

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1832)
Sonata in E flat, Op.81a
‘Sonate caracteristique: Les adieux, l’absence et le retour’:
A commentary on the first movement.

by

Jack Day

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1832)

Sonata in E flat, Op.81a

‘Sonate caracteristique: Les adieux, l’absence et le retour’

When Beethoven wrote this sonata in 1809, he had already suffered from the effects of impaired hearing for over a decade. His home city, Vienna, was occupied by Napoleon and the French army on May 12. One of his patrons, Erzherzog (Archduke) Rudolph had already left the city, albeit temporarily, on May 4. It was Rudolph who, with Fuerst (Lord) Lobkowitz and Fuerst Kinsky provided Beethoven with an annual stipend.

The sonata was first published in London, by Muzio Clementi (1752-1832), who added a French subtitle to the piece paraphrasing Beethoven’s German headings:

German title	French paraphrase	English translation
Das Lebewohl	Les adieux	The good-bye
Die Abwesenheit	L’absence	The absence
Das Wiedersehn	Le retour	‘Seeing-again’ - the <i>occasion</i> of the return

The first of Beethoven’s German headings is actually written directly underneath the score, without its definitive article, (‘das’): the piano intones the German for ‘Good-bye!’ rather than ‘*the* good-bye’). The first three descending notes, analogous to ‘Three Blind Mice’, form a motive which recurs throughout the movement, and actually verbally expresses the programmatic idea behind this sonata with some expressive force, as you will find at the end of the movement. *Lebewohl!* This was not the only place Beethoven employed such textual underlay - the string quartet Op. 131 contains the words ‘*Muß es sein*’ (Must it be).

Aside from this some commentators have suggested that the music of this piece is not overly influenced by the programme. It is also noteworthy that the Sonata broadly follows the standard sonata movement arrangement (fast-slow-fast), supplementing a slow introduction to the first movement.

The two opening sounds, gentle two-part chords in E flat major and B flat major, lead us to expect a further E flat major chord, at least when we first hear this piece. In fact, Beethoven writes chord VI (c minor). The right hand proceeds as expected, but the left hand changes the function of the notes on which it alights. Further surprises will engage the ear, such as the diminished chord at the start of bar seven, the flattened submediant (chord VI) at the start of bar 8, and (within music developed from the same gesture) the step of a single semitone between bars 69 and 70.

Such harmonic ingenuity is paralleled by an acute concern for the way chords are voiced - Beethoven’s texture is varied, and exploits the sonic nuances of his piano. Consider, for example, the balanced inner (or ‘alto’) part from the end of bar 8 to the beginning of bar 12 - one might equate it with a gentle flute line underscoring a more

soloistic clarinet part. Indeed, Sigfried Mauser (in *Beethoven's Klaviersonaten*) compares this movement to a horn quintet.

There are more specifically pianistic textures too. The rocking motion for the left hand from bar 21 is dependent on the pianist playing the bass and the top notes louder than the 'inner' B flats. The passage from bars 32-34 is difficult to hammer out evenly, but this too is pianistic. In bars 39 and 43 a flattened ninth (G flat) over a fifth formed on the supertonic (chord II: F and C) works because of the distance between the two sounds - it would be far more jarring if the dissonant elements were closer together.

The motivic continuity of the Allegro section, looking as far ahead as the repeat marks, makes it obvious why musicologists as early as the 1860s could see Beethoven's work as organic - i.e., that every note has a relationship to every other. The process as I see it in Op.81a is that of statement and repeat, with the repeat being based on but not identical to the original. Often the repeat veers off to achieve a harmonic objective, whereas the original presents its material within harmonic stasis.

Consider bars 21-29, for example:

Bar	What happens	Tonal movement
21-24	New idea	None (remains in E flat major)
25-28	Repetition	Moves to dominant (B flat major)

and bars 39-50:

Bar	What happens	Tonal movement
39-42	New idea	None (remains around F major, supertonic or 'secondary dominant')
43-51	Repetition and extension	Moves to dominant key (B flat major)

Because Beethoven repeats and develops (i.e., alters) small phrases in this way, the music is engaging and feels like an integrated whole. There is certainly enough interest to justify the repeat.

The ensuing development maps the musical material from the exposition onto a much larger canvas: both the motives that appear in the dominant and the order in which they appear can be accounted for by precedents in the exposition. The first page of the

development develops the beginning idea and the quaver-quaver crotchet rhythm by using its figuration throughout a long harmonic section, for example.

As regards the overall form of the first movement, there is no clear separation of development and recapitulation. Such labels (as with all theory) were formulated after the literature to which they refer and cannot be literally applied onto all works; Beethoven did not write sonatas to predestined formulae. Two points are however clear: 110-124 is a straight repeat (a recapitulation) of the opening of the Allegro, but takes a different turn at bar 124 to give us a consolidatory passage in the tonic rather than the dominant. The section from bar 197 to the end is a gentle Coda, whose overlapping descending chords ('Lebewohl') may suggest an 'affectionate leave-taking'. That leaves two passages, the passage before the recapitulation, which we can accurately call 'development', and the passage around f minor after the recapitulation. This perhaps defies definition, as we shall see after summing up our results so far:

Bar	What happens?
1	Introduction
17a	Exposition
17b	Exposition again
70	Development
110	Recapitulation
197	Coda

What we make of this passage could affect the label we give to the form as a whole. What seems to happen is that a renewed passage of development follows the repeated recapitulation. Whilst the musical material is not new, it has not been heard in f minor before. One possible label is therefore 'Exposition, Exposition and Development, Recapitulation and Redevelopment, Coda':

70	Development
110	Recapitulation
162	'Redevelopment'
197	Coda

However, one cannot be absolutely sure. In his dynamic use of form, Beethoven often defies truly definitive analysis. His ninth symphony, for example, contains much repetition and alteration, but definitive labels for the individual sections defined by 'classical form' are elusive.