

April 2026

by Derek Katz

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Sonata in D Major, Op. 10, No. 3 (1796-98)

All three of the sonatas on this program were dedicated to women who had significant places in Beethoven's life and career, with each sonata reflecting a different type of relationship between Beethoven and the recipient. The three sonatas of Op. 10 were dedicated to Countess Anna Margarete Browne, who had arrived in Vienna around 1794, only a couple of years after Beethoven himself. Her husband, Count Johann Georg von Browne, was an officer in the Russian army (his suspiciously non-Slavic name came from his Irish father) and a person of significant wealth. The Count and Countess were amongst Beethoven's most important patrons in his early years in Vienna, expressing their devotion to him through money and gifts (including a horse that Beethoven promptly forgot about and neglected to care for) and by hiring Beethoven's student Ferdinand Ries to be a kind of house pianist who played Beethoven's music for them and their guests for hours at a time. Beethoven dedicated seven compositions to the Count or the Countess between 1798 and 1803, all music suitable for domestic use (chamber music, piano music and song). It is reasonable to assume that the Countess had some keyboard skills, but there is no surviving report of her accomplishments, and it seems more likely that the works dedicated to her were mementos of Beethoven's own playing in her home, or material for Ries to play for her, than that they were designed for her own use.

The Op. 10 sonatas were the second set of three published by Beethoven (there is also a single sonata, Op. 7). Although Beethoven began to compose the Op. 10 sonatas less than a year after his three sonatas Op. 2, they find him perhaps stretching his wings a little and allowing himself to be both more playful and more serious than in his initial offerings. The sonata Op. 10, no. 3, in

particular, combines high-spirited outer movements with one of Beethoven's most deeply felt slow movements. The ebullient first movement starts with a quiet but swift rush of notes. Although there is not much in the way of a memorable melody or motive here, Beethoven will make a great show of building most of the movement from the simple four-note scale that is heard going both down and then right back up at the beginning of the movement. There is a very short (but very nice) melody for the second theme, surprisingly minor, but still elegant. Beethoven makes a real meal of the four-note figure in the middle of the movement, going (mostly) down and (sometimes) up, placing it in the bass, moving it to the treble, presenting it both soft and loud, sometimes isolated, sometime not.

The second movement is extraordinary, and unexpected after the wit and energy of the opening movement. Beethoven marks it "slow and sorrowful," and both its pace and character stand out at a time when "slow" movements were more likely to be in moderate tempos and more elegant than deep. The movement begins with a melody worrying the same notes in the middle of the keyboard over thick, dark chords. The melody manages to briefly rise up the keyboard and swell in volume before falling back. A contrasting idea thins the texture, with a higher and more ornate melody floating over a single moving line in the left hand, with the emotional intensity rising until it is released in a downward cascade. A middle section starts in a noble major mode before splintering into a series of gasps in the right hand that lead into the return of the opening material. A dramatic passage near the end finds the opening melody deep in the bass register before the movement evaporates into fragments.

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This movement stands beside the slow movement of Beethoven's string quartet, Op. 18, no. 1 as the two most moving and mournful essays from his early works. The quartet movement was inspired by the tomb scene in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, and it is possible that this one also had a literary model. According to Beethoven's (notoriously unreliable and dishonest) friend Anton Schindler, Beethoven said later in life that the time of these sonatas was a "more poetic" age, and that people would sense "the spiritual condition of a melancholy person" in this movement without being guided by titles.

The graceful and simple Menuet that follows eases us back into the sunlight, although spirits elevate again for some witty and athletic hand crossing in the central Trio.

The final Rondo is squarely back in the world of fun and games, with an opening idea consisting of isolated three-note gestures that fail to coalesce into a proper theme. The two false starts do lead to a longer passage, but this, too, gets stuck. The different ways in which these fragments can be brought back and altered provides many humorous surprises along the way to the movement's end, which worries the three-note figure in the bass under a chromatic scale in the right hand.

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Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Sonata in F-sharp Major, Op. 78, "à Thérèse" (1809)

The sonata Op. 78 is also dedicated to a Countess, Therese von Brunsvik, from an aristocratic Hungarian family. Therese had a brief visit to Vienna with her family in 1799, and she and her sister Josephine received very long daily piano lessons with Beethoven for over two weeks. Beethoven remained close to the musical Brunsvik sisters (and to their cellist brother Franz). Both Josephine and Therese have been (implausibly) proposed as Beethoven's mysterious "Immortal Beloved," but it was Josephine with whom Beethoven was truly in love, and to whom he almost certainly proposed marriage. His relationship with Therese seems not to have been similarly passionate, but he visited the family regular in Hungary and clearly was fond of them.

At the time of the Op. 10 sonatas, Beethoven was largely driven by commissions, composing pieces requested by his patrons, who then received exclusive possession of the manuscript for a time, before publishing them. A decade later, the situation was reversed, with Beethoven negotiating directly with publishers, and bestowing dedications as tokens of esteem, rather as the consequence of a commission or in hopes of a financial reward. Op. 78 is from a group of three sonatas (with Op. 79, and Op. 81a, "Les adieux") requested by the pianist and publisher Muzio Clementi, who brought them out in London at the same time that Breitkopf und Härtel published them in Leipzig. The character and technical demands of the sonata, as well as its modest dimensions, probably reflect what Beethoven thought that Therese would enjoy playing, as well as what he thought might be attractive to potential purchasers.

The sonata has only two movements, and even with both halves of the first movement repeated last only about ten minutes.

It is in the very unusual key of F-sharp Major, meaning that the pianist is playing on the black keys most of the time, and that the sonata would have sounded slightly out-of-tune in Beethoven's day, before equal temperament. The movement opens with a brief slow introduction, with chords rising over a low octave in the bass, as if the pianist is testing the keyboard, or perhaps accustoming herself to the odd key and temperament. The theme of the main section is Beethoven at his most melodic and lyrical, in a manner that would later be associated with Schubert. Here the flowing melody comes only in short bursts, interspersed with passage work. Unlike Beethoven's next sonata, Op. 79, which is relatively easy and clearly intended for amateurs, this one is intended for accomplished players. Still, the moderate tempo of the first movement and even the key suggest that Beethoven may have been making some concessions for Therese's benefit (black keys stand above the white keys and are easier targets). It is even possible that Beethoven had some pedagogical goals in mind in forcing Therese to play in this key, and especially to play so many scales. If Beethoven was trying to do his dedicatee any favors, he seems to have dropped the idea by the second movement, which requires very light and quick fingers. The theme is a quick question and answer pair, alternating between loud and soft, that quickly gives way to very rapid two-note figures galloping up and down the keyboard.

Although Therese von Brunsvik appears in the annals of music history only through her cameos in Beethoven's life, she later had an important role in education, founding the first kindergartens in Hungary and writing a treatise about the education of women.

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Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Sonata in A Major, Op. 101 (1813-16)

While we can only speculate about the musical accomplishments of most of Beethoven's pupils and patrons, the Baroness Dorothea von Ertmann, to whom the third sonata on this program is dedicated, was widely recognized as one of the finest pianists in Vienna and as one of Beethoven's most important advocates. An 1803 issue of a Berlin literary journal carried a report on musical life in Vienna which listed the leading artists of the time, praising Ertmann for her "amazing precision, clearness and delicacy." The composer Johann Friedrich Reichardt heard Ertmann play many times during a winter spent in Vienna in 1808-09 and wrote of her "I have never seen such power and innermost tenderness combined even in the greatest virtuosi; from the tip of each finger her soul poured forth." Ertmann did occasionally play in public, even giving the first performance of Beethoven's cello sonata in A major, Op. 69, but her primary sphere was the private salon. There was no such thing as a piano recital in Beethoven's Vienna, and there is record only of a single public performance of a Beethoven piano sonata in his lifetime. The piano sonata lived and was cultivated in salons, and it was Ertmann who continued to play his music even when his keyboard music had otherwise been eclipsed by younger and more fashionable composers. There is no reason to doubt Schindler's account of Ertmann gathering around her a circle of devoted music-lovers and keeping Beethoven's sonatas current in Vienna in the last years of his life and beyond.

The sonata Op. 101 is generally regarded as the first piano sonata of Beethoven's "late" period. Beethoven's "middle" period is associated with ambitious, heroic works that make bold statements (like the "Eroica" symphony, or the "Appassionata" sonata, Op. 57, heard on the last program), but the

"late" are more difficult to characterize. Composed at a time when Beethoven was almost completely deaf, and had largely withdrawn from public life, some of the "late" works seem more intimate and private, as well as more formally experimental and unpredictable. Op. 101 seems to have two different expressive modes; one questioning and indefinite, and the other more confident and assertive.

The first movement is in the first of these modes. Beethoven indicates that it should be played "with the deepest feeling" (another possible translation would be "the most heartfelt"), and it seems to imply rather than state. The movement sounds as if we have joined a piece already in progress, as short fragments of melody float without committing to either a definite key or to a complete and closed statement. This short movement stays in this tender but tentative register throughout, mostly remaining smooth and quiet and musing over a small collection of gestures. After such a gentle opening, the second movement comes as something of a shock. Suddenly, we are in a different and more decisive musical world. Instead of gently rolling rhythms, we have a confident march, and instead of fragmentary ideas, we have complete phrases and long repeated sections, as well as a conventional March-Trio-March structure. This is not to say that the march is without surprises and oddities. The harmonies tend to slink and slither, and there is a wonderfully ethereal passage in the second half of the march, high on the keyboard, and played with the sustaining pedal open.

The next movement returns to the intimate mode and sounds as if it will be a serious and substantial slow movement (Beethoven indicates that it is "full of longing").

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It is, indeed, moving, but it fails to gather momentum, with the opening melody trailing off into repetitions of one idea before halting altogether. This is followed by a return of a fragment from the opening movement (reminiscent of the “sonata in the mode of a fantasia,” Op. 27, No. 1, from the last program). This fragment quickly splinters and accelerates into the last movement proper, and back into the mode of bold, confident statements (here, Beethoven asks that the music be played “with determination”). The main idea has the two hands imitating each other, and this hint of contrapuntal dialogue is more fully explored in the middle of the movement, which contains a formal four-voice fugue.

This reflects both Beethoven’s study of Bach’s fugues around this time and Ertmann’s own interest in Bach’s keyboard music. The climax of the movement drops to the very bottom of Beethoven’s keyboard, repeatedly striking the low E, a note only recently added to the piano keyboard at the time.