

2024 International Conference on Educational Information Technology, Scientific Advances and Management (TSAM 2024)

Exploring the Musical Styles of Beethoven's Middle Period through the Piano Sonata Op. 90

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Received: May 21, 2024

Accepted: June 22, 2024

Online Published: August 05, 2024

doi:10.22158/mmse.v6n2p69

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/mmse.v6n2p69>

Abstract

Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 90 represents the pinnacle of his compositional achievements during his middle period, showcasing significant transformations and advancements in his musical style. This paper analyses the structure and technical features of Piano Sonata Op. 90, including its two-movement sonata, the treatment of thematic material, and the application of polyphonic techniques. These elements illustrate the stylistic evolution from Beethoven's middle to his late periods. A detailed musical analysis of Piano Sonata Op. 90 reveals how Beethoven integrated classical and Romantic elements within this work, thereby foreshadowing the technical and spiritual developments of his late period compositions. Furthermore, the paper discusses specific performance techniques essential for interpreting Piano Sonata Op. 90, providing practical guidance to enhance understanding and execution of this masterpiece.

Keywords

Beethoven's Piano Sonatas, Piano Performance, Compositional Characteristics

1. Introduction

The period between 1801 and 1814 represents a pivotal point in Beethoven's oeuvre, witnessing a significant transformation and further development in his musical style. At the turn of the nineteenth century, European society was undergoing a period of profound transformation in terms of political, social, and individual philosophical outlooks. The exploration of personal emotions and the inner world became a significant cultural phenomenon during this era. The expression of these emotions in Beethoven's music not only touched the inner realms of individuals but also reflected the societal turmoil and the emotional state of the populace, offering a vision of a hopeful future. During this period, Beethoven gradually relinquished the constraints of early Classicism in order to develop a distinctive

musical language and style. Moreover, his compositions exposed the hypocrisy and ugliness within the social milieu of the period, reflecting the influence of the Enlightenment and the pursuit of liberty, equality, and fraternity.

During Beethoven's middle compositional period, his piano sonatas in particular demonstrated a clear influence not only of the Romantic movement's emphasis on the free expression of individual emotions, but also of a break from and innovation in traditional musical structures. Typically, traditional sonatas comprise three or four movements. However, Beethoven's two-movement sonatas reflect his pursuit of musical freedom and individual expression, aligning with Romantic ideals of creative liberty and uniqueness.

Furthermore, Beethoven's compositions during this period underwent significant transformations, expanding the potential of various segments within the sonata form and enriching the piano's musical language. For example, the polyphonic composition in Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 90 introduces complexity and symphonic depth to the music, while maintaining its vitality and expressiveness, thereby demonstrating mature and profound artistic expression. This reflects Beethoven's mature artistic style during his middle and late periods, as well as his deep exploration of musical forms.

2. Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 90

Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 90 was composed in 1814 and published the following year, 1815. This composition represents the final sonata of Beethoven's middle period, occurring approximately four years after his previous sonata. The Piano Sonata Op. 90 is renowned for its beautifully expressive and relaxed ambiance, which maintains traditional tonic and dominant harmonic relationships while incorporating polyphonic writing and the active use of sixteenth notes. These elements not only enrich the expressiveness of the sonata but also serve to highlight Beethoven's artistic exploration as he transitioned from his middle to late style. Such characteristics exemplify the technical sophistication and depth of emotional expression in Beethoven's musical compositions.

Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 90 represents a clear stylistic and emotional divergence from his earlier works. While both pieces aim to convey a joyful mood, the musical texture in Op. 90 is significantly more complex and symphonic, utilising polyphony to create a sound that is both rich and elegant. Furthermore, the consistent alternation of sixteenth notes introduces a pronounced dynamic force, propelling the evolution of the multi-voiced texture and exemplifying how Beethoven meticulously balanced the music's robust character with an overall jubilant atmosphere. In terms of musical notation, the piece exclusively employs German for tempo and expression marks. This is largely influenced by the surge of nationalism that swept through Europe at the end of the Napoleonic Wars, inspiring a desire to create distinct national art and free it from foreign influences.

In its polyphonic composition, the Piano Sonata Op. 90 exemplifies Beethoven's evolving and expanding use of this technique, transcending mere imitation. This allows the work to convey emotions with greater depth and maturity than his earlier compositions. This mature artistic expressiveness

reflects the challenges and growth that Beethoven experienced in his personal life and social realities. It is therefore to be expected that this sonata should be positioned close to the compositional heights of his late piano works.

3. Musical Analysis of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 90

This composition was dedicated to Count Moritz von Lichnowsky, who fell in love with a court theatre singer of a vastly different social status. After enduring a series of challenges, the couple ultimately found resolution. As a result, the initial section of the sonata, entitled "A Conflict Between the Head and the Heart," portrays the internal anguish and turmoil, whereas the subsequent section, "A Conversation with the Beloved," symbolizes the elation and triumph associated with the eventual triumph of love.

This Piano Sonata, the final work of Beethoven's middle period, comprises two movements. The initial movement is in 3/4 time in E minor, while the second is in 4/4 time in E major. The contrast between major and minor keys within this structure is uncommon in other sonatas with two movements. The intrinsic contrast in tonal colour between the major and minor modes provides a distinct contrast and tension between the two movements. Furthermore, the use of the same tonic in both major and minor modes creates a subtle harmony and unity on a macro level, pioneering a form that influenced later two-movement sonatas. Furthermore, both movements of this sonata are characterised by a relatively fast tempo. The first movement is imbued with a dynamic quality, while the second movement evinces a serene and contemplative mood, thereby establishing a striking contrast between light and dark.

Formally, Piano Sonata Op. 90 adheres to the principles of the Classical tradition, yet it displays a proclivity towards Romanticism in its content. For example, the tempo markings and expressive indications are exclusively in German, reflecting a profound sense of national identity. This work exemplifies Beethoven's liberation of his inner world from traditional forms, a characteristic of his middle period compositions.

Table 1. Structural Overview of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 90

movement	Key	Tempo and Expression	Form	Number of measures
I	E minor	Vivacious and consistently expressive	Sonata form	240
II	E major	Not too fast and very lyrical	Rondo sonata form	290

Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 90 represents a pivotal work from his middle compositional period. It employs a two-movement sonata structure, with the intention of creating distinct musical characters for

each movement. The initial movement commences with the introduction of substantial chords in E minor, which evoke a sense of unresolved tension and yearning. The rapid descending sixteenth notes, which follow an upward octave leap, create a "sliding" effect, symbolising the Count's tumultuous emotions. The second movement employs a lyrical musical language to depict the beauty of love and to express the joy of love's ultimate success. Thematic consistency between the two movements is maintained throughout the sonata, stemming from a deeper emotional contrast between them. Furthermore, the contrasting elements between the movements, including form, tempo, texture, and emotional content, align with the composer's distinctive approach to the design of the two movements. From the perspective of thematic material, the opening four notes of the first movement are G-G-#F-E, which descend sequentially. In contrast, the opening three notes of the second movement are E-#F-#G, ascending in sequence. This contrast demonstrates that the thematic motif of the second movement is in fact a retrograde of the first movement's motif, clearly deriving its creative inspiration from the thematic material of the first movement. This method of composition results in a subtle interplay and symmetry between the two movements, thereby enhancing the internal coherence and unity of the entire work.



Figure 1. Beginning of the First Movement (E minor)

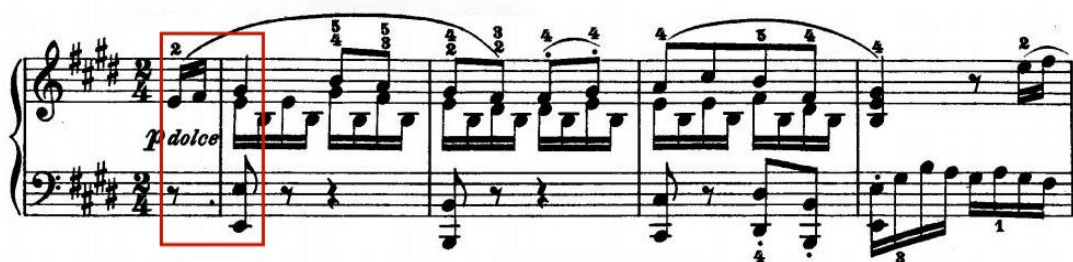


Figure 2. Beginning of the Second Movement (E major)

The final two measures of the first movement are melodically comprised of the notes F, F, A, G, and F, whereas the initial two measures of the second movement consist of the notes E, F, #G. Upon examination of the direction of the melodic lines, it becomes evident that the core melody of the first two measures of the second movement is actually a retrograde of the last two measures of the first movement. This sophisticated structural design serves to integrate the second movement into the overall structure of the work, thereby enhancing the unity and fluidity between the movements. This

integration serves to strengthen the internal logic and expressiveness of the entire work.

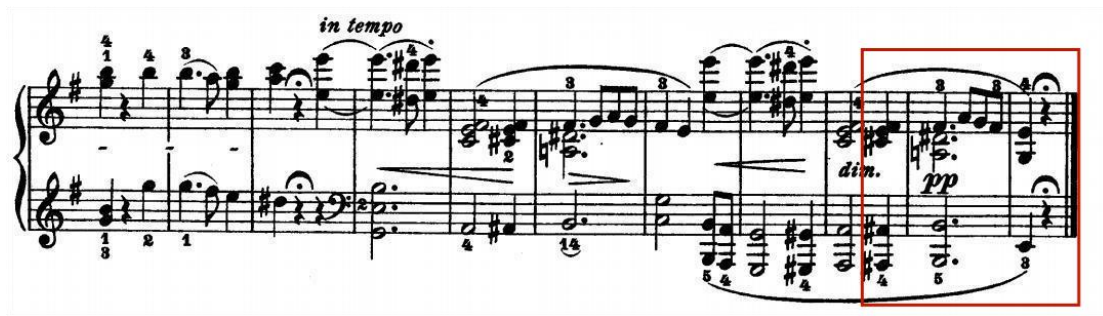


Figure 3. Conclusion of the Second Movement (E major)

In Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 90, the use of polyphonic texture is particularly prominent across both movements. For example, measures 132 to 143 of the first movement employ imitation techniques, whereby repeated melodic lines intensify the musical expression. This method not only enhances the tonal character of the movement but also facilitates a natural and fluid transition to the subsequent section. The composer employs polyphonic in a skilful manner, thereby enriching the music's textural depth and expressive power.

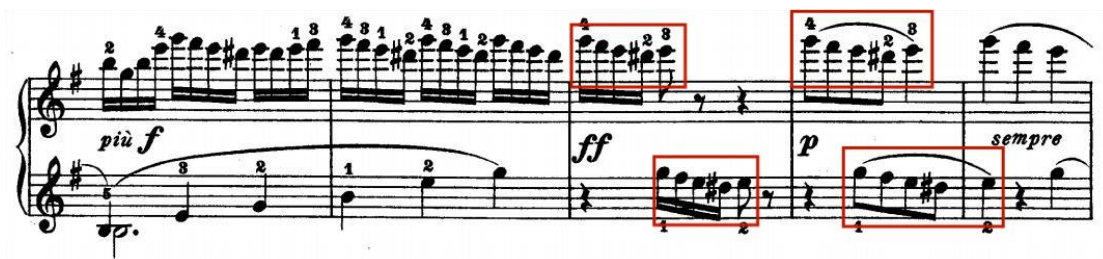


Figure 4. Measures 132-143 of the First Movement (E minor)

This sonata exemplifies Beethoven's comprehensive investigation of the two-movement sonata form, establishing a robust foundation for his subsequent piano sonatas, particularly Op. 111. In addition to innovating in form, Beethoven also refined his approach to expression and thematic development in Piano Sonata Op. 90. The sonata saw Beethoven further perfect his musical language through further exploration and experimentation, thus enabling the subsequent Piano Sonata Op. 111 to achieve new technical heights and an unprecedented depth and breadth of artistic expression. Consequently, Piano Sonata Op. 90 represents not only an achievement in its own right but also a significant milestone in the evolution of Beethoven's late style.

4. Performance of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 90

This composition presents few technical challenges. In order to achieve a more nuanced understanding of this composition, it would be beneficial to direct our attention to the following aspects with a view to enhancing our performance:

4.1 Rhythm and Note Values

At the outset of the initial movement, Beethoven employs the use of an upbeat and dotted quarter notes, thereby establishing a distinctive rhythmic character. It is of the utmost importance to exercise caution when managing the dynamics between the upbeat and the downbeat, as each time the upbeat enters, whether in measures 1-2 and 5-6 with forte interrogative phrases or in measures 3-4 and 7-8 with piano response phrases. Furthermore, the dotted quarter notes must be more emphatically stressed and their durations precisely measured. If the notes are prolonged to an excessive degree, they will appear rushed, whereas if they are too brief, they will diminish the inherent tension of the music. It is also essential to ensure that rests, which form an integral part of the musical notation, are precisely timed, as subtle differences can produce dramatically different effects. It is of the utmost importance that these note values are adhered to during the performance.



Figure 5. Measures 1-17 of the First Movement (E minor)

4.2 Polyphonic Textures

The piano is a polyphonic instrument that requires layered differentiation when multiple notes are sounded simultaneously. Polyphonic elements frequently appear in Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 90, differing in performance approach from the traditional homophonic melody with accompaniment.

For instance, in measures 212-215 of the second movement, polyphonic elements are evident, with the theme sequentially appearing from high to low across four voices. During performance, each entrance of the motif in a new voice should be emphasized, while other voices are subdued to distinguish the different lines. Beyond dynamics, performers can also create contrasts in timbre, such as using the fingertips for the higher voices to produce a brighter sound, and the pad of the fingers for the lower voices to yield a richer, cello-like tone.



Figure 6. Polyphonic Section, Measures 212-215 of the Second Movement (E major)

4.3 Lyrical Melody

The second movement of this sonata is distinguished by its melodious and lyrical qualities, which are often associated with the lyrical style of the Romantic composer Schubert. The second movement's melody necessitates a more lyrical approach from the performer.

In measures 1-4 of the second movement, the composer has marked "dolce." To produce a soft and clear sound, performers should use the pads of their fingers, which are softer than the fingertips and can act as a buffer to prevent the sound from becoming too sharp and direct. The right hand is divided into two parts, with the highest voice carrying the main melody, which needs to be particularly outlined and emphasized by the performer. This can be achieved through a weight transfer technique, where the weight of the arm is concentrated on the pads of the fingers, and as the melody progresses, the weight shifts from one finger pad to another. This method of key attack not only makes the sound more connected and singing but also aids in using breath to create longer musical phrases. To highlight the main melody in the upper voice, the accompanying texture in the lower right hand should be subdued.



Figure 7. Measures 1-4 of the Second Movement (E major)

4.4 Pedal

The pedal serves to enhance the musical experience by maintaining uniform crescendos and decrescendos, enriching the sound, enhancing contrasts in dynamics, and enriching the colour and tension of the music.

Beethoven was opposed to the use of non-legato playing; his sonatas are frequently characterised by extremes, either of sharply detached or flowing like water. Consequently, performers must utilise the pedal in a clean manner when playing Beethoven's sonatas in order to prevent the music from becoming muddled.

4.5 Inter-movement Transition Handling

In performing Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 90, it is of particular importance to pay close attention to the transition from the conclusion of the first movement to the commencement of the second. Beethoven employed a sustained E note at the end of the first movement, which, through the use of a fermata, connects to the initial E note of the second movement, thus forming a musical bridge. This design not only enhances the continuity between the two movements but also adds depth to the overall fluidity and unity of the composition.

Although the final published score lacks an explicit *ritardando* marking, Beethoven included this marking in his initial drafts, indicating his intent to emphasise the close connection between movements. It is recommended that performers do not remove their hands from the piano at the conclusion of the first movement. Instead, performers should transition seamlessly into the second movement, using a sequence of ascending major notes (E-#F-#G) to alleviate the tension created by the minor key of the first movement in a natural manner. This approach not only aligns with the composer's original intention but also facilitates a more natural and smooth emotional transition in the piece.

Furthermore, in light of the abrupt conclusion of the initial movement and the concise commencement of the second, it is imperative that performers strive to achieve equilibrium between these sections in order to maintain the coherence of the entire work. The second movement also concludes abruptly, without a discernible deceleration. This demands from performers a delicate and elegant execution that accurately conveys Beethoven's pursuit of lyrical subtlety and understated humour. It is of the utmost importance to consider these performance details in order to gain a full understanding of and successfully interpret Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 90.

5. Discussion

A meticulous examination of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 90 enables a more profound comprehension of the character, colour, and tempo of each movement, as well as a profound insight into the internal contradictions and conflicts within the themes. This comprehensive analysis enables us to fully appreciate the spirit and emotional expression in Beethoven's late-middle and late-period works, which encompass elements of struggle, heroism, and a transcendent unity with the universe. This sonata not only exemplifies the stylistic traits of Beethoven's middle period but also anticipates the technical and spiritual culmination of his later works, offering a valuable perspective for comprehending the continuity and depth of Beethoven's musical development. This work serves as a bridge between the middle and late phases of Beethoven's compositional career, revealing his greatness as a continuously innovative musician.

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