January 2026

by Derek Katz

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Piano Sonata in E minor, Op. 90 (1814)

Both Beethoven piano sonatas on this program have two movements. Keyboard sonatas in the time of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven (including accompanied sonatas) usually had three movements, missing the menuet or scherzo expected in a symphony or string quartet. Beethoven's piano sonatas are mostly split between pieces with three movements (15 of the 32 sonatas) and with four (11). There are six sonatas with only two movements, but these include both the atypically slight Op. 49 sonatas intended for amateur players (discussed below) and the massive, expansive final Sonata in C minor, Op. 111. The Sonata in E minor, Op. 90 falls between these extremes both chronologically and in its dimensions, as a compact and efficient, but deeply serious work.

The division of Beethoven's life and works into early, middle, and late periods is problematic in many ways, and is especially unhelpful when attempting to distinguish when the late period begins, a boundary for which there is no critical or scholarly consensus. The Op. 90 sonata, from 1814, is a work that is sort of late-ish; not coming from the canonically late works of Beethoven's last decade but sharing some traits with them. The sonata comes from a fallow period of Beethoven's career from about 1812 to 1817, when he composed relatively few new works, due to a combination of financial problems caused by the deaths of major patrons and the economic consequences of the Napoleonic wars, personal emotional distress over his failure to find a wife, and other musical tasks, including major revisions to his opera *Fidelio*.

One characteristic of two movement sonatas is the lack of a tie-breaking vote, or of a consensus between movements. With only two movements, we generally get a contrast between equals. The two movements of Op. 90 could hardly be more different in character and expressive register, but, other than the priority that comes from being heard first, there is no sense that one character is primary and the other the changeup. The sonata is only "in" E minor in the sense that that is the key of the first movement. Each movement has a rather lengthy tempo marking (in German, probably as part of a post-Napoleonic nationalist impulse) indicating both speed and character. The first movement is "with liveliness," and "throughout with sensitivity and expression." At least initially, these directives seem a poor match for a movement that is terse, restless, and begins somewhat brusquely. The stern opening gesture, however, is immediately answered by a calmer echo in the same rhythm, and, after another exchange of echoes, the theme remains soft and smooth. Changes in volume and character are frequent, rapid and sometimes extreme. The expected contrasting second theme, rather than a distinctive melody, starts as agitated repeated chords, builds from very soft to very loud, and then eases into a rhythmically uncertain line over very fast and rather awkward arpeggios in the left hand. The brief middle section of the movement is devoted solely to worrying the opening idea. Given the how concise the movement is as whole, the transition back to the opening ideas is surprisingly leisurely, as Beethoven reduces a descending scale fragment from four notes to three notes, and allows it to slow down and get softer before winding it back up to lead into the return of the beginning.

January 2026

by Derek Katz

The second movement comes from a completely different expressive world. Beethoven now instructs the pianist not to be too quick, and always to play in a singing manner. Very unusually for Beethoven, this theme of this movement is a proper, extended, self-sufficient melody, and one that straightforwardly lovely. Beethoven seems to have been content to let the beauty of the theme speak for itself, bringing the long melody back unchanged twice as the movement progresses, and again at the end with only the small alteration of moving the melody between the left and right hands. This kind of lyrical rondo theme has often been described as similar to Schubert's style, with an example of that style coming next in this program. It is very possible that this movement was part of an attempt by Beethoven to counter accusations that he was difficult composer to understand. As wrote in a public statement about his *Fidelio*, "what is truly great and beautiful finds kindred souls and sympathetic hearts in the present without withholding in the slightest the just privileges of posterity."

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)
Sonata in A minor for Arpeggione and Piano, D. 821 (1824)

The Schubert Sonata in A minor was composed for an arpeggione, a now long-obsolete instrument briefly popular in Vienna. The instrument was a cross between a guitar and a cello, having six strings and frets like a guitar, but held between the legs and bowed like a cello. The instrument was also tuned like a guitar, and the hope was that it could be taken up by both guitarists and cellists. Indeed, of the two main concert virtuosos on the instrument, one was a guitarist and the other a cellist. Although the guitar is most closely associated with Spain, early 19th century Vienna was a center for guitar production and design, and home to many amateur players. The arpeggione (more commonly known as a "guitar-violoncello" or a "bowed guitar") was invented in Vienna in 1823. Schubert composed his sonata the following year, and it was quickly performed by Vincenz Schuster, the virtuoso who came to the instrument from the guitar. The arpeggione boom lasted for about a decade, and Schubert's sonata wasn't published until 1871, long after anyone was likely to have or know how to play one, and, for that matter, at a time when even one Schubert biographer didn't know what one was.

The 1871 publication included an alternate part for the cello, and the "Arpeggione" Sonata has long been a standard part of the cello repertoire. Perhaps especially because the original instrument is no longer in general circulation, the sonata has been transcribed for many instruments, including wind instruments. Period accounts suggest that the arpeggione sounded like a basset horn (a sort of alto clarinet), but modern reconstructions sound more like a viola da gamba. Violists, who are short of repertoire in general, and especially lacking in pieces from the 19th century, have historically been

January 2026

by Derek Katz

especially grateful for the Arpeggione Sonata (this sonata, along with the Schumann *Märchenbilder* on this program and the two Brahms clarinet sonatas, constitutes the core of the Romantic repertoire for viola and piano, with only the Schumann originally intended for the viola). When played on the cello, the sonata sits quite high in the instruments' range, mostly confined to the highest string. The viola cannot play a few of the lowest passages in the original octave, but the sonata is generally in a more comfortable and natural register.

The Arpeggione Sonata was composed during the last phase of Schubert's life, when the symptoms of his syphilis were already apparent, and he was facing both great restrictions in his social activities and the prospect of a premature death. His music from this period is either described as moving, reflecting these tragic circumstances, or mysteriously betraying no trace of them (which should probably make us generally skeptical about the relationships between biography and musical style). This sonata would be the second type, a genial and energetic piece that is distinctly shadow-of-death-free. As would be expected for a piece composed for a virtuoso concert performer, the sonata provides many opportunities to display the possibilities of the instrument and the abilities of the player. After a short introduction, the pianist is almost completely relegated to the role of subservient accompanist, and the arpeggione part takes frequent advantage of the wide range of the instrument and the possibilities of using open strings for big leaps and rapid passage work.

The sonata does open with a rather somber and plaintive expressive melody, but this mood gives way both to a shift to the major and to vigorous and athletic passage work that exploits the full range of the viola. There are some reminders of the arpeggione's guitar DNA in the plucked chords at the end of the first section (calling for five strings of the arpeggione, while the viola or cello can only provide four) and in the pizzicato passage that follows (affording the pianist a brief flirtation with the main theme). The second movement is slow, quiet and smooth throughout. Again, the focus is almost entirely on the viola, with the pianist providing a soft bed of steady pulses to support the violist's long, arching melody. There is a passage in the middle where the piano abandons the bass register and the viola dramatically drops below the accompaniment figures. This is one place where the cello, which can play this passage an octave lower (where Schubert wrote it), undeniably has an advantage over the viola. The movement winds down with the piano pulses slowing, and an improvisatory short cadenza leads directly into the final movement. This is the kind of "singing rondo" that has inspired the comparisons between the rondo theme of Beethoven's Op. 90 piano sonata and Schubert. Schubert's graceful opening section will appear three times, in alternation with contrasting sections, one of which is a lively minor section in the Hungarian style popular in Vienna at the time. Again, there is a passage in the middle of movement in which the viola imitates the guitar while the piano gets a rare moment in the melodic spotlight.

While the arpeggione as Schubert knew it is now only a curiosity, there is a modern instrument inspired by it (the "GuitarViol") that has been become a staple of film and television scores, in both acoustic and electric versions.

January 2026

by Derek Katz

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Piano Sonata in G minor, Op. 49, no. 1 (ca. 1797, published 1805)

The two sonatas of Op. 49 have a somewhat marginal status in the Beethoven canon. Shorter, less technically demanding, and less expressively ambitious than the other thirty sonatas, they are often labelled as "sonatinas." The opus number of 49 is misleading, reflecting the publication date of 1805 rather than the time when the sonatas were composed. The opus number implies that this sonata should fit in the company of substantial and heroically assertive works like the "Kreutzer" Sonata for violin and piano (Op. 47) and the "Waldstein" Piano Sonata (Op. 53), both also published in 1805. These are hardly appropriate companions for the attractive, but modest Op. 49, no. 1, which was probably composed significantly earlier, most likely around 1797. Even the earlier date is not a sufficient explanation for the characteristics of the Op. 49, no. 1 sonata. 1797 would put it around the same time as the lengthy, grand Op. 7 piano sonata and the three piano sonatas of Op. 10, all more typically Beethovenian.

Like the Sonata in E minor, Op. 90, heard earlier on the program, Op. 49, no. 1 has two movements in contrasting characters, the first in minor and the second in major. While in the minor mode, the opening movement of this sonata is more wistful than stormy and has none of the tragic weight more typical of Beethoven's minor moods (think the opening of the Symphony no. 5). Some of the brevity of the sonata is the result of compressed transitions. The sonata moves quickly from theme to theme, without much in the way of preparation. Happily, all of the themes are engaging. The two main ideas of the first movement are a somewhat pensive opening idea that falls into two halves, both of which begin the same way, and more graceful second subject over arpeggios in the left hand. This second idea appears both in major and in a more subdued minor when it returns in the second half of the movement. Beethoven stays in the minor after this, ending with a quiet coda in the lower reaches of the keyboard, with fragments of the second subject in the bass. This descent into the low and quiet sets up the arrival of a perky, dance-like rondo theme in the major. A mock-serious turn to the minor leads to a second sprightly theme, now somewhat more lyrical. The two themes will alternate for the remainder of the movement.

The keyboard writing is kind to less accomplished players, allowing the hands to generally stay in the middle of the keyboard with minimal motions of the arms, and usually restricting itself to a single note at a time in each hand (with most of the exceptions parallel thirds in the left hand). The sonata could also be played on a variety of keyboard instruments, with no pedal indications and few dynamic markings. A harpsichord or clavichord could easily be used in a domestic setting. All of this suggests that the sonata was probably commissioned by an amateur (perhaps someone that Beethoven met on his travels to Prague, Dresden, Leipzig and Berlin in 1796). This is not a lesser Beethoven sonata, but rather a sonata that (unlike his other sonatas) is typical of the genre at the time, both in its scope and intent, and in its suitability for amateur players and private settings. It is both a piece to be cherished on its own merits and one that gives a finer sense of how implausibly unusual and impractical Beethoven's other sonatas are.

January 2026

by Derek Katz

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)
***Märchenbilder* for Viola and Piano, Op. 113 (1851)**

Robert Schumann's chamber music can roughly be divided into two groups. His most famous chamber works, including the three string quartets (Op. 41), the piano quartet (Op. 47) and the piano quintet (Op. 44) were composed during his "chamber music year" of 1842, when he focused solely on small ensemble music. These are all substantial, four-movement works without programs or narrative content, intended (in the case of the string quartets) to engage directly with the legacy of Haydn, Mozart and Beethoven or for public performance by professionals (as with the piano quintet, which featured prominently in Clara Schumann's concert repertoire). A second group comes from later in Schumann's career, falling between 1849 and 1853. Many of these were intended as domestic *Hausmusik*, with an eye to selling sheet music to amateur musicians. These works are made up of shorter movements and tend to have some kind of extra-musical associations, often with the worlds of fantasy, childhood and fairy tales. The *Märchenbilder* ("Fairy Tale Pictures") for viola and piano are something of a special case, belonging to the larger category of collections of character pieces, but composed for virtuoso professionals.

Schumann began a new position as Municipal Music Director of Düsseldorf in the fall of 1850, finally securing a stable, salaried position. His duties included leading a music society with a choir and an orchestra, and he immediately attempted to improve the orchestra by bringing in his own concertmaster. His choice was the twenty-eight-year-old violinist Joseph von Wasielewski, whom Schumann had known in Leipzig, where Wasielewski had been one of the first students at the Conservatory, studied the violin with Mendelssohn's friend Ferdinand David, and played in the Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra, where David was concertmaster. Wasielewski became a friend and frequent musical collaborator of the Schumanns and wrote the first biography of Robert (published in 1858). The *Märchenbilder* were composed for and dedicated to Wasielewski, who, judging from the technical demands of the viola part, must have been an excellent violist as well as a fine violinist. It seems unlikely that there was a significant market of amateur violists capable of coping with this music in 1851, but Schumann optimistically published the piece with an optional part for violin. According to his diary, Schumann also played the *Märchenbilder* with Ferdinand David, although he didn't indicate whether David played violin or viola.

There is a persistent tradition in program and liner notes that Schumann was evoking specific stories published by the Grimm brothers, but this does not seem to be documented in Schumann's diaries (the title page of the first edition was illustrated with a drawing based on one used for a Grimm brothers collection, but Schumann was unlikely to have been consulted about this). Instead, two German scholars have recently convincingly argued that Schumann was probably inspired by a Berlin poet, Louis du Rieux, who sent Schumann a poem titled "Märchenbilder" in February 1851, suggesting that Schumann compose a piece based on it. Schumann composed his own *Märchenbilder* the next month.

January 2026

by Derek Katz

Whatever the inspiration, each of the four movements is clearly a character piece and is marked by what the Schumann scholar John Daverio called the "once-upon-a-time quality" typical of Schumann's late chamber miniatures. The first piece starts with full, arching melody in the viola that could feel like an announcement of events to come. The rest of the movement is mostly rapid, improvisatory exchanges between the players that could represent dialogue. The main material of the second movement is marked by fanfares and flourishes, coming from Schumann's imaginary world where legend and chivalry intersect with folk tales. The third movement combines devilishly difficult and stormy running notes and more heroic gestures (the bouncing bow technique called for here was a relatively recent development in Germany), and the final movement is a slow and melancholy lullaby, with a low viola part nestled amidst the gentle piano texture. It is easy to imagine the second piece representing the prince in Rapunzel, the third the angry dance of Rumpelstiltskin and the last movement the slumber of Sleeping Beauty, but they could just as well be mapped onto du Rieux's poem, or merely constitute a musical analogue to the literary fairy tales that authors were newly creating in the manner of folk stories at the time.