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by Derek Katz

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Piano Sonata in C Minor, Op. 13, Pathétique (1798-99)

The *Pathétique* is perhaps Beethoven's best-known and most beloved piano sonata, no doubt due in part to its evocative title and its substantial swaths of slow music that are highly satisfying to play even for less-accomplished pianists (the most obvious rival would be the "Moonlight" sonata, another piece with a suggestive nickname and a long section of amateur-friendly music). The title was suggested by Beethoven's publisher, and approved by the composer, so it comes with Beethoven's seal of approval, but was not necessarily in his mind as he was composing. "Pathétique" should not be understood as "pathetic," either in the sense of arousing pity or of being inadequate, but rather as referring to pathos. Beethoven probably understood pathos through Friedrich Schiller, who held that pathos was created not merely by the artistic depiction of suffering, but rather from the confrontation between an awareness of suffering and the possibility of resisting this awareness through rational thought. One way of understanding the sonata in these terms is to map that confrontation onto Beethoven's juxtaposition of music that seems tragic or disturbing with music that is consoling and lucid, something that happens both within the slow introduction to the first movement, and between the three movements. Another implication of the designation "Pathétique" is that Beethoven's publisher perceived the work as a "characteristic" sonata, that is, as a piece in which each movement expressed a single affective character rather than mixing many characters together. Indeed, with the (admittedly significant) exception of the slow introduction to the first movement, each of the three movements is unusually consistent in character, with enormous contrasts between movements, but less variety within them.

This musical mediation of the tragic is immediately audible in the slow introduction to the first movement, which begins with low, dark chords in a dramatic, uneven dotted rhythms. These dissolve into a descending flourish which leads to a hopeful, lyrical rising figure (same rhythm, same melodic shape), which, in turn, is repeatedly interrupted by loud, jagged outbursts. This mini-operatic scene calms and ends with another grand (if quiet) descending flourish, leading to the main body of the movement. Here rapid throbbing notes in the left hand plunge us into a world of enormous energy and tension that largely persists for the remainder of the movement. There is no theme to speak of, but just a series of rising gestures. Even the second theme, which would be expected to offer some respite, remains in the minor mode, and combines its more elegant melody with continued relentless motion in the accompaniment. More precisely, this rhythmic energy persists in the fast sections of the remainder of the movement, for shockingly (spoiler alert!) music from the slow introduction returns twice. The first return comes right in the middle of the movement, after the repeat of the first fast section, and before the central development section. This central section immediately returns to the tempo and character of the fast sections, while incorporating fragments of the slow introduction motives into the fast tempo. The last appearance of the slow introduction material comes just before the movement's close. This final attempt to offer an antidote to the movement's more anguished side is swiftly rebutted by a curt and decisive coda.

If the first movement is the most concentrated expression of the tragic side of the sonata, the middle movement is the balancing dose of comfort.

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The movement is mostly constructed from multiple statements of one of Beethoven's most beautiful and memorable melodies. After the turbulence and uncertainty of the first movement, everything here is clear and untroubled. The theme unfolds slowly and lyrically in two symmetrical phrases. The texture is in three voices, with an active middle line wending its way between the stately outer voices. The larger structure is also simple, with two contrasting episodes filling the spaces between the three statements of the main melody.

The concluding Rondo is something of a synthesis of the preceding two movements. It shares the minor mode, quick tempo and constantly moving figures for the left hand of the first movement, but the tempo is less breakneck, the accompaniment less agitated and the character more graceful. It shares the spirit of the second theme of the first movement and even starts with the same figure. Less obviously, it also has a similar shape to the theme of the slow movement. The slow movement is also suggested by a lengthy episode in the major mode (and in the same key as the slow movement) in-between statements of the rondo theme, and the connection between the slow movement and the rondo theme is made more audible at the very end of the movement, when a fragment of the rondo theme is stated in the major.

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Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Piano Sonata in E-flat Major, Op. 27, No. 1, *Sonata quasi una fantasia* (1800-01)

The two sonatas of Op. 27 (the other one is the famous "Moonlight" Sonata) are both labeled sonatas "in the manner of a fantasia." In the 18th century, the word "fantasia" would have indicated a piece that was free of formal patterns (and perhaps free of bar lines), giving the impression of being improvised on the spot. For Beethoven, "fantasia" seems to have indicated a piece made up of short sections in different tempos and characters that does not fall into distinct movements.

Op. 27, No. 1 is not a fantasia proper, but a sonata "in the manner of" one and is something of a hybrid between a sonata and a fantasia. It is not difficult to squint and see the general outlines of a four-movement sonata with a moderate opening movement followed by a scherzo (with a trio), a slow movement and a lively finale (recordings are usually tracked following these four "movements"). Beyond that, however, the "movements' are short, do not follow expected formal patterns, are run together without pauses between them, and are sometimes interrupted by unexpected and very different music.

The first "movement," rather than using any of the usual formal patterns, consists of a series of short phrases, each beginning with a short-short-long rhythm in the right hand, and running scales in the left.

Variety is created by a jump to a distant key, and by eventually subdividing the two short notes in the right-hand pattern into four and later eight notes. This apparently predictable series of phrases is suddenly broken with a brief whirlwind of much faster music, before returning to the opening material. This proceeds immediately to the second "movement," which resembles a scherzo-trio-scherzo complex, but one that goes by very quickly. The scherzo portion is a constant series of notes, but the when the scherzo returns the two hands are disjointed, rapidly answering each other.

Again, the next "movement" follows without pause, and again it is a compressed version of a recognizable type. In character, it is a typical slow movement, but is made up only of a single-phrase theme, a transition passage of the same length, and a return of the theme. An improvisatory flourish leads right into the final "movement." This one has the character of a sprightly rondo, but is also the most formally involved of the "movements," containing the only music in the sonata that is developmental. There is one more interruption lurking near the end of the sonata, as the "slow movement" theme makes a surprise cameo before an extremely quick finish.

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Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Piano Sonata in A-flat Major, Op. 26, "Funeral March" (1800-01)

The Sonata in A-flat Major, Op. 26 was composed at the same time as the two sonatas of Op. 27, and, while it is not as overtly experimental as those works, it does have some unusual elements. In particular, the first movement is a set of variations in a moderate tempo. This was not novel – Beethoven would probably have known multiple similar examples from Haydn's keyboard sonatas and string quartets – but it does create the effect of feeling as if we have begun with the slow movement and are already in the middle of the sonata. The theme is in triple meter and is marked by a rising figure that begins most of its phrases and by repeated notes that will be echoed later in the piece. The five variations that follow are less about technical display than the stand-alone variation sets of Beethoven's early years in Vienna, with the melody kept prominent and recognizable throughout. The third variation moves to a somber and syncopated minor mood, becoming dramatic in the middle, and the last variation encases the melody with rippling passage work above and below it.

If the variations were the slow movement of a four-movement work, we would expect a menuet or scherzo to follow, and, indeed, one does. This one is fast and fleet scherzo; worlds away from the stately menuets that the Beethoven's scherzos replaced. The third movement is a striking and distinctive deviation from the expected sonata pattern, a funeral march marked "for the death of a hero." This is what Beethoven, in his sketches for the sonata, called a "characteristic" movement, something that expressed a well-known and recognizable musical topic. Beethoven had many possible reasons to choose a funeral march.

In the midst of the Napoleonic wars, military funerals were common and Beethoven had just participated in a charity concert for wounded soldiers. Funeral marches played by military bands were also prominent in post-Revolutionary France, and there was a march similar to Beethoven's in an opera that had played recently in Vienna. The march movement is in a simple three-part form, with the outer sections in stately dotted march rhythms that suggest drumbeats, and a "melody" that consists of the same note played over and over again above shifting harmonies. Both the repeated melody notes and the somber minor mode recall the first movement of the sonata. The middle section has rumbling tremolos and two-note outburst that have reminded some commentators of musket shots. After all of this drama, the final movement is a rambunctious perpetual motion, with some especially funky syncopated rhythms in the bass line.

The funeral march is the part of the sonata that has been most consequential. It is an obvious forerunner of the much more elaborate funeral march in the "Eroica" Symphony a few years later, and Beethoven orchestrated the sonata march in 1815 for incidental music for a play about a real-life woman soldier who had died of wounds inflicted while fighting against Napoleon's forces. That version uses winds, low strings and timpani for the march sections, in imitation of a military band. This orchestrated version was also played outdoors by a wind band at Beethoven's funeral. This sonata was also one of the few Beethoven sonatas that Frédéric Chopin played and taught and was the inspiration for his own "Funeral March" Sonata.

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Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Piano Sonata in F Minor, Op. 57, *Appassionata* (1804-05)

The "Appassionata" sonata was only composed a few years after Beethoven's experiments with movement types in the Op. 26 and Op. 27 sonatas that precede it on this program, but it seems to come from a completely different expressive world, elemental and extreme in ways that Beethoven had never been before. Beethoven is pushing even more insistently at musical boundaries and at the sheer physical possibilities of the keyboards of his time, creating a texture of whispers, shouts and silences. The "Eroica" symphony (composed a year before the "Appassionata") is generally held up as a watershed work for Beethoven; the one in which he leaves the models and gestures of Haydn and Mozart behind, whether as a response to his growing deafness or as one to political events. The "Appassionata" is the "Eroica" symphony of Beethoven piano sonatas.

The title "Appassionata" does not come from Beethoven and did not appear in print until after his death. It does seem appropriate, for this is a very passionate sonata, indeed. It's a dark passion, though. Beethoven intended to publish this sonata in a group of three, along with the "Waldstein" sonata, Op. 53 and the F Major sonata Op. 54. Beethoven liked to include pairs of strongly contrasting works in his multi-work publications, and the "Waldstein" and "Appassionata" sonatas are one such coupling, with the "Waldstein" joyous and ebullient and the "Appassionata" stormy and tragic. These three sonatas were also the first that Beethoven composed after receiving a new piano from France, with a longer keyboard, a more powerful tone and more dynamic effects that could be produced with pedals. Beethoven takes advantage of all of these new possibilities in the "Appassionata," using the full extent of his keyboard, and asking for sudden and severe changes between loud and soft as well as using the pedals to move more gently between them.

The opening gesture of the first movement immediately plunges to the lowest note on Beethoven's keyboard. This initial idea feels less like a theme or melody than like something improvised on the spot, trailing off with a trill in an open-ended question. The question is repeated and is then interrupted by the four-note short-short-short-long rhythm that Beethoven's Symphony no. 5 would make famous a few years later. It sounds as if the quiet question will be asked again, but it is violently cut short by a powerful outburst each time that it attempts to begin. The texture calms, and a new theme appears, sharing the same rhythm as the opening question, but now a noble, complete, balanced statement in the major mode. There then is a third idea, stormy and vigorous, and the rest of the movement will be constructed from these elements. The return of the opening material is especially striking, preceded by crossed-hand repetitions of the four-note "Beethoven 5" rhythm and then proceeding over insistent and unsettling repeated notes in the bass.

The middle slow movement, somewhat like the slow movement of the Pathétique sonata, provides a respite from the intense outer movements. It is a theme and variations, with the theme a stately chorale in the lower register. Much like the funeral march of Op. 26, there isn't much in the way of melody, with interest coming from shifting harmonies and an active bass line.

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This bass line is foregrounded in the variations, and we can imagine Beethoven taking great pleasure in the rich bass sonorities of his new piano. A repeat of the theme fails to make it to the final cadence, instead getting stuck on an unstable chord, which is repeated and then hammered in a new rhythm that begins the last movement. This is another perpetual motion, one of Beethoven's favorite finale types (and one that also concludes Op. 26). Beethoven indicated that this one shouldn't be played too quickly, and holding back the tempo makes it all the more relentless. The constant running notes turn out to accompany a series of sighing figures, with the left hand moving above the right hand for the sighs, and below it for the bass notes between them.

The tempo does not remain restrained for the entire movement, accelerating towards the very end into a kind of stomping dance and then a mad dash to the finish with arpeggios covering the entire length of Beethoven's keyboard. While the other movements of the sonata were laboriously sketched and worked out, Beethoven apparently conceived of the third movement while sitting in a meadow during a walk with a student. He attempted to sing the music to his student (sounding like humming and howling) and then rushed home to play it for him on the piano. According to another of Beethoven's students, Carl Czerny, Beethoven considered this to be his greatest sonata until the "Hammerklavier" sonata.