



Pearson

L van Beethoven: 1st Movement from Piano Sonata no. 8 in C minor ‘Pathétique’ (for component 3: Appraising)

Background information and performance circumstances

The composer

Ludwig van Beethoven was born in 1770 in the western German city of Bonn. As a young man he moved to Vienna in Austria, where he became known as a **virtuoso** pianist. ‘Virtuoso’ means displaying considerable skill and agility in difficult ‘showy’ music.

Beethoven performed his own improvisations and compositions, as well as music by other composers. He played mainly in the salons (large social rooms) of wealthy aristocrats, but he also gave grander-scale concerts. At this early stage of his career at the end of the 18th century, he performed his first two piano concertos (pieces for piano and orchestra). He also wrote piano trios (pieces for piano, violin and cello). Much of his greatest music at this time and later was contained in his piano sonatas. A **sonata** is a piece for solo instrument and contains three or sometimes four **movements**, each with a different **tempo** (speed).

At this stage Beethoven was beginning to go deaf, though the problem wasn’t severe enough yet for him to give up performing. The situation worsened rapidly in the next few years and he even contemplated suicide. In later years he was able to continue composing despite being totally deaf.

The ‘Pathétique’ Sonata

This piece was his eighth published sonata and was written between 1796 and 1799. It was dedicated to one of the Viennese aristocrats, Prince Karl von Lichnowsky. The French term *pathétique* means ‘moving’ or ‘emotional’. It was used by the publisher in the first edition. It certainly demonstrated a new passionate musical style. Beethoven is regarded as one of the great composers of the **Classical** period together with Mozart and Haydn, both of whom he knew. To a certain extent, though, this piece shows early signs of the **Romantic** style to come.

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Beethoven knew Mozart's sonata in C minor, K 457, which had been written around 15 years earlier, and he would have been influenced by that composition. Beethoven's piece is more revolutionary still in its extreme use of dynamics and unusual structure.

The Instrument

When Beethoven wrote this piece at the end of the 18th century, the piano had almost completely replaced the harpsichord as the keyboard instrument of choice for the home and concert hall. Even so, it was still seen as a recent invention and had only started to be used widely around 20 years earlier. There were frequent new developments in the instrument's power, tone quality and sustaining ability.

At the time the instrument was often known as the **fortepiano**. Whether you call it that or the more modern **pianoforte**, the clue to the popularity of the instrument is in its name. *Piano* is the Italian for 'soft'. *Forte* means 'loud'. It was now possible to play using all kinds of **dynamic** levels just by altering the pressure of the fingers on the keys. On a harpsichord, the mechanical action meant that on basic instruments there was no way of changing the dynamics – it could only be done by having an extra keyboard, or by using a lever or 'coupling' mechanism.

Mozart and Haydn had started to use dynamic markings, but Beethoven was one of the first to make extensive use of all kinds of dynamic possibilities. This sonata has frequent **crescendos**, **diminuendos** and numerous other performance markings.

The **sustaining pedal** was coming into use at the time and was sometimes worked by the knees instead of by the foot. It is important to note that in the original edition of the music there were no pedal markings, although Beethoven would almost certainly have used some kind of sustaining system in his own performances.

Structure

The first movement is written in **sonata form**, a complex structure used in the first and sometimes last movements of sonatas, symphonies and other works of the **Classical period**. It features an **exposition** section containing the two main **subjects**, the first in the **tonic** (main home key), the second in the **dominant** or other **related key**. A subject is a **theme** (main tune) or group of themes. The exposition is then repeated.

It is followed by a **development** section where the earlier tunes are altered, especially by **modulating** to different keys. Then a **recapitulation** restates the exposition but with both subjects now mainly in the tonic key. Pieces often then end with a rounding-off section called a **coda**.

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<p>Slow introduction Bars 1–10</p>	<p>Introductions were unusual in piano sonatas, though Haydn's symphonies of the time often contained them. The music here is at a solemn grave tempo (pronounced 'grahvay') – very slow. There is a distinctive six-note motif (short melodic idea) in homophonic texture at the start. This motif is used throughout the introduction in different textures and keys. Sometimes the first note is left out, and sometimes the second last note rises to the final note instead of descending.</p> <p>The introduction also contains rapid scalic flourishes, and ends with a long descending chromatic scale. The music is in the key of C minor, modulating briefly to the relative major key of E ♭ .</p> <p>There is constant dynamic contrast here and in the rest of the piece, with frequent use of fortepiano (loud, then immediately soft) and sforzando (sudden loud accent on an individual note or chord).</p>
<p>Exposition First subject Bars 11–50</p>	<p>The exposition is marked <i>Allegro di molto e con brio</i> (very fast and with vigour). The first subject theme in C minor (tonic) rises mainly scalically a distance of two octaves – over a tonic pedal in the bass. The music is marked with staccato – meaning detached (separate) notes. A subsidiary theme begins at bar 27 and features sforzandos and descending arpeggios.</p> <p>A transition based on the main theme – using sequences begins at bar 35 and modulates towards the expected key of E ♭ major through dominant preparation.</p>
<p>Second subject Bars 51–132</p>	<p>The second subject begins in the unexpected key of E ♭ minor. The theme features a distinctive acciaccatura ornament and hand-crossing technique, where the right hand moves down over the left hand to play four <i>staccato</i> notes, before returning. The theme continues with a stepwise descending phrase featuring mordents.</p> <p>A new theme begins in bar 89 in the relative major key of E ♭ . It has a new broken chord texture. There is a crescendo while the hands move in contrary motion.</p> <p>Finally, a third theme begins at bar 113. This makes much use of scalic melody. It reinforces the new E ♭ major key. This final section can also be called a codetta (short rounding-off section).</p> <p>The whole exposition is then repeated.</p>
<p>Development Bars 133–194</p>	<p>The development begins with four bars of the introduction material, now in the dominant key of G minor. This is a very unusual structural feature.</p> <p>The <i>allegro</i> then introduces the main first subject theme in the unrelated key of E minor. Fragments of the theme are heard in the bass from bar 149.</p>

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	<p>Long dominant preparation begins at bar 167 where the dominant note G is played in rapid alternating octaves in the bass as a pedal.</p> <p>A passage of trills leads to a descending monophonic quaver passage in the right hand.</p>
Recapitulation Bars 195–294	<p>The recapitulation repeats the music of the exposition but alters the keys of the second subject material. This time the second subject starts in the subdominant – F minor – (bar 221) before moving to the expected tonic key. All three main musical ideas of the second subject are heard and the recapitulation finishes with two fortissimo diminished seventh chords.</p>
Coda Bars 295 to the end	<p>Four bars of the introduction, with silence on the first beat (a very unusual idea), leads to 12 bars of <i>allegro</i> with the first subject theme. The music ends with <i>fortissimo</i> perfect cadences (using dominant seventh) in the tonic key.</p>

Tonality

- The **key** of the piece is **C minor**.
- The music modulates to a number of related keys, including E ♭ major (the **relative major** key) and the **subdominant** (F minor).
- It also modulates to **unrelated keys** such as E minor at the beginning of the development section.

Harmony

- The music features many **chromatic chords**, especially **diminished sevenths** (e.g. half way through bar 1).
- There are distinctive **perfect cadences** at the end of the movement.
- There is an **interrupted cadence** in the introduction at bar 9.
- Use of **Circle of fifths** bars 244 - 249
- Use of augmented 6th chords, e.g. bars 30 and 34.

Melody

- The music of the slow introduction is based on a short (six note) **motif**, first heard at the beginning. This is used as a basis for most of the introduction, sometimes reduced to five notes, and sometimes with the second last note rising instead of falling.
- There are a number of **scalic** passages, such as the **descending chromatic scale** at the end of the introduction. The first subject theme from bar 11 of the *allegro* is built on an **ascending scale** of the tonic key C minor, but with a major third (E). Notice the distinctive **augmented second** from A ♭ to B♭.
- Melodic lines also include **arpeggios** and **broken chords** (e.g. bars 29–30).
- **Ornaments** are an important feature of the second subject in particular. These include **acciaccaturas** at bar 53 etc., **mordents** shortly afterwards, and **trills** just before the recapitulation.

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Texture

- The slow introduction includes many passages of **homophonic** (chordal) writing (e.g. bar 1).
- The right hand plays in **octaves** later in the introduction (e.g. bar 5).
- There is a long descending **monophonic** passage in the right hand leading into the recapitulation.
- The second subject material features **melody and accompaniment** style – you can also call this **homophony** (or **melody-dominated homophony**).
- There are examples of **two-part** music with **broken chords** in the second idea of the second subject (e.g. bar 93).
- There is a brief passage in **thirds** where the trills are (e.g. bars 181–187).

Tempo, metre and rhythm

- The introduction is marked **grave** (very slow). The time signature is **common time**.
- **Dotted rhythm** is an important feature of the piece (e.g. bar 1).
- There are some very rapid notes, including **septuplets** and $1/128^{\text{th}}$ notes in bar 10.
- The main *allegro di molto e con brio* (very fast with vigour) section is in **alla breve** time (or **cut time**) – a fast two in the bar.
- **Continuous quavers** are a distinctive feature of the accompaniment of the first subject.
- **Staccato crotchets** are important in the right hand of the first subject.

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