

Beethoven Piano Sonatas with Robert Silverman



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I have known Robert Silverman for many years. I have been blessed with his friendship, his humor, and many brilliant and insightful performances of his over the years. About eight years ago we hatched a plan to produce a new recording of the Beethoven piano sonatas.

Beethoven's piano sonatas are, to me, the most rich, moving, intellectually interesting, and musically important body of work of any composer. I have listened to, played, and studied these sonatas since I was a boy, and I am still learning about them. They reveal to us the story of Beethoven's musical genius and take us through his life and compositional development. They are so unlike the sonatas of Haydn and Mozart in part because of the importance he gave to these pieces and in part because Beethoven was endowed by patrons who bestowed upon him the freedom to compose free of obligations (such as touring) and full artistic license to boldly go where no composer had gone before (and boy, did he ever).



And in part because nobody rocks it like Beethoven.

On the other hand, Robert Silverman is a rare gem in the musical world. There are many superb pianists, and I have listened to all the important recordings of the sonatas I could lay my hands on. What is so amazing, though, about Robert's playing is his nuance of line and his ability to get to the musical soul of a piece and expose its beauty, spirit, passion, joy, and tragedy while retaining the delicate structure of the piece, tying it all together in a way that captivates your entire being.



So when this opportunity arose, I didn't hesitate. We were very lucky to get a world-class recording engineer on board, Mark Willsher, whose talents are astonishing and whose credits are extremely impressive (look him up on IMDB — he is one of the top sound engineers in the world today). This was a live recording, and we found a very talented editor, Zach Miley, to clean up the recordings for us. And although I guess I did a little work here and there, I mostly had the honor of being awash in a sea of awesomeness. Best. Gig. Ever.

The piano sonatas were Beethoven's own personal musical playground, and starting from the very first sonata, written at age 24, Beethoven made the bold statement that this was a serious work and that he was a man not to be trifled with! Whereas the sonatas of Mozart and Haydn were in three movements, all of the opus 2 sonatas are four movements, like the symphony of that time ("serious" music) – a statement that these sonatas were just as important musically.

Beethoven explored every facet of the four basic musical movement forms (sonata-allegro, rondo, theme and variations, and minuet and trio / scherzo) in these pieces and even took these to places unrecognizable to the musically educated. Although his early sonatas are brilliant, amazing, and moving compositions, in just a few short years, starting with opus 13 (the Sonata Pathétique, in which we feel pathos, oh, yeah, we do), Beethoven would take the sonata to a new level, recreating the art form with each piece.

The sonata-allegro form is so brilliantly explored and developed through these sonatas that in opus 109, Beethoven creates two perfect diamonds in the first two very short movements: made not by carbon, but by the unearthly element known as EDeRCium (also commonly referred to as "sonata-matter"). Beethoven had perfected and developed this form to a degree that for any other composer to attempt to pick it up would take some courage. Or foolishness.

At this point, it's difficult for me to even mention the later sonatas because there is just too much to say about them, and so many others more eloquent than I have done such a good job with this already. In addition to Robert Silverman's liner notes below, I especially suggest the András Schiff lectures, which can be downloaded for free from theguardian.com; the Robert Greenberg lectures, which can be purchased from thegreatcourses.com; and the Jonathan Biss lectures, that focus on Beethoven's development of the sonata-allegro form, and which are available for free at coursera.org.



But I can't leave you without saying just a few words about Beethoven's final sonata, opus 111.

This last (and greatest sonata ever written) is a mere two movements, but in these two movements Beethoven elevates the art form to heavenly rapture. The harmonic structure and compositional form are the height of genius, with emotional expression so deep that one cannot listen to this sonata without being forever changed. The first time I listened to this sonata, many years ago, I lay in the dark, transfixed. At the end of the sonata I was physically paralyzed. I couldn't move my body for several minutes. And what is so astonishing after hearing it is that the silence after the music ends becomes more important than the music itself.

Enjoy!

—Michael Silver :o)

Liner Notes By Robert Silverman

Sonata #1 in F Minor, Opus 2 No. 1

Composed in 1795; Published in 1796

Although many young pianists study Beethoven's first published piano composition before they reach their teens, it would be a mistake to consider the music itself a "student" or "apprentice" effort. At twenty-five, Beethoven already was a master of the late classical style, arguably the only living composer of his time who could withstand comparison with Haydn or Mozart. Moreover, he managed to distance himself from his older colleagues by treating his piano sonatas from the outset as seriously as his chamber and orchestral music. It is easy to point to his frequent use of four movements as evidence of his enlarged concept of the sonata—he was the first great composer to do this—but one must look deeper into the works themselves to discover the extraordinary care and finish he lavished upon them.

The main theme of the sonata's concise first movement bears an obvious resemblance to the opening of the finale of Mozart's 40th Symphony. However, his treatment of that idea as early as in the fifth measure—lopping off the opening arpeggio and insistently repeating the turning motif (a technique Alfred Brendel calls "foreshortening")—is pure Beethoven. Likewise, the immediate repetition of the theme in a new key, a new mood, and a new register, bears his unique thumbprint. Other original touches, such as making the second theme a smoother mirror image of the first, or placing jarring accents in unexpected places, occur throughout the movement.

Particularly effective is the way Beethoven prepares the return of the opening theme following the central Development section. Classroom definitions of sonata form often emphasize the importance of that moment, with its re-establishment of the tonic key and the main theme. However, the finest classical composers frequently disguise and modify that event. One of Beethoven's favorite techniques is to "sneak in" the main theme's return in the middle of an on-going phrase: overshooting his target, as it were. He uses that device here, as well as in the Tempest, Appassionata and Hammerklavier sonatas, among others.

One of the more notorious points of contention among pianists occurs on the very first note of Beethoven's very first published sonata. No staccato mark appears here, although the other notes in the motif are thus clearly marked. Eight measures later, in the parallel passage in the left hand, a staccato mark is present. The inconsistency returns later in the movement. Some performers have found a justification for playing all the notes staccato, whereas others underscore the differentiation by slurring the first note to the second, even in the absence of such an indication by the composer. (When faced with such dilemmas, I try, perhaps simplistically, to do just what the composer indicates. In this case I play the first note non legato: musically joined, but unconnected physically to the second.)

In the decorative slow movement, Beethoven again asserts his individuality. Although the language is quite similar to that of Mozart, his message is far more direct, aimed straight to the hearts of his listeners. In general, Beethoven's early slow movements are some of the most ravishingly beautiful compositions in existence. The opening measure of the Adagio is distilled into its essence, placed into the minor key, and used as the main theme of the Minuet, an unassuming little piece that grows increasingly complex with each hearing.

The Finale begins with the same three-chord outburst that concluded the first movement. The surging, tumultuous motion continues virtually unabated for the entire opening section, but then follows one of those infrequent occurrences that illustrate Beethoven's relative inexperience as a composer. Although this

movement is cast in sonata form, he interrupts the structure in order to insert a new, self-contained section prior to the more traditional development of earlier material. This creates a conundrum for the performer at the movement's conclusion, where a repeat is nominally called for. If one observes the repeat, as I feel I must, the new material—itsself quite repetitive and now no longer new—sounds redundant. Yet, if the repeat is omitted, the movement is clearly too short, and the ending catches everyone, including the pianist, off guard. It is reassuring to know that Beethoven, after all, was human, provided we also remember that he never made the same miscalculation twice.

Sonata #2 in A Major, Opus 2 No. 2

Composed in 1794 - 1795; Published in 1796

In spite of its relative obscurity, the Sonata No. 2 contains the most strikingly original music of the three sonatas in this opus. It is also in this work that Beethoven's penchant for not allowing such trivialities as the shape of a pianist's hand to interfere with his musical vision. Although the overall difficulty of this sonata does not approach that of the middle- and late-period pot-boilers, there are a few brief passages whose successful negotiation depends totally upon the smile of the deities, no matter how thorough the artist's prior preparation.

The expansive first movement provides one of the earliest example of Beethoven's practice of presenting two simple, contrasting ideas at the outset, and using the rest of the movement to exploit, and ultimately reconcile their differences. The ideas themselves are about as uncomplicated as they can get: a pair of descending motifs (an A sharply dropping to the dominant E, answered by a filled-in descent from E back to A); and an ascending A major scale.

It is in this movement that Beethoven begins a systematic probing of all aspects of the sonata—in this case, the common practice by which the opening section of a sonata movement modulates from the tonic to the dominant. True, we ultimately arrive where we are "supposed" to, but the route Beethoven chooses is so circuitous and convoluted that musicians and educated listeners of his time must have felt completely lost along the way.

The Largo is Beethoven's first truly sublime slow movement. Its simple melody and string quartet-like texture conveys a powerful spiritual sense that was first noted by his student, Karl Czerny, shortly after the piece appeared. Formally, the movement seems to progress in a standard ternary fashion (A-B-A), and most listeners can be forgiven for expecting a peaceful close following the return of the opening theme. Even if Beethoven had chosen to do this, he would still have composed a wonderful, moving slow movement, and none of us would have been the wiser. However, he had other ideas. What appears to be the coda is suddenly interrupted by a forceful outburst of the main theme in the minor mode. That gesture is easily described, yet it is one of the most cataclysmic events in all music. It doesn't last long. The main theme returns one last time, then the music closes quietly, just as we had expected it to do a short while earlier.

In spite of its title, the brief Scherzo is a playful minuet whose jocularly is tempered every so often by darker hues, especially in the Trio. The fourth movement is the first of those gracious, leisurely, repetitive rondos he was so fond of composing. The opening theme, with its long sigh, is not merely delightful, but also delicious, while the material that follows is as delicate as anything he wrote. However, a furious middle section crudely interrupts this delectable atmosphere. (Beethoven frequently inserted music of this nature into his rondos, but in my opinion, he "went over the top" on this occasion, with subsequent deleterious consequences, as we shall soon see). The return to the main theme is superbly paced; its third reiteration and the music that follows is just as magical as it was the first time around. So, for that matter, is the fourth statement of the theme. A sprightly coda follows, and the movement seems well on its way to a happy conclusion.

But wait! There's more! Remember that crude middle section? No self-respecting composer would dare use such a prominent theme without justifying its presence elsewhere in the piece. Beethoven has no choice: holding his breath, he plows into it again, thankfully in a milder, shortened version. Like its predecessor, it also dissolves into what is now a fifth statement of the main theme. Finally, the storyteller sheepishly tiptoes off the stage, hoping that no one will notice that he'd been winging it for the last two pages. But what winging!

Sonata #3 in C Major, Opus 2 No. 3

Composed in 1794 - 1795; Published in 1796

This sonata is the third of the set of three that Beethoven dedicated to his teacher, Josef Haydn. It is the most brilliant and freewheeling of the troika, and the slow movement ranks as one of Beethoven's finest. Nevertheless, some commentators belittle it because of the composer's use, mostly in the first movement, of the sort of virtuoso passage-work that one might expect from Czerny or Hummel rather than Beethoven. Admittedly, Beethoven had yet to learn how to make pianistic brilliance better serve a work's inner drama, and even become the very stuff out of which a composition is constructed. Nonetheless, there are many extraordinary touches, not the least of which occurs partway in the Development section of the first movement, when the main theme returns in the 'wrong' key of D major. At first Beethoven has the pianist continue playing the theme in a normal fashion, blissfully unaware that anything is amiss. Four measures later, however, the music stops suddenly, and the player, angry at having been duped by the composer, stormily resumes the Development.

When the main theme finally returns in the correct key, Beethoven makes a slight alteration in the bass. He then throws in even further thematic development before allowing the recapitulation to hit its stride. This is especially ingenious: Because both the exposition's and recapitulation's opening sections begin and end identically, he simply could have repeated that portion of the exposition verbatim rather than go to the trouble of re-composing it. However, he understood that recapitulations and expositions evoke such vastly different perceptions of the tonic key that the music had to be altered considerably in order to accommodate the new context. Finally, just prior to the conclusion of the movement, Beethoven includes a cadenza: a solo improvisatory section more typically found in a concerto than in a sonata.

Like so many of Beethoven's early, hauntingly-beautiful, slow movements, the second movement contains angry outbursts. However, the explosion in the middle of this one has special significance, given its double reference to the first movement. It is in C major, the principal key of the sonata. More importantly, it now becomes obvious that the slow movement's main theme is a thinly-disguised variation of the sonata's opening motif.

The contrapuntal Scherzo, characterized by 'Mendelssohnian' lightness, contrasts sharply with the brilliant and stormy Trio. The descending pattern of the main theme delightfully serves as a foil to the ascending scale that opens the Finale. This fleet, energetic rondo is neither too long nor over-repetitious. The stirring, anthem-like middle section served as an obvious model for Brahms at a parallel spot in his own Sonata No. 3.

Like so many Beethoven sonatas, this one concludes unpredictably: just at the point where we are sure the piece is about to wind down, Beethoven suddenly moves into a remote key of A major. He stops abruptly, suddenly aware that he has strayed too far afield. He hesitantly tries out the theme in A minor. Suddenly he sees an opening, and decisively makes his move. Moments later we are back in the home key of C major, and the piece is over. Checkmate!

Sonata #4 in E-flat Major, Opus 7

Composed in 1796 - 1797; Published in 1797

Beethoven's relatively unknown fourth piano sonata is the second longest of the thirty-two. Abounding with boldness and energy, it is—and can only be—the product of youthful creativity. It used to have a German nickname, *Die Verliebte* (the Maiden in Love) but no one knows why. It may have reflected Beethoven's infatuation with the sonata's talented dedicatee, Countess Babette von Keglevics. Other commentators suggest that the sobriquet derives from the character of second or fourth movements. In any case, the name has not stuck.

Its vastness aside, Op. 7 is one of the most symphonically conceived of the sonatas. The bell-like tolling in the first movement, the rhetorical pauses that permeate the *Largo*, the terrifying Trio in the third movement (an unnamed Scherzo) and the clattery middle section of the finale have a commonality: they all seem to point to a sonic image that ranges beyond the capacity of contemporary pianos, let alone those transitional ones of the late 18th century.

Beethoven's sense of humour is totally off-the-wall. Consider the final moments of the slow movement: After creating a vast, serious work lasting about nine minutes, he returns to the main theme and devises an ingenious way of harmonizing it even more profoundly so that the bass arrives at an F-sharp—a note as far away from C (the key of the movement) as one can get. He further complicates matters by using that F sharp as the bass of an accented, highly dissonant chord. Now, any decent composition teacher would—if he had permitted all this to occur at all—have cautioned his student to write a lengthy coda in order to work his way out of the corner into which he had just painted himself. However, Beethoven needs only two measures to dispose of the problem, in a gesture that clearly says, at least to me, “Oh, the hell with it” (or less polite words to that effect).

One reason for this magnificent work's relative obscurity lies in the finale's character. (The problem of how to conclude a composition was one Beethoven wrestled with throughout his career.) Several of Beethoven's sonatas, including Op. 7, feature leisurely closing movements cast in a sectional form that combines sonata and rondo elements. In the hands of Haydn, who literally invented this form, the repetitive structure originally featured short, playful themes. However, Beethoven frequently broadened those themes into lengthy lyrical melodies, thereby imparting a “here comes that damned tune again” quality to the music. Furthermore, as often as not, he ended these movements with a quiet fade-out. Concluding a major work in a light, charming manner was standard classical practice. Beethoven, while lengthening and adapting the form to his own methods, evidently saw no need to discard that aspect of a sonata's structure. Nonetheless, the form was on its last legs; of all the great composers who followed Beethoven, only Schubert frequently employed it. (One might even argue that Schubert, in his later instrumental works, understood the implications of Beethoven's changes to the form better than Beethoven himself. However, programme notes for a Beethoven sonata cycle are probably not the most appropriate launching pad for such a thesis.)

Sonata #5 in C Minor, Opus 10 No. 1

Composed in 1796 - 1798; Published in 1798

This is the first of three dramatic sonatas Beethoven set in the key of C minor. Although the *Pathétique* and the final sonata, Op. 111 ultimately would overshadow it, it is a strong work on its own: powerful and concise, with each movement's character clearly delineated. The similarities between the opening of this work and that of Mozart's Sonata in C minor, K. 475, are too striking to be coincidental. Both sonatas begin with bold, rising C minor arpeggios, followed a plaintive response. However, in spite of this kinship, each sonata could only be the product of its creator. Beethoven's restless, nervous energy is something quite new in the musical language of the late eighteenth century.

The first movement is also notable for the unusual presence of a new theme in the central section, which normally is devoted solely to the development of previously introduced material. This is one of several examples of how Beethoven, even in his earliest published compositions, methodically questioned and probed every aspect of the classical tradition as he found it at the outset of his career.

The slow movement begins with a wonderfully lyrical theme that surely influenced Schubert when he composed his own great C minor sonata. Like virtually all of Beethoven's early slow movements, it is a work of transcendent beauty. Also typical of the composer is the passionate, almost defiant outburst shortly following the return of the main theme; it reminds us that peaceful moments are transitory, and that darker forces are always present even if they do not show their faces at every moment.

The finale is one of Beethoven's most ominous creations. Cast in sonata-allegro form, it is one of only two movements marked Prestissimo in the entire set of 32 sonatas. Its particularly terse Development section fleetingly introduces for the first time in his music the soon-to-be-familiar motif—three short notes followed by a long one. (Interestingly, the key of the piece in which this motif was later immortalized is also C minor.) Both principal themes of the movement are ingeniously combined in the brief coda, which concludes the movement as quietly and mysteriously as it began.

Sonata #6 in F Major, Opus 10 No. 2

Composed in 1796 - 1798; Published in 1798

There is a wonderful moment in the first movement of the Sonata No. 6 when, after the development section winds down, the opening theme returns virtually unaltered, just as expected in a traditional sonata recapitulation. But something isn't right. We pause to sniff the air, so to speak. Somehow, we have landed in the wrong neighborhood, and find ourselves in D major, rather than the home key of F major. We start again, far more hesitantly, seeking our way back to more familiar territory. Suddenly, we see a path that leads back to F. In order to make up for lost time, we don't bother with the characteristic opening phrase of the theme, but simply sneak into the middle, hoping that no one will have noticed our absence.

This is the kind of humour at which Beethoven excelled, and it occurs time and time again in his music. Undoubtedly, he learned this trick (along with countless others) from Haydn, who, if anything, was even better at it than Beethoven. Some might tend to consider the notion of a work of art commenting on, and poking fun at, its own processes as a very modern, almost postmodern, phenomenon. However, it is a prominent, almost distinguishing, feature of the mature classical style.

The middle movement, with its ominous outer sections and richly-chorded trio provides the only serious moment in this sonata, although even here, some jarring off-the-beat accents do their best to break the mood. The jocular Finale, with its echo of the Haydn Allegro in F that we all studied as kids, and whose themes literally laugh at themselves, begins like a fugue. Soon, however, the fugal style is quickly dropped, and the movement proceeds in a fairly straightforward sonata style to its abrupt conclusion.

Sonata #8 in C Minor, Opus 13 "Pathétique" (Also called Grande Sonate Pathétique)

Composed in 1798; Published in 1799

In 1793, the German poet, Friedrich Schiller, wrote an essay entitled *Über das Pathetische*. Musicologist William Kinderman, in his book, *Beethoven*, lucidly states Schiller's thesis: "Pathos or tragedy arises when unblinker awareness of suffering is counter-balanced by the capacity of reason to resist these feelings."

Beethoven's understanding of this affect was undoubtedly close to Schiller's. Defiance of suffering and a single-minded determination to surmount it lie at the heart of virtually all his C minor compositions. By the

late 18th century, that key's strong association with a sense of tragic drama was firmly established: Mozart had cast several of his most dramatic works in that key, while Beethoven had recently composed the first of three dramatic C minor sonatas (Op. 10/1). However, the "C minor as pathos" identification probably was cemented with the "Grande Sonate Pathétique," one of only two sonatas whose nickname was actually provided by Beethoven.

This trait is found most obviously in the first movement, with its conflict between the solemn Grave, which is so reminiscent of the opening of Bach's C minor Partita, and the hugely defiant Allegro. Only four of the sonatas have an introduction, and this, his first, is the lengthiest and most elaborate. It does far more than merely set the mood: it is heavily integrated with the rest of the movement.

A famous point of dispute between musicians occurs in the opening movement: some early editions of this sonata seem to indicate that the Introduction as well as the Allegro be repeated. The late Rudolf Serkin performed the sonata in this manner, as does at least one of his former students. I sympathize with anyone's desire to hear (or play) the introduction a second time. However, the overwhelming momentum of the Allegro suffers by the resulting interruption, and the devastating shock of the return to the introduction in G minor at the outset of the Development is completely lost. More importantly, how are we to handle Beethoven's contemporaneous Piano Quartet/Quintet, Op. 16, with its even longer introduction and identical ambiguity about the repeat? In that work, repeating the introduction sounds ludicrous. Doing so in the Pathétique is equally wrong.

Was the famous slow movement consciously or unconsciously influenced by the very similar middle section of the slow movement of Mozart's C minor sonata? Was it deliberately echoed, in turn, by Beethoven himself in the Adagio of his Ninth Symphony? We can never know such things: When someone pointed out to Brahms the resemblance between the finale of his first symphony and Beethoven's Ode to Joy, he responded "Any idiot knows that." However, when I intrepidly asked Aaron Copland about a striking kinship between the closing measures of The Cat and the Mouse and the introduction to Dukas' The Sorcerer's Apprentice, he acknowledged the resemblance, but then added that he'd never heard the Dukas piece when he'd composed his own work as a young man.

Like so many of Beethoven's adagios, this one has a troubled inner section in the minor key. His piano sonatas often contained textures associated with string quartet writing; here, one can easily envision a duet between the first violin and cello, accompanied by the nervous triplets in the second violin and viola parts. It is also characteristic of the composer's slow movements that some aspect of the contrasting middle section—in this case the triplet figures—remain present when the song-like opening theme returns.

The Finale may be the lightest of the three movements, but its thematic connections to the rest of the sonata run deep. The rhythm of the main theme is identical to that of the second theme in the opening movement. The middle section contains two links to the second movement: not only do they share the key of A flat major, but the melodic skeleton of Adagio is also maintained. Throughout the movement Beethoven also plays a teasing game with us: on four occasions there occurs a brilliant descending scale, beginning from the topmost F of the keyboard as he knew it. However, only in the last measure does he finally resolve it in the home key of C minor.

Sonata #9 in E Major, Opus 14 No. 1

Composed in 1778 - 1779; Published in 1799

Those who enjoy Beethoven only when he is storming the heavens will have to sit out both Op. 14 sonatas. These brief, unpretentious, and mostly good-humoured pieces are a wonderful foil for the dramatic Pathétique that immediately preceded them. Of course, nowhere is it written that a composition in a lighter

vein cannot be expertly crafted, and the first two movements of the E Major sonata are indeed the work of a master.

The opening theme, for instance, contains three ideas that at first glance seem quite disparate. However, they are strongly related. The first motive delineates four rising notes (B to E). Those notes are immediately compressed into a brief scurrying passage that is famous for giving nightmares to even the most pyrotechnically-endowed pianists. The theme concludes leisurely with a descending scale, the last four notes of which are-almost predictably-the first four in reverse. The remainder of the movement concerns itself with developing the scale-like material, but also hidden away in the fabric of the music is a simple two-note pattern, G-G#, that the composer delights in reintroducing in a variety of guises.

Early in his career, Beethoven was still wrestling with the matter of whether to include a minuet a livelier, trendier scherzo into his compositions. On this occasion, he skirted the issue by writing an unspecified, wistful Allegretto. This gentle work contrasts so satisfactorily with the outer movements that a genuine slow movement would have been superfluous.

A curious rondo concludes the sonata. As with the opening movement, the main theme is primarily concerned with scale-like motion, with progression from B to E again prominently featured. Now, the vast majority of Beethoven's themes are constructed so as to leave room for, and even demand, further growth and development, but this one never seems to be able to get off the ground. Furthermore, with a generous dose of repetitiveness as well as a busy middle section that may leave some listeners wondering why it is there, it is no wonder that the sonata ends so abruptly and unceremoniously! It is as though Beethoven were saying "Whew! I'm glad to be through with that one."

Incidentally, Beethoven later set this sonata as a string quartet. Although his doing so might be more illustrative of his creative financial dealings with his publishers than with any artistic creativity, the result is no mere transcription. As the famed British musician Donald Tovey wrote in his edition of the sonatas, a careful study of the quartet score sheds new light on Beethoven's piano style.

Sonata #10 in G Major, Opus 14 No. 2

Composed in 1798; Published in 1799

This good-humored sonata is an exact contemporary of the Pathétique, Op. 13. Beethoven possibly may have planned to include all three under a single opus number, but soon realized that the two lightweight inhabitants of Op. 14 hardly belong in the same galaxy as the Pathétique, let alone the same binding.

Jokes abound throughout the piece, beginning with the first measure, which is deliberately written so as to mislead the unsuspecting listener as to the placement of the main beat. The movement continues amiably until the relatively lengthy development section, where the mood becomes more serious, even confrontational. Rhythmic confusion begins again toward the end of the section, and the piece is forced to come to an abrupt, ugly halt on C#, a note as far away from G as we can get, before a return to the main theme—the sneakiest Beethoven ever composed—can be managed. He obviously liked the joke so much that he repeated it practically verbatim in the finale of his sixteenth sonata (G major, Op. 31/1).

The brief second movement is possibly the most unsophisticated in the canon. It is an unnamed set of variations in which the main theme is always discernible, while the speed of its embellishments increases from variation to variation. Interestingly, Beethoven never called movements of this type Variations, reserving that designation only for those works in which the theme itself is subjected to more profound transformations. One almost can imagine this movement having been written by a far less talented colleague, were it not for two touches that only Beethoven could have thought of: a four-bar interpolation just before final variation, and an audacious chord that brings the movement to a close.

The final movement is a rondo entitled Scherzo. Once again, the composer keeps the listener guessing: first about the time signature, then, about where the main beat is within the bar. A fitful piece, except for a lyrical episode, it keeps us off guard from beginning to end. Haydn would have loved it.

Sonata #11 in B flat Major, Opus 22

Composed in 1799 - 1800; Published in 1802

This is the first sonata where, instead of breaking new ground and probing the limits of every precept and process he can, Beethoven appears satisfied to rest on his laurels. Op. 22 is the most “normal” sonata he wrote—the one that most closely adheres to textbook descriptions of the form. Furthermore, it does not portray him in any of his most characteristic moments; it is not especially defiant, tragic, humorous, or brilliant. Nevertheless, he was particularly proud of it, according to a letter that he wrote to his publisher, and his pride is fully justified. Beethoven’s accomplishments to date in this genre are fully summed up in this work. Moreover, it would be hard to find a piece that better exemplifies the piano sonata at the end of the 18th century.

Still, even here, something new is afoot: the degree, and function, of pianistic figuration. The passage-work no longer merely provides self-conscious moments of brilliance as in, say, Op. 2/3: it becomes the very stuff out of which much of the work is cast, and forecasts pieces like the Waldstein and the fourth concerto.

This is also Beethoven’s most elegant sonata to date. From the start of his career, his ‘Haydnesque’ tendency to wring as much melodic content as he can from a few simple motives was present. However, in Op. 22, we also witness a ‘Mozartean’ sense of effortlessness in the way the themes flow into each other, especially in the opening movement. The utterly sublime slow mov’t is one of my personal favorites in the entire canon. With its simple accompanying chords in the left hand, it begins innocently, like a Grade 3 piano piece. However, once Beethoven has stated his material, the movement—in a full Sonata form—develops magically, with an almost unbearable degree of tension in the Development section.

The gracious, trouble-free Minuet begins with upward motion from D to F, as in the opening movement, followed by a turning motif that is derived from the Adagio. The trio is more intense, with most of the melodic interest maintained by the figurations in left hand. Although we “tune detectives,” can be a tiresome lot, we are here justified in noting a strong connection between this theme and an episode in Mozart’s Turkish Rondo.

The final movement is probably the most successful of Beethoven’s congenial, repetitive sonata-rondos. The second theme is reminiscent of that which he used for a set of G major variations familiar to many student pianists. The central section is a little sonatina—a form within a form, as it were—in which the main theme is that same G Major tune, while the second theme derives from a figuration that occurs in the first movement. More than one commentator has noted the resemblance between this movement and the finale to the Sonata, Op. 7, but whereas the earlier one ends softly, Beethoven must have decided that a sonata of this scope required a more decisive conclusion than he had provided the first time around.

Sonata #12 in A-flat Major, Opus 26

Composed in 1800 - 1801; Published in 1802

In 1802, any musician or educated music-lover who had been tracking Beethoven’s career would have come to expect a thematically unified work consisting of a dramatic, cogently-argued opening movement, followed by an intensely lyrical Adagio, possibly a witty minuet or scherzo, and finally, a relatively light closing movement. Against such expectations, the appearance of the suite-like Sonata in A flat, Op. 26 and

the two sonatas quasi una Fantasia of Op. 27, would not merely have been surprising. With their unorthodox ordering of movements, and the use of genres not normally associated with sonatas, they must have seemed as shocking as Beethoven's final sonata trilogy, Op. 109-111, composed two decades later.

The opening movement is a leisurely set of variations, based on an Andante that seems far more appropriate to a slow movement than to the beginning of a sonata. Although the relationship between the theme and each of the five variations is clear, there is little connection between the variations themselves, nor is there much of a cumulative effect when all are heard together. (Beethoven tacitly acknowledges each variation's separateness by concluding each with a full double bar, a practice not encountered in any of his other variation sets.)

For the first time in his four-movement piano sonatas, the Scherzo appears as the second movement rather than the third. The change of order was virtually a necessity here, given the slow pace of the opening movement. Nevertheless, Beethoven must have been satisfied with the result, because this was the order to which he would frequently return in many of his instrumental works.

A heroic funeral march serves as the slow movement. All the elements that characterize the genre are present—the lumbering dotted rhythm, a minor key, and a military salute featuring trumpets and drums. Beethoven must also have been satisfied with this idea, because he soon was to repeat the procedure in his *Eroica*. (Incidentally, it is not generally known that in 1815 he orchestrated this movement and included it in his incidental music to the now forgotten play *Leonore Prohaska*.)

Op. 26 is the first sonata to feature a *perpetuum mobile* finale, a technique he would employ in seven of his nine subsequent sonatas. The theme's gentle character is interrupted throughout the rondo by jarring syncopations in the second theme, and a middle section whose ferocity anticipates the finale of the *Moonlight*. The coda, while losing none of its momentum, quickly and effectively dissolves the sonata into nothingness.

Sonata #13 in E-flat Major, Opus 27 No. 1

Composed in 1800 - 1801; Published in 1802

This work, like the *Moonlight*, its better known bedfellow, represents one of the earliest attempts by Beethoven to create a succinct, unified sonata in which, for the first time in his piano music, individual movements are linked together without a break. A reprise of the slow movement following the finale likewise contributes to the work's unity, as does the fact that Beethoven derives virtually all the important themes in this sonata from two ideas: a falling third, and a rising arpeggio.

The most notable innovation in this piece is the dramatic shift in the work's centre of gravity. Until this point, the classical sonata's weightiest moments generally occurred in the two opening movements. However, this sonata breaks that tradition by intensifying as it progresses, with the Finale serving as its climax.

In order to underscore the importance of this structural change, and make it obvious, Beethoven may have deliberately composed as innocuous an opening theme to the sonata as he could. The subsequent variation even borders on silliness: this is one of the few places in Beethoven where the music is not, as Schnabel was fond of saying, "greater than it possibly can be played." The two intervening episodes and the coda are by far the most interesting sections of this rondo movement.

The work then deepens dramatically and suddenly. The second movement is the first example we have of Beethoven's dark, almost sinister scherzi. A songful slow movement is interrupted by the perpetual motion, driven Finale. Brilliant as it is, however, the Finale lacks the stamina to make it all the way to the finish line.

It stops suddenly, and while pausing for breath, the Adagio returns for one final reprise. A short Coda resumes the activity, and brings this unjustifiably neglected sonata to a brilliant conclusion.

Sonata #15 in D Major, Opus 28 “Pastorale”

Composed in 1801; Published in 1802

This sonata is something of an anomaly, given the six highly innovative sonatas from Op. 26 to 31 that surround it. It is, for Beethoven, a relatively conventional four-movement creation (his last) and is the most laid-back of the canon. There are few formal and harmonic experiments like those that characterize his previous sonatas; also absent is their strong dramatic presence. Still, as Donald Tovey points out, Op. 28 is “Pastoral” only in the sense that Jane Austin’s novels are. One only has to compare this masterful piece to Clementi’s Sonata Op. 40/3 (written almost at the same time, in the same key, and with a strikingly similar opening theme), to recognize the masterful quality that shines through from beginning to end. It is tightly unified; a descending scale from A to D is found in the opening themes of the first, second, and fourth movements. (One wonders whether Beethoven had at the back of his mind, the famous Bach Musette in D major we all played as children, which also begins with the same descending five notes.)

Two particularly striking moments in the opening movement bear specific mention. The ending of the first theme, in the right hand, becomes the basis of the closing theme in the left. Later, the Development section provides a classic instance of what Alfred Brendel terms foreshortening, in which more and more of a theme is chopped away, while the remainder is repeated again and again with increasing insistence.

The processional Andante follows, accompanied by a cello-like pizzicato bass line. Lest we labour under the misunderstanding that this is another funeral march, Beethoven provides a fairly jocular Trio. Towards the end, however, the movement deepens significantly, and when the Trio is briefly reprised, its far more menacing qualities are also revealed.

The Scherzo begins ambiguously, with four descending unison F sharps that could easily imply several different keys. It is only when those notes are answered that we know that Beethoven is remaining in the home key of D Major. His humorous use of silence in this movement is also especially noteworthy. The Trio anticipates a trick Chopin often used in the Mazurkas, in which the melody remains constant while the surrounding harmonies alter with each iteration.

Op. 28 marks the first instance in a Beethoven sonata where a deliberately-paced Finale is followed by a brief, fast coda. It is the most “pastoral” of the four movements, with the opening measures wonderfully evoking the sound of country bagpipes (decidedly not the Black Watch variety) in the distance.

Sonata #18 in E flat Major, Opus 31 No. 3 “The Hunt”

Composed in 1802; Published in 1804

This work was to be Beethoven’s final four-movement sonata aside from the Hammerklavier. Its layout is quite unusual. There is no slow movement: instead, the composer provides both a Scherzo and a Minuet. (Had Beethoven appeared on the late-night Dietrich Leitemann TV show, the gap-toothed comic might have quipped: “What’s the matter, Lou? After composing 17 sonatas, you still can’t make up your mind?”)

Like the other two Op. 31 sonatas, this one begins unusually. Instead of positing a thesis or statement, Beethoven asks a question. Moreover, throughout the movement, like an insecure child, he asks the same question over and over again, even though the answer is provided on each occasion by a parent whose patience exceeds that of anyone else listening to (or performing) the piece.

The Scherzo is equally unorthodox. Until now, Beethoven's scherzi have essentially been fast, triple-metered minuets, with contrasting Trios. This one breaks with both traditions: it is a quick march in 2/4 time, and is cast in a sonata form, complete with a repeat of the opening section. Its most distinguishing characteristics are the perpetual-motion accompaniment in the left hand, and the sudden explosive chords that temporarily halt the movement's continuous motion. The surprise ending is truly one of the composer's masterstrokes.

The Minuet—Beethoven's final free-standing one for solo piano—is characterized by a complete absence of the vigour and rhythmic thrust of most classical minuets by Haydn and Mozart, as well as those by Beethoven himself. Instead, this beautiful piece is filled with nostalgia and sentiment, as though the composer is reluctantly taking his leave of the eighteenth century. *

Beethoven's student, Karl Czerny, claimed that the composer told him that he was inspired by the sound of a horseman riding wildly outside his window as he composed the finale to the D minor Sonata, Op. 31/2. There may have been a breakdown of communication between them, due either to Beethoven's deafness or a lapse in Czerny's memory. It requires a stretch of the imagination to hear the last movement of Op. 31/2 (marked Allegretto) in that manner. However, very few pieces better evoke the image of a furious gallop than the Finale of Op. 31/3. It begins breathlessly with the sound of hooves clattering on the cobblestones. Later on, hunting horn calls are added to the mix, and the movement continues to a joyous conclusion with only a tiny break just before the final phrase.

* Later, in his Symphony No. 8, he would return to the minuet form to parody it, rather than, as in this sonata, to pay homage to a beloved genre that he realized had outlived its time.

Sonata No. 19 in G Minor, Op. 49/1 — Composed circa 1797; Published in 1805

Sonata No. 20 in G Major, Op. 49/2 — Composed in 1795-96; Published in 1805

Despite their opus number, the two Op. 49 sonatas are early works, published without the composer's consent at his brother's instigation. One can readily understand Beethoven's annoyance: they are quite unfinished, especially with respect to their unusually sparse dynamic markings, which Beethoven invariably treated not simply as "expression marks," but as an important aspect of a work's structure. More importantly, for all the sonatas' allure, they no longer reflected his compositional skills in 1805, and he would not have wanted them regarded as representative of his current work. It is for those reasons that some pianists and commentators argue that these pieces should be excluded from the canon of Beethoven's piano sonatas, and grouped instead with the remainder of his juvenilia.

Still, they were composed very shortly before Beethoven launched his career in earnest, and are much closer in quality to his earliest published works than to the student pieces he had written previously. Occasionally, they even exhibit a surprising degree of sophistication. The opening movement of the G minor sonata is a tragic Andante. This in itself is unusual—slow first movements were rare in the classical era—but more interesting is the fact that both themes share a common rhythm. In the first movement of the G major sonata, the relationship is even subtler: the second theme is derived from the latter portion of the first.

Both finales are light rondos. The first combines a formal scheme that is characteristic of Mozart, blended with a humorous quality reminiscent of Haydn. The final movement of No. 2 opens with the theme that Beethoven subsequently used in the minuet of his Septet, Op. 20. Considering that he virtually disowned the Septet, imagine his anger at seeing what is tantamount to a sketch of one of its movements published several years later without his knowledge.

For all their youthfulness, the Op. 49 sonatas are delightful, charming pieces. It is small wonder that they are so often used as an introduction to Beethoven for young pianists. Nevertheless, they do deserve a more serious outing every so often...

Sonata #22 in F Major, Op. 54

Composed in 1804; Published in 1806

What are we to make of this curious, unassuming work that separates the heroic Waldstein and Appassionata Sonatas? Should we read anything into its lack of a dedication, seemingly a wasted opportunity for one of the more politically astute composers in history? Is it an indication that Beethoven realized that it hadn't quite come off? Could he have intended it as a heavy-handed burlesque of less talented composers' efforts, along the lines of Mozart's Musical Joke, or perhaps even his own eighth symphony? Or should we cast our votes with pianists Edwin Fischer and Alfred Brendel, both of whom have written that it is an important work (without really explaining why)?

The truth probably lies somewhere within all these assertions. In this sonata, Beethoven explored a number of radical techniques for the first time, while disguising the sonata's experimental nature with the use of humour, so as to deflect any criticism of the piece.

In the opening movement Beethoven attempts a juxtaposition and ultimate reconciliation of two diametrically opposing ideas: an elegant, gentle minuet and a crude, heavily accented octave exercise. The minuet occurs three times, becoming increasingly ornate with each repetition, finally dissolving into trills. Interspersed are the two octave passages. They begin similarly, but partway through the second of these, Beethoven suddenly breaks off, as though he realizes that this experiment simply is not working, and returns to the minuet. He becomes contrite in the coda when, as though to atone for his sins, he delivers the movement's finest music.

In the second movement we find the composer experimenting with structure. The thematic material, admittedly, can be shoe-horned into some kind of sonata form, but with the proportions of each section totally askew: The opening exposition is only 3 lines long, while the remainder of the movement occupies more than five pages. Furthermore, the imbalance is magnified because Beethoven specifically indicates that the lengthy second section be repeated. Perceptually, the effect is one of the composer leading us all over the map for several minutes, at a hypnotic pace that according to Donald Tovey, nothing can hurry and nothing can stop. Finally, Beethoven decides that enough is enough, and races us for the concluding double bar, leaving us all out of breath when we arrive there. The laugh is on us!

Some of the techniques he first explored here would be repeated with more notable success in subsequent keyboard works. The progressively increasing decorativeness in each repetition of the minuet can also be heard in both the slow movement of Op. 57 and the final variation of the third movement of Op. 109. The juxtaposition of two seemingly incompatible ideas in the opening movement of Op. 54 is again worked out in the first movement of Op. 109. Finally, Beethoven was sufficiently satisfied with the finale that he immediately used a similar in his very next piano sonata, the Appassionata, both with respect to the tempo and asymmetrical ground plan.

Sonata #24 in F# Major, Opus 78

Composed in 1809; Published in 1810

This is first of three relatively brief piano sonatas that appeared four years after the Appassionata. Its brevity, however, is not an indication that it is a slight work; indeed, Beethoven claimed that this sonata was one of his favorites. (Presumably, he was sufficiently objective not to allow his special affection for the

sonata's dedicatee, Therese von Brunsvik, as well what may have been more than affection for her sister Josephine, to color his judgment.)

Anyone believing that keys lost their distinctive personalities following the introduction of the well-tempered system of tuning need not look further than this sonata. Try playing the introduction in G or F major, then play it in the proper key of F#. The difference is astonishing; the piece becomes so dark, so haunting! No wonder Beethoven wouldn't have been bothered in the slightest by the fact that the pianist has to "walk on eggs" in order to play the rest of the sonata!

The miraculous four-measure introduction sets the stage and the mood of the remainder of the movement, with the cantabile feeling moderating all the harmonic and rhythmic contrasts that follow.

The main theme of this exuberant, kaleidoscopic second movement is based on a three-note idea that appears inconspicuously in the first movement, followed immediately by the refrain, *Britannia rules the Waves*, from Thomas Arne's anthem *Rule Britannia*. (This could be a coincidence, although Beethoven knew the theme well, having composed a set of piano variations on the English melody in 1803.) Good humour abounds through the continuous two-note chirrups, the sudden changes in register, and even the sharp major-minor shifts. One of the movement's finest touches occurs just prior to each return of the main theme, when the composer keeps us guessing about exactly when it will happen. Also in evidence is Beethoven's genius for knowing precisely how to end a movement.

Sonata #25 in G Major, Opus 79

Composed in 1809; Published in 1810

This is the second of three relatively brief sonatas that followed the *Appassionata*. Beethoven described it in a letter to his publisher as *Sonatine facile*. However, although of sonatina length, it is not sonatina-like in its detailed working out; nor is it particularly facile to jouer.

The opening movement is marked *Presto alla Tedesca* (i.e. a fast waltz). Toward the beginning of the Development section, Beethoven discovered that, if you eliminate the first note of the opening three-note theme, you are left with a falling motive that sounds like a cuckoo clock. His amusement at this discovery knows no bounds! He repeats it for us time and time again. Then, at the end of the movement, he has another go or two at the idea, just to ensure we have not forgotten his jest.

The lilting, melancholy second movement forecasts the *Venetian Boat Songs* of Mendelssohn, while the finale is a miniature rondo in which the main theme alternates with two epigrammatic sections. (Beethoven would use that theme again in the first movement of the sonata, Op. 109.) The coda provides a surprise ending that perfectly sums up the jocular mood of this delightful movement.

Sonata #26 in E flat Major, Opus 81a "Das Lebewohl" (also called "Les Adieux")

Composed in 1809 - 1810; Published in 1811

Op. 81a is a transitional work: the sonic landscape of the introduction presages some of his late compositions, while other portions could easily have been written a few years earlier. This sonata is also unusual in three respects that have nothing to do with the music itself.

Of all the sonatas, this is the only one with an explicit program. Archduke Rudolph, a close friend and sponsor of Beethoven, was forced to leave Vienna due to the imminent Napoleonic invasion, and Beethoven composed this work with the movements representing, respectively, his friend's farewell, his absence, and their reunion. (He even delayed completion of the finale until Rudolph actually returned to

Vienna). It is also no coincidence that this is also the first sonata in which the original titles and principal tempo indications are in German. To employ even common musical terms such as Allegro and Andante was politically incorrect at this time because Italian was the Napoleon's native language*.

Lastly, the work owes its unusual opus number to the fact that it was bound with a sextet for two horns and string quartet (Op. 81b) which Beethoven had composed much earlier. Although the grouping of several similar compositions under a single opus number was still relatively common (although no longer so for Beethoven, whose works were in such demand that he could sell each one individually), this type of "dog's breakfast" publication was always a rare occurrence.

The sonata is not only programmatic, but also highly pictorial. The first three notes of the introduction bring to mind a post-horn call. One can almost imagine the Archduke's horses' neighing in the flourish immediately preceding the main theme, following which, the left hand imitates the clattering of coach wheels while the sharp, rising three notes in the right hand depict the cracking of the driver's whip. Also, in the coda, it is not hard to picture, in the winding down of the tempo and the spreading of the hands, the Archduke's coach disappearing from view. The second movement wonderfully evokes a sense of loneliness, while the third, complete with fanfare, conjures up the joy and excitement of seeing a close friend after a lengthy absence.

Yet, for all the programmatic content, the sonata is rigorously constructed, beginning with the Introduction, which is totally integrated with the rest of the composition. Indeed, the opening three notes are the source of virtually all the important material of the first movement. In various transformations, that motto also plays a meaningful role in the remainder of the sonata. All three movements are in fairly standard sonata forms, except for the deeply expressive Andante, which lacks a development section. The Finale, with its E-flat major scales and arpeggios, is highly reminiscent of the Emperor Concerto, written around the same time.

* "Les Adieux" was the last name Beethoven would have chosen, and not simply because of anti-French sentiment. Beneath the important descending three-note motto with which the Sonata begins, the composer wrote the syllables, Le-be-wohl, whose meaning in German - 'live well' - is quite different than the French 'good-bye,' or 'God be with you'.

Sonata #27 in E Minor, Opus 90

Composed in 1814; Published in 1815

The years 1812-1814 were the least productive of Beethoven's career. No wonder: the combination of particularly severe personal stress, a sharp decline in his hearing, and the impact of the recent Napoleonic occupation could hardly have been conducive to the incredible productivity that had characterized his output in the 19th century's first decade. (He did remain busy during those years, but it was 'busy work' that principally occupied him: the creation of patriotic pieces like Wellington's Victory and The Glorious Moment, which were written to commemorate the Congress of Vienna, several folksong settings, and the final revision of Fidelio.) The sonata in E minor, Op. 90 marks a return to more serious composition. Perhaps coincidentally, Beethoven appears to have "picked up where he left off" with the principal thematic germ of the first movement—the three-note descending motif, G-F#-E—remarkably like his previous sonata's (Op. 81a) main theme, G-F-E flat. The two ideas are even developed similarly in places.

As with all his mature two-movement sonatas, each movement contrasts sharply with the other. In the opening, highly concentrated movement, two dissimilar ideas are presented at the outset, and it is these themes that Beethoven ultimately subjects to extensive development. Especially masterful is the manner in which, at the end of the development section, the composer ruminates about the first of these motives—three descending notes—to the point where the rhythm of the movement almost dissolves completely. However, just before chaos sets in, the music regains its momentum, and the main theme emerges out of the prior dissolution of the musical material.

The concluding movement is not only the last of the five congenial Rondos to appear in his piano sonatas, but is as leisurely, lyrical, and repetitive a finale as he was ever to compose. (Some commentators refer to it as 'Schubertian' because of its melodiousness, but with the exception of a cadence just before the movement's conclusion, that particular reference eludes these ears.) Thank goodness Beethoven knew a good tune when he wrote it: it occurs virtually unadorned sixteen times over the course of the movement. Beethoven knows exactly what he is up to, however, and teases us at the sonata's conclusion, pretending that the movement is going to continue even more. Suddenly, he decides that enough is enough and as abruptly as this sentence, the music stops cold.

Sonata #30 in E Major, Op. 109

Composed in 1820; Published in 1821

With his gigantic Hammerklavier of 1818, Beethoven had taken the piano sonata as far as it could go in anything resembling a traditional format. If he was not to repeat himself, any subsequent effort would have to lead the form into uncharted waters, and his three final sonatas, Op. 109-111, composed between 1820 and 1823, are indeed unlike any others written previously.

As revolutionary as these sonatas are from so many standpoints, they reach backward for much of their originality. Late in his career, Beethoven seemed to undertake a conscious exploration of his musical roots, and in Op. 109, he was clearly preoccupied with the Baroque era. With its shifting moods and tempi, the opening movement almost seems to hearken back to the free organ fantasies of Bach and his predecessors, while the last movement, for reasons I will soon explain, could almost be called Beethoven's Goldberg Variations.

Beethoven did not only pay homage to other composers in his later works; he sometimes echoed himself. This is the case of the main theme of the first movement, which is derived from the finale of his sonata, Op. 79. However, the most striking feature of the opening movement is its extreme conciseness. It obeys all the conventions of sonata form, but the main theme—if you can call that sort of noodling a theme—is over

almost before it begins. The brief, sharply contrasting secondary material gives us another rare glimpse of Beethoven's improvisatory skills. It is only in the central development section that he lets us feel comfortable enough to settle back, unwrap our cellophane-covered candy, and listen to the music. Soon, however, the unsettled material returns, and a coda brings the movement to a peaceful, yet uneasy close.

The middle movement, a wild Tarantella, immediately shatters this calm. Although listeners would be justified in assuming that the main theme is in the right hand, it is the left hand's counter-theme that Beethoven later subjects to substantial development.

In his last sonatas, Beethoven reserves his most sublime thoughts for the finales, and Op. 109, with its glorious set of variations, is no exception. Unlike the second movement of the *Appassionata*, where one variation leads almost imperceptibly into the next, each variation here is discrete and distinctive. The subtle, almost intangible, links between them attest to Beethoven's masterful skill as a spiritual travel guide. I earlier referred to this movement as Beethoven's *Goldberg Variations*. There are three reasons for this comparison: both themes share a similar Sarabande-like rhythm; both sets make copious use of imitative counterpoint; and at the conclusion of both works, the composer restates the theme almost verbatim, allowing us a few extra moments to reflect on how many changes the themes—and we—have undergone since their initial occurrence.

Sonata #32 in C Minor, Opus 111

Composed in 1821–1822; Published in 1823

Yin and Yang are perfectly reflected in the two movements of Beethoven's final sonata, in which the nervous, pent-up energy of the concise opening movement gives way to the utter serenity and timelessness of the second.

Here, as in many of his late works, Beethoven was consciously exploring his musical roots. The first movement clearly has its origins in the French Overture, a standard genre of the Baroque period. Its principal components were a slow introduction in dotted rhythms, followed by a fast fugal section. (A kinship with the Introduction to that of his earlier *Pathétique* Sonata, also in C minor, also cannot be overlooked.)

A terrifying trill in the lower bass leads to a statement of the explosive, defiant three-note main theme. Like a caged beast, it tries again and again to escape its bonds, and finally breaks free, with an energetic fugue. The second theme, although very different from the first, is similarly constricted and requires several attempts to break out of its constraints. The fugal Development section is unusually short for a piece of this scope and an overall sense of restlessness and frustration soon returns. The key changes from C minor to C major in the brief coda, but this is not the joyful C major of Op. 2/3 or the triumphant C major of the close of the Fifth Symphony. Rather, the mood is one of resignation and acceptance.

The second movement is, in my opinion, the most sublime, transcendental work written for piano. With the theme's stark simplicity, the astonishing sonorities that Beethoven explores over the course of the piece, and the final drive to the movement's climax and release, its profundity is unmatched in the entire repertoire.

Beethoven's obsession in the latter part of his career with the interval of the third is here extended to the number 'three' in general. The time signature is 9/8 (or three times 3/8), and without exception, each beat in every measure is similarly subdivided and sub-subdivided. Although not termed as such, the movement is a set of continuous variations that are characterized by a process of increasing rhythmic animation, while the theme and accompanying harmonies remain constant. *

Variations 1 through 3 increase the rhythmic activity to the point where Beethoven seems to be straining at our earthly confines, much like the buffeting an airplane must endure before breaking the sound barrier. (So active and syncopated is Variation 3 that some wishful commentators have suggested that the beginnings of jazz date from this point.) Variation 4 is a so-called double variation: the repeat of each section receives totally different treatment than its initial iteration. Here, the rhythm is broken down into even smaller rhythmic subdivisions (a background rumble or a pointillistic elaboration of the melody). The boundaries of everyday existence are now behind us; our spirits are in free flight. A lengthy interlude follows, featuring trills, music's ultimate thematic disintegration. Then, when all is dust, Beethoven begins reassembling his material. Finally, the theme begins again, like a phoenix rising from the ashes, transporting us to a state of spiritual ecstasy that will continue into infinity, even after all is silent...

* It is interesting that, as with the middle movement of the Appassionata and the slow movement of the Archduke Trio, Beethoven never entitled this type of composition a set of variations. He reserved that designation only for movements such as those in the Sonatas Op. 26 and 109, in which each variation is far more of a distinct entity.

— *fin* —