

# The Mind of Beethoven

## A Performer's Perspective

One of the lasting rewards of performing and recording Ludwig van Beethoven's thirty-two piano sonatas is the privilege of getting to know the creator's mind, of identifying the ideas, values, and visions that were the catalysts for his continued productivity in this form. The challenge is to identify these recurring patterns in their vast variety and over a lifetime of artistic evolution.

I have identified seven specific artistic aims and techniques that are central to Beethoven's creative process. The following list, while somewhat arbitrary, begins to provide a window into "the mind of Beethoven."

### Originality

(1) A desire to surprise, startle, and delight the listener. Beethoven was wary of convention, and found myriad ways of avoiding predictability by playing with expectations, sometimes humorously, sometimes to startlingly innovative effect, but never in a gratuitously shocking way. He accomplishes this goal by the originality of his themes, novel ways of developing them, and creating structural surprises that humorously or dramatically deny our Classical expectations.

### Orchestration

(2) Instrumental colors and textures. In attempting an understanding of Beethoven's piano writing, it is helpful to become familiar with his entire output, especially the string quartets and symphonies. The richly homogeneous texture of the string quartet is often found in slow movements, as in the Adagio molto of Op. 10/1. Tonality and texture sometimes suggest woodwind writing, as in the opening of the late sonata Op. 110, or the horn duet opening the "Lebe wohl" sonata Op. 81a. Many orchestral textures can be found in the piano sonatas, evoking strings, winds, or timpani writing (as in the repeated low C's in the recapitulation of the "Appassionata"). For performer and listener alike, these instrumental dimensions provide opportunities for an enhanced perception of the composer's imagination and of the piano's coloristic capabilities.

### Drama

(3) Operatic aspects. Beethoven was obsessed by the desire to write operas, in which, as a moral idealist, he yearned to embody his beliefs in theatrical form. One operatic element that he uses in his piano sonatas is the recitative, a form of sung speech found, most tellingly, in the "Tempest" Sonata, Op. 31, no. 2. According to Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny, the use of the pedal is supposed to create an echo effect "as if coming from a cave," a haunting and powerful image of loneliness and abandonment.

Another dramatic effect with psychological overtones is what I call the "stern/pleading duet," a juxtaposition of implacable force with vulnerable humanity, of which the most

wrenching example is the Adagio of the Fourth Piano Concerto, in which the powerful orchestral string unison vies with the quiet, pleading voice of the soloist. One example in the piano sonatas is the *ff* bass and *p* treble exchange in the Adagio of Op. 2/3 (mm. 26–36).

One operatic image that recurs in the piano sonatas is the stark opening of the second act of *Fidelio*: a dark stage where the prisoner languishes in despair. In piano music, darkness can be represented by the low register, as in the *pp* start in the *Introduzione* of the "Waldstein" sonata, Op. 53. To me, this movement represents desolation, arriving at the final *Allegretto* as a symbol of rescue and hope.

### Nature

(4) Nature as mystical inspiration. To Beethoven, nature represented a reflection of the divine. In one of his notebooks, he wrote: "I am happy, blissful in the forest: every tree speaks through you, O God! What splendor!" In the piano sonatas, one can find its manifestation in many forms: benevolence ("Pastorale" sonata, Op. 28), bliss (Adagio, "Tempest" sonata), threat (opening of "Appassionata"), and storm (finale, "Moonlight" sonata, Op. 27/2). As in the "Pastoral" symphony, there is a love of village life, a Romantic symbol of folk simplicity and wisdom.

### Illness and healing

(5) One of Beethoven's most intimate friends, Antonie Brentano, wrote to her sister-in-law Bettina: "He visits me often, almost daily, and then he plays spontaneously because he has an urgent need to alleviate suffering, and he feels he is able to do so with his heavenly sounds..." There is no doubt that the composer, who himself suffered from many physical ailments, found musical ways to describe the ravages of disease followed by the renewal of strength and the blessings of healing. The most powerful expression of this idea is in the *Molto adagio* of his String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132, which bears the inscription "Holy Song of Thanks by a Convalescent, to the Divinity, in the Lydian Mode."

A similar stream-of-consciousness scene of weakness and regained strength is depicted in the finale of the Sonata in A-flat major, Op. 110: which alternates an "arioso dolente" (song of suffering), with a vast, restorative fugue followed by a return of the arioso, this time marked *perdendo le forze, dolente* (losing strength, lamenting), after which the inversion of the fugue is stated with detailed instructions: *sempre una corda* (muted), *poi a poi di nuovo vivente* (gradually reviving). The gradual return of strength is indicated later by removing the mute (*poi a poi tutte le corde*), and by a speeding up of the pace (*poi a poi più moto*), finally bringing the piece to a close with a joyfully exhilarating restatement of the original fugue subject, harmonized by excited accompanying figures. In its vast stream-of-consciousness scenario, this is truly Beethoven's pianistic opera.

### Improvisation

(6) Improvisation as compositional device. Beethoven was a masterful improviser, as noted by numerous contemporary witnesses. As he matured, he increasingly used improvisatory passages in his sonatas, making them part of the overall structure. This technique is best seen in the transition to the finale of Op. 101, where the theme of the first movement gradually becomes the inspiration for the fourth movement by transforming three notes: E–C#–B. It is inspiring to be allowed, through this device, a glimpse into the creative thinking of the Master. As an example of this stream-of-consciousness compositional process, listen also to the introduction to the final fugue in the “Hammerklavier” Sonata, as Beethoven samples various Baroque forms (prelude, fantasia, toccata) through a cycle of descending thirds, until he finally arrives at his bold fugal subject.

### Transcendence

(7) The search for transcendence. By his maturity, Beethoven had traversed an immense journey in his development as a composer, moving beyond the Classical traditions inherited from his immortal predecessors, Haydn and Mozart. One of the forms that allowed him to explore new territory was the Classical composer’s bread and butter, the theme with variations. In the final movements of two of his last sonatas, Op. 109 in E major and Op. 111 in C minor, he explores all aspects of musical expression, creating cumulative narratives of unprecedented power. In the finale of Op. 111 he begins his quest for transcendence with a simple Arietta in C major, marked Adagio molto semplice e cantabile. After many transformations, a sublime texture emerges: the theme in high register, surrounded by trills above and murmuring triplets below, creating a magical sense of heavenly glow. This is the Master marking his farewell to the piano sonata with a statement of resignation and ultimate peace.

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Hailed as “a marvelous pianist” by the New York Times, Peter Takács has established himself as a distinguished performer, teacher, and lecturer. Winner of the William Kapell International Competition, he has appeared in recital, chamber music, and with orchestra in the United States, Europe, and Asia.

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