

## Quotations and Ideas in Beethoven's Piano Sonatas

With the composition of his piano sonatas, Beethoven left an oeuvre that since its inception has lost nothing of its significance. From his first sonatas onwards, he presented a musical spectrum from which new horizons are continually revealed, through which his creativity appears to be inextricably bound to his way of constantly finding a new language for each individual sonata and formulating his ideas, not only within each separate movement, but also for the work as a whole.

In this paper I would like to focus on some 'new ideas' Beethoven is using in several of his piano sonatas,<sup>1</sup> whereby, to begin with, I would like to mention the significance of specific musical quotations from Bach, Handel and Mozart in his piano sonatas. While some quotations might just be of general interest, others may indeed influence the manner in which an interpretation takes its form.

Of course, a well-known example is Beethoven's quotation from the opening of Mozart's sonata in C, K. 457 for the beginning of his Op. 10 No. 1, but what about the quotation from Mozart's Adagio in B minor, K. 540 that Beethoven is using in the slow movement of his sonata Op. 10 No. 3? This *Largo e Mesto* is in general considered as the first real example of tragic music in Beethoven's oeuvre.

Compare the beginning of Mozart's Adagio with the moment when Beethoven turns in the second movement of his sonata from major to minor again in bar 17.

The image shows a musical score snippet for Mozart's Adagio in B minor, K. 540. The score is written for piano and is in 3/4 time. It features a treble and bass clef. The tempo is marked 'Adagio'. The key signature is one sharp (F#). The score shows a transition from major to minor in bar 17. The first part of the snippet shows a melody in the treble clef starting with a piano (*p*) dynamic, followed by a forte (*sf*) dynamic. The second part shows a melody in the bass clef starting with a piano (*p*) dynamic, followed by a forte (*sf*) dynamic. The score includes various musical notations such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.



Beethoven, Sonata Op. 10 No. 3, Largo e Mesto, bars 17-19

It is not inconceivable that Beethoven had already known Mozart's Adagio for some years, because after it was probably released by Hoffmeister in 1788, though no copy has survived to document this, it was Artaria who published it in 1794, four years before Beethoven's Op. 10 was published by Eder in Vienna. Mozart wrote it in the key of B minor, a key he is using only once more – for his Adagio in the Flute Quartet K. 285. Beethoven describes this tonality as 'the black key': its character must have held a specific significance for him and was explicitly associated with intensely tragic emotions. For example, he uses it for the quartet 'Er sterbe' in the 3rd Scene of the 2nd Act of his opera *Fidelio*, in which Don Pizarro is wishing Florestan dead.

In addition, I would also like to devote a few words to Mozart's beautiful Adagio. He added it on 19 March 1788 in his thematic catalogue and the work has often been associated with the death of his father on 29 May 1787. However, it is more probable that he composed it for a remembrance service for the Freemasons, who he had joined in Vienna in the Lodge of the 'Zur Wohltätigkeit' [Beneficence] in December 1784. The brevity of the composition would have made it highly suitable for such a service, and above all, the Coda evinces an optimistic musical picture – the shift from B minor to B major in the final bars – a true Freemason idea: 'The following of the Path from Darkness into Light'. While the above-mentioned knowledge might only be of general interest, in Beethoven's later works some quotations can indeed put us on the right track regarding an interpretation. For

example, Beethoven’s quotation from the St John Passion by Bach ‘Es ist vollbracht’ (It is finished) in his sonata Op. 110.

5 A Alt  
 Es ist voll - bracht, es ist voll - bracht, o Trost für

The image shows a musical score for an Alt voice part and piano accompaniment. The vocal line is in treble clef with a key signature of one sharp (F#) and a common time signature. The piano accompaniment is in grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with the same key signature and time signature. The vocal line includes the lyrics 'Es ist voll - bracht, es ist voll - bracht, o Trost für'. The piano part features a complex rhythmic pattern with many sixteenth and thirty-second notes.

Bach, ‘Es ist vollbracht’

Klagender Gesang  
*Arioso dolente*

8 4 5  
1 3  
2 2

*cresc. - - - dim.* ***p*** 45 45 3 21 4

1 4 2 5 \*

The image shows a musical score for the 'Klagender Gesang' section of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 110, 3rd movement. The score is in grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a key signature of three flats (Bb, Eb, Ab) and a common time signature. The section is marked 'Arioso dolente'. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (crescendo, decrescendo, piano), articulation (accents), and fingering numbers (1-5). There are also some performance instructions like '45' and '21' above the staff.

Beethoven, Sonata Op. 110, 3<sup>rd</sup> movement

Of course, this Arioso dolente is a very tragic movement, but the quotation can also lead us to a better understanding of the sonata as a whole. The first movement, Moderato cantabile molto espressivo, has, as Beethoven specifies, a ‘con amabilita’ character, evoking a mood of peace and tranquillity. Only in the penultimate bar does the colour change like a shadow, auguring the imminent dramatic developments.

113 5 4 5 5  
2 4 3 4

***p*** cresc. - - - ***f*** ***p***

5 1 4 2

The image shows a musical score for the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 110, starting at measure 113. The score is in grand staff (treble and bass clefs) with a key signature of three flats (Bb, Eb, Ab) and a common time signature. The section is marked 'Moderato cantabile molto espressivo'. The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (piano, crescendo, forte, piano), articulation (accents), and fingering numbers (1-5). There are also some performance instructions like 'cresc. - - -' and 'f' above the staff.

Sonata Op. 110, 1st movement

Intense emotions burst out in the subsequent Allegro molto, where great dynamic contrasts confront each other like question and answer, while in the middle section the voices are literally crossing in a suggestive manner by the downwards-whirling quavers contrasting with the upward drive of the syncopating crotchets, all of this reinforced by marking each phrase with *sforzati* and *fortissimi*.

The image shows two systems of musical notation for a piano sonata. The first system covers measures 41 to 48, and the second system covers measures 49 to 45. The music is in G major and 3/4 time. The first system begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a sforzato (*sf*) marking at the end. The second system begins with a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic and a sforzato (*sf*) marking at the beginning. The score includes various fingering numbers (1-5) and articulation marks such as asterisks and slurs.

Sonata Op. 110, 2nd movement

Here, too, there is a reference to Bach's St. John Passion, because right at the beginning, in the chorale 'Lord, our ruler', Bach employs this symbolism of constantly intertwining voices (flutes and oboes) to depict most impressively the musical image of the crucifixion scene.

By means of such allusions, Beethoven confers to this sonata an ever-present Passion ambience. This specifically, because the subsequent Recitativo and the afore mentioned Arioso dolente, with the St John quotation, are leading to the first fugue, whereby the fugue, like a choir of human voices, is trying to rise from the despair of the Arioso, finding a solution. When this first effort fails and the despair returns even more tragically in a second Arioso, at last the second fugue finds its ultimate way, ending homophone, with all voices united, driving the music irresistibly upwards, soaring ecstatically to a liberating conclusion.

It is interesting that the structural design from the Recitative onwards corresponds to the way Bach does that in his cantatas, namely in the order Recitative, Aria and then a Chorus.

Upon reflection, it must be concluded that in this sonata Beethoven is expressing an image of Christ's passion. The first movement as his birth with the foreboding of his fate expressed in the final bars, then the persecution, the crucifixion, the suffering and at last the resurrection.

It is most striking that this is the only one of the 32 sonatas for which Beethoven gives a specific date. At the top of the first page of the autograph he writes, 'Den 25sten December 1821'. Indeed Christmas Day, the birth of Christ.

The significance stretches even further, because it is the only one of his last piano sonatas that is not dedicated to anyone – indeed a work written also for himself with the significance of a *document humain*.

Such an approach for this sonata will certainly influence any interpretation, and does, for example, change immensely the musical picture of the second movement, which is considered by many pianists as a joyful movement, instead of a dramatic one, with the crucifixion in the middle section.

The conclusion must also be that behind this sonata lies an idea, a complete 'plan' from beginning to end. It is remarkable to see from Beethoven's sketchbooks that such planning is regularly encountered. For him, movements – with only rare exceptions – were not regarded as independent entities but rather belonged to a previously conceived idea for the whole work.

We might also conclude this from a remark from Franz Schubert made to the author Karl Johann von Braunthal when both men observed Beethoven in a Viennese establishment, probably Leonhard Wanner's '*Zur Eiche*'. Von Braunthal recorded the following conversation about this subject with Schubert:

In a small Vienna inn, I saw B e e t h o v e n in the last years of his life on many a winter evening. [...] Sometimes he drew a second, firmer notebook from his heart pocket (I mean the left breast pocket of his simple gray overcoat) and wrote with half-closed eyes. I wonder what he's writing? – one evening I asked my neighbour, the unrivalled song composer Schubert, who died far too young. He's composing, he replied. – But he's writing words, not notes? – That's his way; he usually indicates with words the progression of ideas for this or that piece of music and puts at the most a few notes in between.

Kopitz/Cadenbach, Vol. I, pp. 91, 92

A progression of ideas is also highly relevant for the interpretation of the Fugue in his sonata Op. 106, the 'Hammerklavier'. In this sonata, too, we find a tragic Adagio sostenuto, followed by a Largo that tries to find a way out, leading to the colossal fugue, Allegro risoluto. While most of the interpretations of this fugue are focused on playing all the notes, which is indeed an effort in itself, and the fugue is in essence mainly considered by scholars to be an abstract outcome of the utmost craftsmanship of polyphonic writing, the focus for an interpretation should be on the musical picture. The beginning of this fugue should be an outburst of utmost joy, leading ultimately in the final pages to liberation in the jubilant trills. For such an image, that certainly will have a profound influence on an interpretation, it is indeed also a quotation that puts us on the right track. Is it not striking that when the theme in its original form arises for the first time in bar 16, the descending line of thirds that mark the first note of each beat, B-flat – G – E-flat, are also the main notes of the melody that mark the words 'And He shall Reign for Ever and Ever...' from the Hallelujah chorus in *Messiah* by Handel, the composer Beethoven deeply admired and had been studying for many years? Beethoven's early knowledge of Handel's *Messiah* was mentioned by Carl Czerny. He wrote in 1805, thirteen years before Beethoven was using this quotation in de Hammerklavier, a work that was composed in the years 1817/1818:

'He [Beethoven] did not know Graun's "Tod Jesu". My father brought him the score [...] Beethoven stated that the two fugues were tolerable, the rest ordinary. With the words, "This is quite another fellow,"

he then took Handel's Messiah and played through the most interesting numbers, pointing out several similarities to Haydn's Creation, etc. This happened in 1805.'

Czerny, p. 13

The image shows two musical staves. The top staff is labeled 'Beethoven' and features a treble clef, a key signature of one flat (B-flat), and a 3/4 time signature. It begins with a trill (tr) and a wavy line (trill-like ornament) above the first note. The melody consists of a series of eighth and sixteenth notes, with some notes beamed together. The bottom staff is labeled 'Handel' and features a treble clef and a key signature of one flat (B-flat). It contains the lyrics 'and He shall reign for e----- ver and ever' with a long horizontal line under the 'e' in 'ever'. The melody is a simple, slow-moving line of quarter and eighth notes.

Beethoven, Fugue, theme, b 16–19

Handel, Hallelujah theme transposed from D major to B-flat major

It will also be clear that the knowledge of such musical images for Op. 110 and Op. 106 will influence any interpretation. This is reminiscent of the words of the legendary pianist Alfred Cortot about Schumann's 'Kinderszenen':

'These wonders are not described by a child, but by a grown-up man, a poet who remembers his childhood. Bear that in mind and it will totally transform your touch.'

Gavoty, p. 27

Indeed, a 'change of touch' also will be the result of such an approach in Beethoven's masterworks.

This will also be the outcome for an interpretation of Beethoven's sonata Op. 31 No. 2 'The Tempest'. For this sonata, Beethoven even, as an exception, revealed his 'plan' when his reply to the question of its musical content was, 'Just read Shakespeare's Tempest.'

The expectant, interrogative opening of the first movement, the first broken chord in *pianissimo* – hovering on a broken sixth chord of A major and not in the fundamental D-minor key – the dramatic sequel and the recitatives sounding from afar, all give us reason for this. Images of murmuring spirits in the recitatives

surrounded by storm and water are never far off, and personages from Shakespeare’s play are omnipresent: from b. 21, for instance, where bass and soprano engage in an engrossing dialogue. It takes little imagination to see Prospero and Ariel here, surrounded by the rolling waters, expressed in the uninterrupted triplet passages.



Sonata Op. 31 No. 2, 1st movement

In the central movement, with the repeated short ‘timpani motif’, the tension created by the first movement is never entirely dissipated.



Sonata Op. 31 No. 2, 2nd movement

In the subsequent Allegretto, the striking rhythm of this motif returns in the theme's agitated melodic motif that forms the core of this *perpetuum mobile*. For a successful performance, the tempo of the articulated demisemiquaver motif of the 'timpani' should be adopted for the main motif of this final movement, meaning that this can also be a real Allegretto and furthermore can do justice to Beethoven's exceptional notation in the left hand, where the bass must be separated from the rest of the broken chord so that not the tonic but the dominant shines through and the music ascends from the ground. This image certainly fits Czerny's assertion that for this movement Beethoven was inspired by the rhythmical cadence of a horseman galloping past his window.



Sonata Op. 31 No. 2, 3rd movement

But a musical picture of floating spirits above the earth, drifting around aimlessly, ending in nothing, comes even closer, especially because in the end everything is disappearing without leaving a trace, indeed like Prospero's words in *The Tempest*:

*The solemn temples, the great globe itself,*

*Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve.*

*And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,*

*Leave not a rack behind.*



Sonata Op. 31 No. 2, 3rd movement, final bars

Cortot had it right: such an image will totally transform your touch, even if Beethoven were to have used the rhythm of a galloping horse.

It was also Czerny who reported Beethoven's words to his friend, the violinist Wenzel Krumpholtz, just before he wrote his sonatas Op. 31:

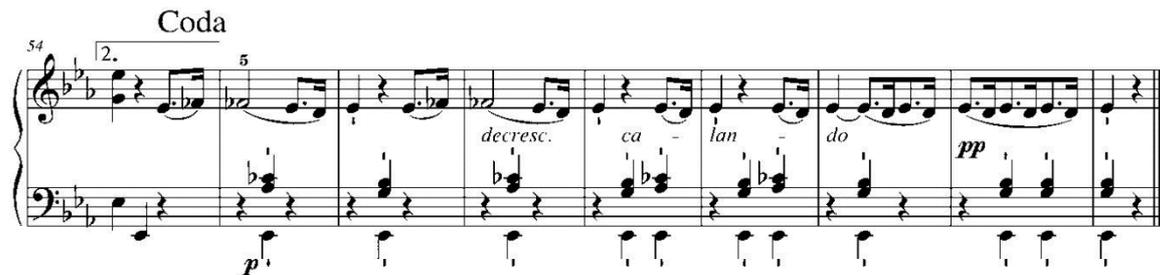
I am not satisfied with my works I have written so far. From now on I am taking a new direction.

Czerny, p. 13

Op. 31 No. 2 is certainly a good example of his success. But there is more to discover in this specific opus. For example in the next sonata Op. 31 No. 3.

In this sonata also something exceptional is going on. It strikes us that a Scherzo and a Minuet are to be found as the two middle movements of this four-movement sonata, but that a slow movement is missing. Will there be a reason for this? A Scherzo in 2/4 time is already rather unusual, but the answer can be found in the Minuet, where in the Coda the already somewhat melancholic mood that arises with the use of the Neapolitan second over a tonic pedal is emphasized, whereby the last phrase assumes a tragic overtone. Indeed a sorrowful farewell to the Minuet, a dance which for Beethoven must have been symbolically linked to the 'old' music of his predecessors Haydn and Mozart. The Presto con fuoco that follows on from this, rushes excitedly into a new era!

Even more so because in the first English edition by Clementi & Co., this movement begins *forte*. Since this edition appeared shortly after the Viennese Nägeli edition and the Berlin Simrock edition, in which this movement begins *piano*, it is not inconceivable that the *forte* is a correction. In any case it would even reinforce the musical picture of joy.



Sonata Op. 31 No. 3, 3rd movement, Coda



Sonata Op. 31 No. 3, 4th movement

Anyhow, getting rid of the Minuet was a special idea, and the ‘plan’ for the construction of the sonata was made. The same idea we notice in the sonata Op. 54, one of the sonatas with only two movements, because here, too, a Minuet is to be found. Greater contrasts than those in the first movement, Tempo d’un Menuetto, are scarcely imaginable. The recurring, ever more varied and almost Rococo-like theme is brought each time to an abrupt end by stamping *forte* octaves. Then the Minuet tries to have the last word before – but after a last, painful exclamation in *fortissimo* – it disappears into obscurity.

When the second movement, Allegretto, flows on in a sunny mood and the tempo is further increased to a più Allegro in the Coda, the mood of the first movement is totally left behind and the work is concluded cheerfully. Indeed only two movements, but it is a matter of course that these two even so form a coherent whole.

One might wonder why, after Beethoven completed the sonata Op. 54 in 1804, he returned almost two decades later again to the Minuet. We see it in his Diabelli Variations Op. 120. With Variation 33, Tempo di Menuetto, he concluded this masterwork.

The return of the Minuet as the last variation might also have a specific reason. Not only that the return of the opening theme resembles the construction of Bach's Goldberg Variations, a work that Beethoven knew, but also that his choice for this particular dance was a part of a specific idea, a 'plan'. In a letter to his friend

Archduke Rudolph from July 29<sup>th</sup> 1819, we find an indication. Coming from Mödling, where he stayed during that summer, he writes:

I was in Vienna in order to collect in Y.I.H's library what was most useful for me. The main aim is to meet the better connection of art [Kunstvereinigung] as quickly as possible. In which connection the older composers render us double service, since there is generally real artistic value in their works) among them, of course, only the German Handel and Sebastian Bach possessed genius). But in the world of art, as in the whole of our great creation, *freedom and progress* are the main objectives.

Brandenburg, Vol. IV, p. 298

In his Cotta edition, Hans von Bülow already pointed to the fact that not only are the Diabelli Variations offering an overview of the complete Beethoven, but also that their content recalls many wonderful reincarnations from composers as Bach, Händel and Mozart and indeed in this way forms a 'connection of art' between the past and the present, carefully preserving the past and from there creating new horizons. At last this wonderful journey must come to an end, and what a marvellous idea it is, to do this with such a serene, gracious Minuet, reflecting the spiritual world of the composer he once met and who he admired so much – Mozart.

Note:

1. I would like to thank my colleague the Dutch pianist Willem Brons for communicating to me some of the ideas mentioned in this paper.

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An English translation of this book *Chopin The Etudes* appeared as E-book by Schott in 2015.

His book *Beethoven: Die Klaviersonaten*, published by Schott in 2012, will be published in an extended English edition, *Beethoven The Piano Sonatas, History - Notation - Interpretation* in the fall of 2020 by Yale University Press, New Haven, CT, USA.