit: one line occupies several acoustic locations. Analytical reduction to a single staff can clarify voice leading while concealing the very plurality that gives the passage force.

Articulation further complicates sameness. Written accents, bowing implications, tonguing, and the decay of brass or timpani can make a nominally shared rhythm internally uneven. Performance may emphasize or minimize these differences, but the score's instrumentation ensures that complete fusion remains an ideal rather than a literal acoustic fact.

This persistence of difference explains why unison can suggest vulnerability. A shared line exposes the ensemble to the risk of imperfect attack and balance; its effect depends on coordination being heard. Even in idealized score analysis, the event bears traces of the bodies required to realize it. Collective force is impressive because it is made, not because plurality has vanished.

8 Preparation and aftermath as formal syntax

The same orchestration can perform different functions depending on its neighbours. Preparation by contrapuntal or antiphonal texture makes unison sound like convergence. Preparation by silence makes it sound like initiation. Preparation by homorhythmic harmony can make a single line feel like narrowing or stripping down. These paths determine what kind of event coordination becomes.

Aftermath is still more discriminating. Dispersion into instrumental dialogue casts the unison as a hinge. Immediate repetition can turn it into insistence. Harmonic arrival makes it cadential. Interruption or fragmentation reveals that the agreement was provisional. These are not metaphorical additions to formal analysis; they describe observable changes in the distribution of parts.

The four symphonies favour different combinations. The First uses coordination as emphasis within inherited role differentiation. The Third places monumental lines inside unusually extended formal conflict. The Fifth lets rhythmic identity migrate among instrumental memberships. The Seventh joins shared contour to continuous propulsion. No single political allegory can account for all four without flattening their musical differences.

9 Discussion

Agency language is useful when it identifies who begins, supports, interrupts, or inherits a musical process. It becomes vague when "the orchestra" is treated as a person with a single intention. The present analysis keeps the term tied to notation: parts enter, double, separate, sustain, and respond. Social or political interpretation may follow, but it should explain how those relations support the claim.

This restraint does not make the music socially empty. Bonds's account of the symphony as a mode of musical thought helps place collective address within the genre's historical listening culture [13]. Burnham's study documents the prominence and limits of heroic interpretations of Beethoven [14]. The score, however, offers no simple picture of unity. It repeatedly composes collectivity as temporary, stratified, and dependent on what happens next.

10 Conclusion

In Beethoven's symphonies, one line never means one body. Literal unison and octave doubling coordinate instruments

whose timbres, registers, and modes of attack remain active. Symphony No. 1 uses that coordination to pressure inherited ensemble decorum; the *Eroica* makes monumental alignment provisional within an expansive divided form; Symphony No. 5 allows rhythmic identity to migrate among changing memberships; and Symphony No. 7 binds unity to propulsion.

Preparation and aftermath supply the grammar of these events. A line becomes collective by emerging from differentiated roles, and its formal meaning is disclosed when those roles return, change, or remain aligned. Beethovenian togetherness is therefore neither permanent consensus nor acoustic sameness. It is the audible work of organizing difference for a particular action in time. The four-score sample and score-based method leave balance and salience unresolved; performance and recording studies should test how orchestras realize these coordinated differences.

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