SCHAGHAJEGH NOSRATI

piano

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)

Partita No. 4 in D major BWV 828

Ouverture – Allemande – Courante – Aria – Sarabande – Menuet - Gigue

(approx. 25 minutes)

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809–1847)

Variations sérieuses Op. 54

Andante sostenuto

Var. 1 - Var. 2 Un poco più animato - Var. 3 Più animato - Var. 4 Sempre staccato e leggiero - Var. 5 Agitato - Var. 6 A tempo - Var. 7 Con fuoco - Var. 8 Allegro vivace - Var. 9 - Var. 10 Moderato - Var. 11 Cantabile - Var. 12 Tempo di tema - Var. 13 Sempre assai leggiero - Var. 14 Adagio - Var. 15 Poco a poco più agitato - Var. 16 Allegro vivace - Var. 17

(approx. 12 minutes)

Intermission

JOSEPH HAYDN (1732–1809)

Andante con variazioni in F minor Hob.XVII/6

(approx. 13 minutes)

CHARLES-VALENTIN ALKAN (1813–1888)

Symphony for Solo Piano Op. 39 Nos. 4–7

Allegro moderato

Marche funèbre. Andantino

Tempo di minuetto

Finale. Presto

(approx. 26 minutes)

Johann Sebastian Bach

Partita No. 4 in D major BWV 828

The Baroque suite was the iPod shuffle of its time. It was a colourful bowl of musical Smarties with a cosmopolitan flavour, offering a collection of dances from all the major musical nations of Europe: the moderately paced *allemande* from Germany, the much-animated *courante* from France (or its cousin, the *corrente* from Italy), the stately *sarabande* from Spain and the leaping, if not outright pole-vaulting, *gigue* (jig) from England. An introductory piece was sometimes added at the beginning, and other optional dances such as the *gavotte* or *minuet* (the *galanteries*) were not infrequently inserted in the lead-up to the gigue finale.

Of course, no one put on their dancing shoes when these pieces were played. These were stylized dances for listening to and for playing before company in middle-class homes, where keyboards were becoming the favourite family instruments for domestic entertainment. Among such works, however, the six suites that Bach published with the title *Partitas* in the first volume of his *Clavierübung* (1726–1731) are in a class all their own, boldly virtuosic both in contrapuntal construction and in the technical demands they make of the performer.

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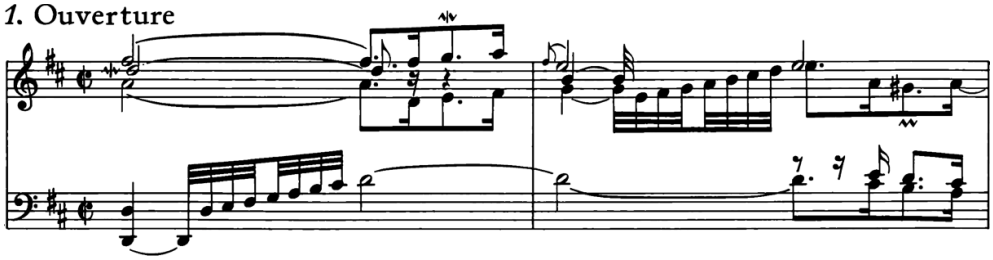
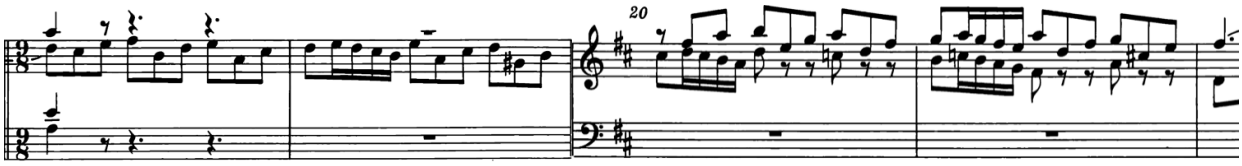
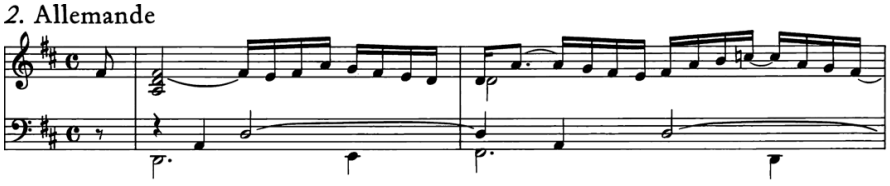
The *Partita No. 4 in D major* opens with a majestic French *Ouverture* movement in the style popularized by Louis XIV's court composer Jean-Baptiste Lully,



featuring a grandly strutting first section in the stop-and-start style of a ceremonial procession, embellished with breathless runs and bell-ringing trills, followed by a much nimbler fugal section in three-part imitative counterpoint.

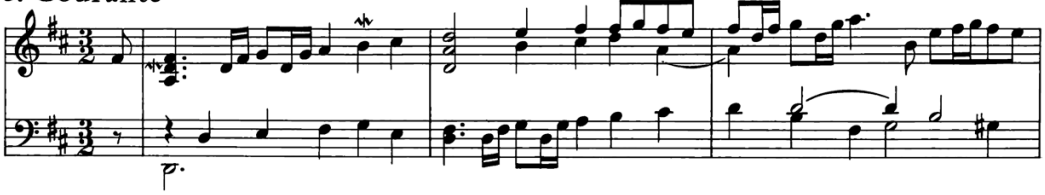


The *Allemande* that follows is deliriously ornate, only kept on the straight and narrow by the steady, even pace measured out in quarter notes and 8ths by its left-hand voices.



The pace picks up in the *Courante*

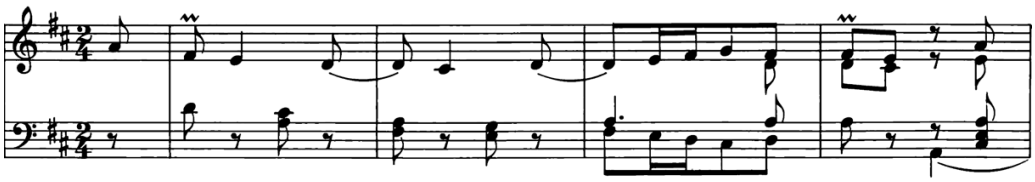
3. Courante



with its fine embroidery of small broken-chord figures permeating the contrapuntal texture from top to bottom.

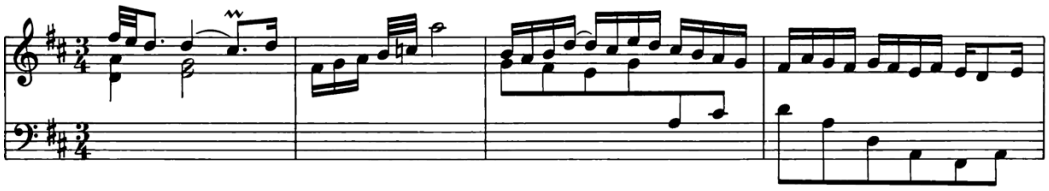
The *Aria* is marked by neatly doled-out four-bar and eight-bar phrases in a radically simple, predominantly two-voice texture.

4. Aria



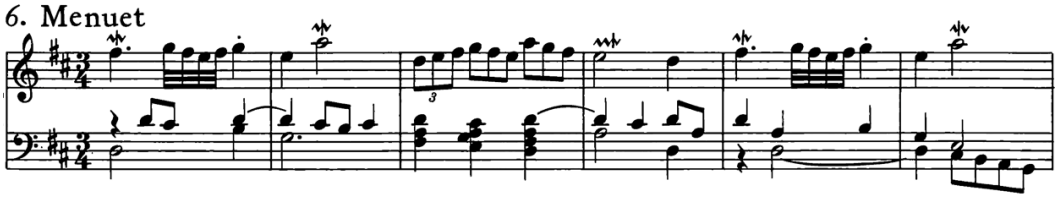
The deeply self-involved *Sarabande* wanders far afield in its almost recitative-like philosophical musings over a walking bass,

5. Sarabande



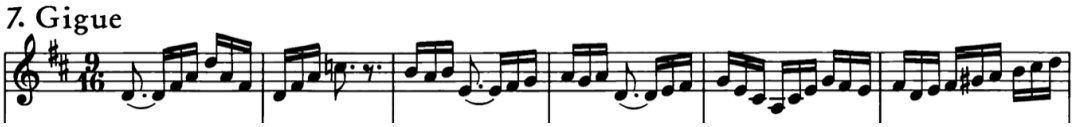
after which we are brought back into more rhythmically regular territory in the following *Minuet*.

6. Menuet



The closing *Gigue* is an exhilarating display of contrapuntal skill mixing rollicking broken-chord figures and mischievous “ants-in-your-pants” running motives within a driving harmonic framework.

7. Gigue



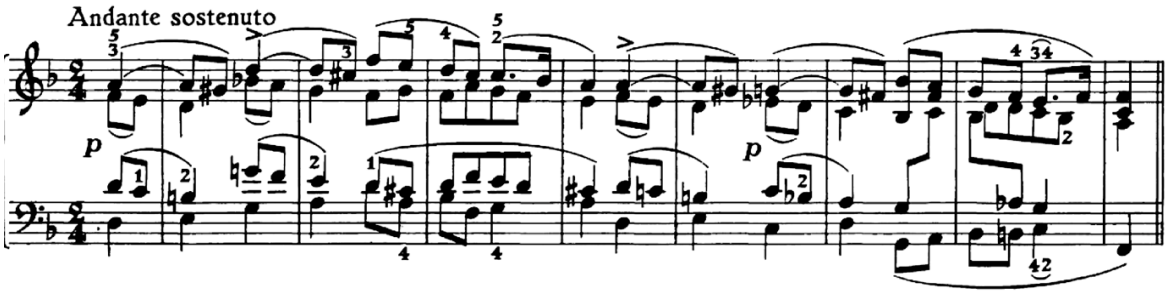
Felix Mendelssohn

Variations sérieuses Op. 54

Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses* was written in 1841 in response to a request from Viennese publisher Pietro Mechetti (1777–1850), who was soliciting contributions to a commemorative album, the sales of which would raise funds for a statue of Beethoven in his hometown of Bonn.

Mendelssohn's description of his variations as "serious" was a pointed dig at the kind of frothy and vapid *variations brillantes* that had flooded the European music market in the 1830s from pianist-composers such as Carl Czerny, Ignaz Moscheles and Henri Herz.

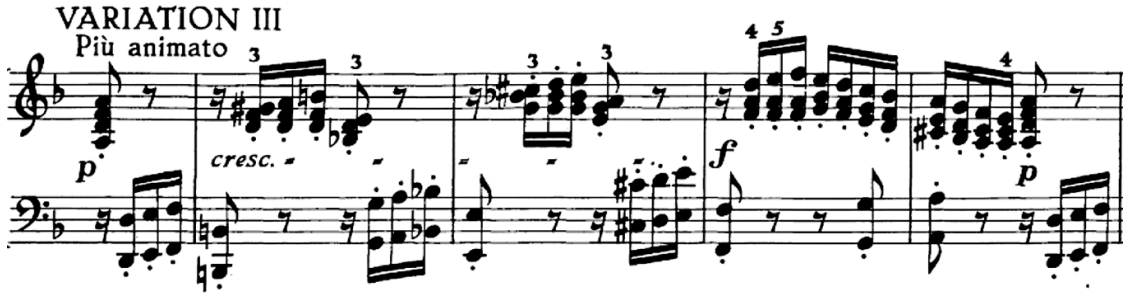
And this work is indeed "serious," starting with its inward-looking, almost self-pitying variation theme in D minor, presented in the learned four-voice setting of a Bach chorale.



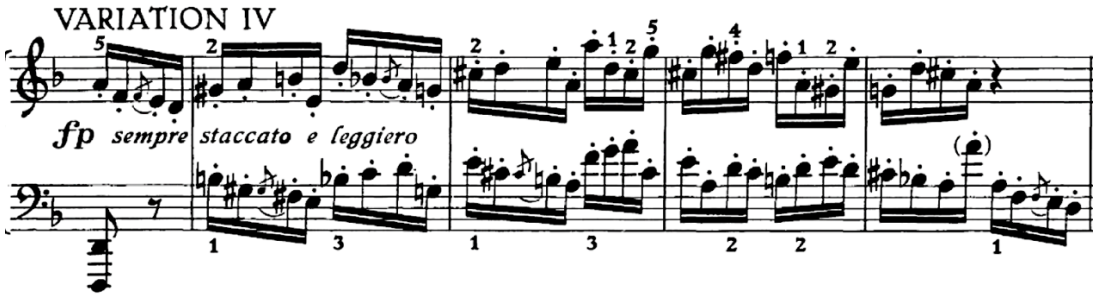
This is a theme that simply oozes pathos, structured as it is in a series of two-note sigh motives and drooping descending lines. Moreover, these sigh motives, being suspended over the bar line, are one beat out of sync with the downbeats of the prevailing meter. And they all "resolve" to chromatic tones not found in the D-minor scale.

The "abstract" quality of this Baroque-influenced texture throws the steady 8th-note movement of the inner voices into relief and maximizes interest in the harmony, like a *chaconne*, to provide the ideal canvas on which to paint any number of piano figurations in the 17 variations that follow.

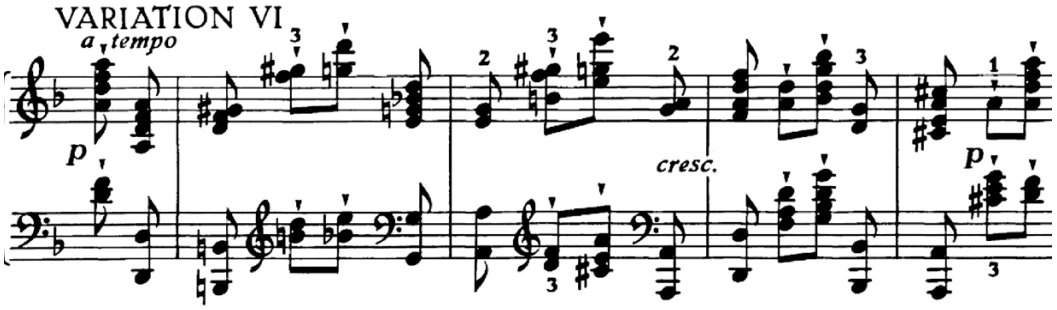
In his first two variations Mendelssohn merely decorates the theme with ornamental filigree, leaving the melody line to sing out clearly at the top of the texture. But more muscular pianistic figuration emerges in ***Variation 3.***



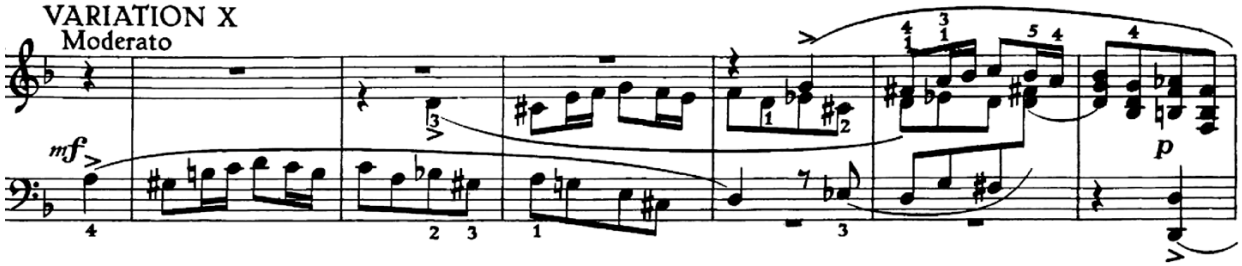
Bolstering the "learned" credentials of the set is the canon embedded in the chirpy chatter of *Variation 4*.



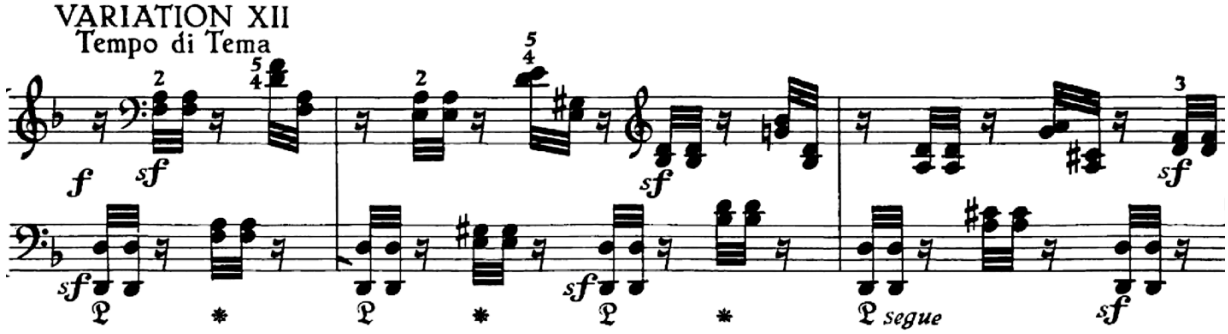
Each variation builds on the momentum and excitement of the previous variation, either by upping the tempo or by expanding the area of keyboard "real estate" used, as in the athletic register-leaps of *Variation 6.*



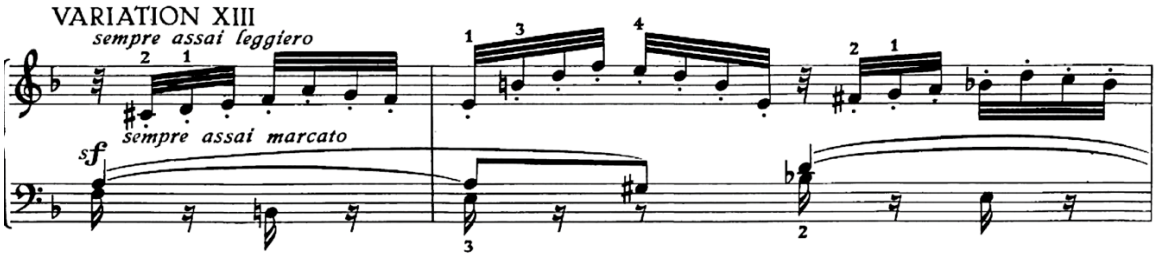
But just when the hurry-scurry seems set to spin out of control, Mendelssohn jams on the brakes, giving us a sobering *fugato* variation that seems inspired by motives from the G-minor fugue from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier Book I*.



This and the very poetic and dreamy *Variation 11* provide a pause in the action until the pace picks up again in the forceful pianistic rhetoric of *Variation 12*.

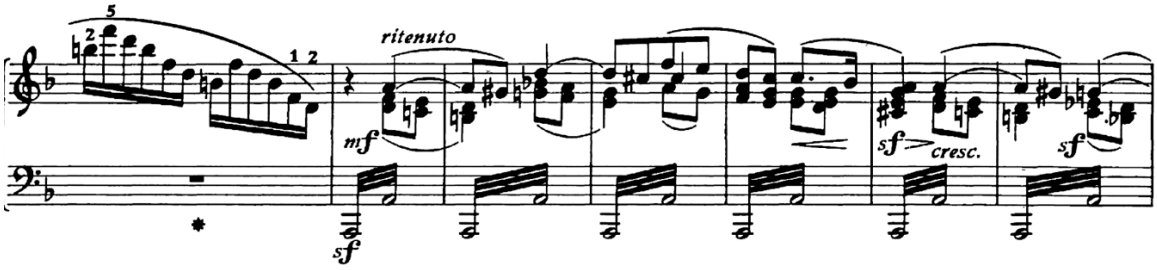


And it is hard to know whether Mendelssohn is being ironic in *Variation 13* when he imitates the "three-hand technique" invented and exploited by Liszt's famous rival Sigismond Thalberg (1812–1871). The theme is buried in the tenor, with filigree seemingly played by two other hands above and below it.



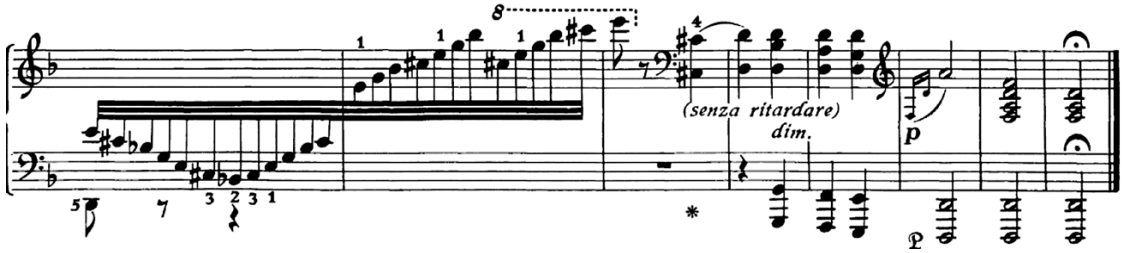
Mendelssohn takes another pause in the obligatory *Adagio* of ***Variation 14,*** the only variation of the set to be in D major rather than D minor.

And then it's off to the races again, with a steady progressive build-up of rhythmic excitement and pianistic exuberance, until in the final ***Variation 17*** the virtuoso figurations racing up and down the keyboard come to a sudden halt when the opening theme returns in all its simplicity over an ominously suspenseful tremolo in the bass.



This is much in the manner of the Commendatore's fateful appearance in the final act of *Don Giovanni* — which also ends in D minor, by the way.

And like Don Giovanni struggling to escape from his comeuppance, this variation struggles up and down the keyboard over an implacable tonic pedal, only achieving release in its final closing bars.



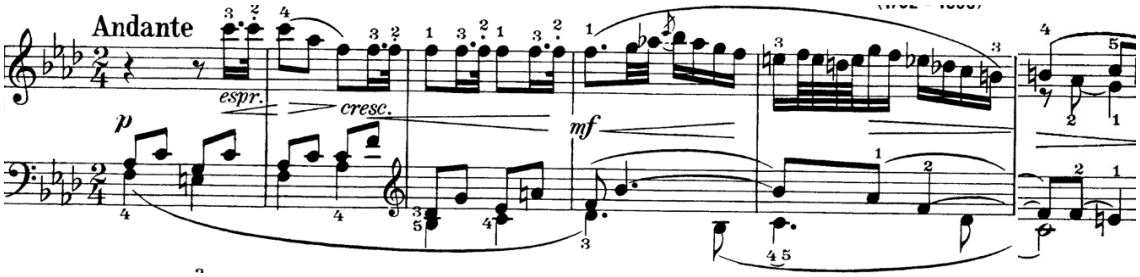
Joseph Haydn

Andante con variazioni in F minor Hob.XVII/6

The *Andante con variazioni in F minor* of 1793 is a set of "double variations," a musical form much favoured by Haydn, being also notably used in the *Andante* movement of his "Drumroll" Symphony No. 103 in E-flat major.

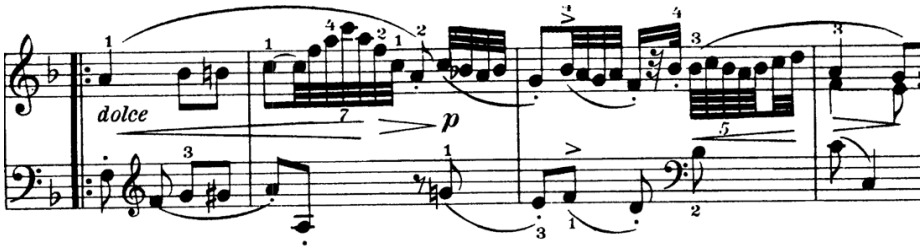
Haydn's keyboard *Andante* features two variation themes presented in turn, one in F minor, the other in F major. Each theme is structured in binary form, i.e., in two halves, each half repeated. Two variations then present these themes in ornamented form, and the work concludes with a dramatic coda in the style of a piano fantasy.

Haydn's opening theme in F minor presents us with two distinct musical "characters": a melancholy but stoically dignified melody line inflected with "sobbing" dotted rhythms, supported by an honour guard of changing harmonies proceeding at the slow drumbeat pace of a funeral procession.



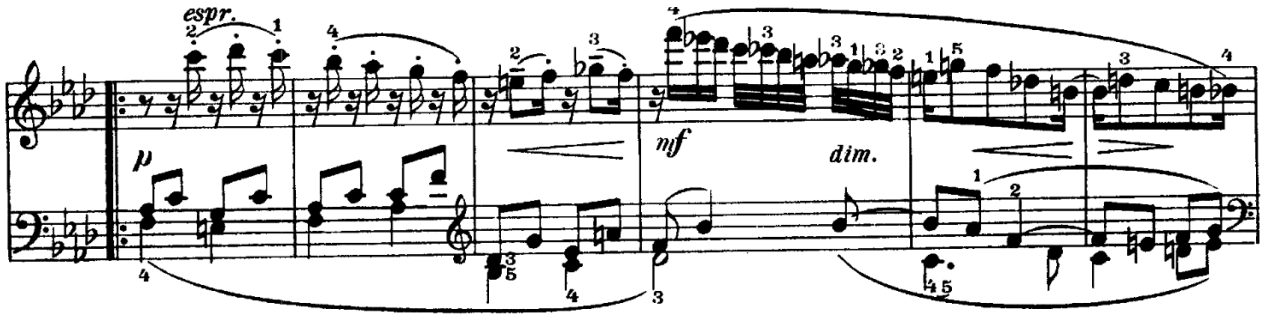
The psychologically probing nature of this opening theme is unusual for a composer whose congenial, merry and upbeat scores earned him the title of "Papa Haydn." In this regard, many commentators have remarked on the timing of this work's composition, just shortly after the sudden, unexpected death of Maria Anna von Genzinger (1754–1793), with whom Haydn had formed a close personal and perhaps romantic relationship.

The "old" Haydn returns in the playful F-major theme that follows, with its coyly ornamented melody line, lavishly embellished with devil-may-care flourishes of arpeggios.

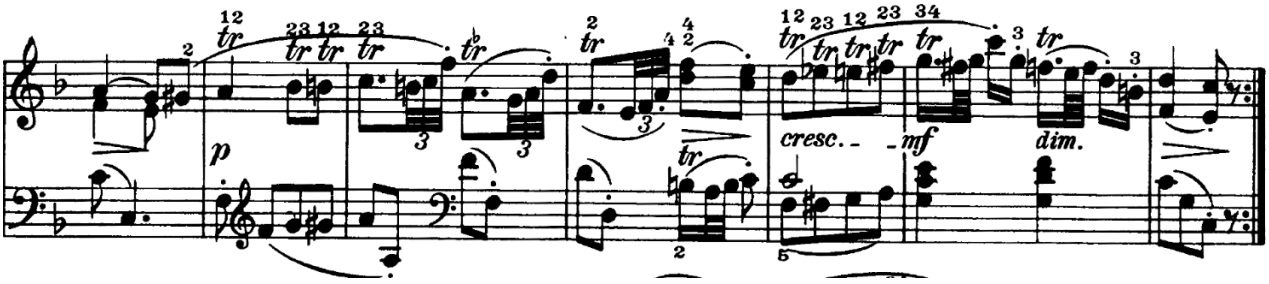


Proceeding at the same 8th-note pace as the opening theme, its whimsical demeanour and sunny disposition contrast strongly with what came before.

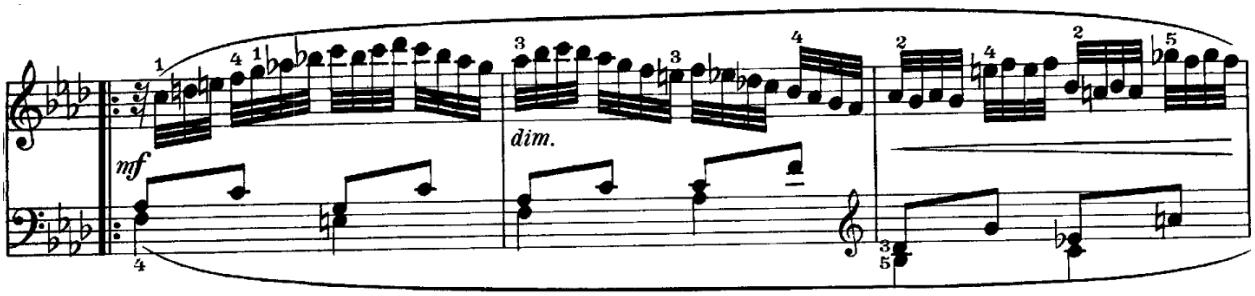
The first variation leans into the "sobbing" motif of the F-minor theme by presenting it with rhythmic displacements of the melody line and with increased chromaticism in its ornamentation.



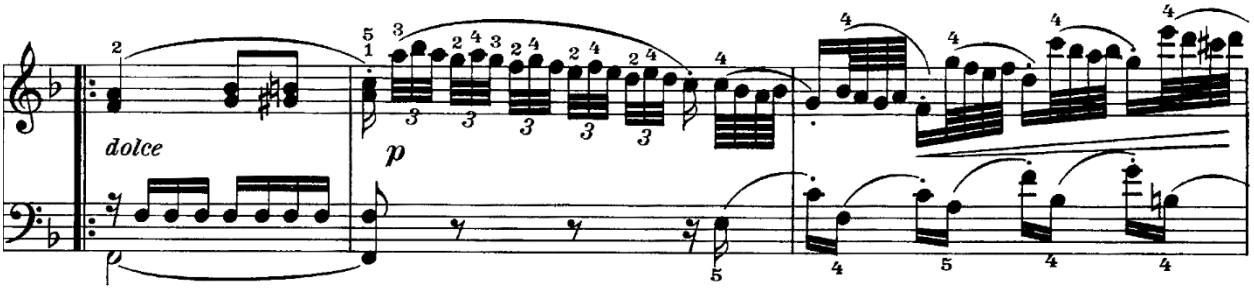
In response, the playful F-major theme is made even more playful in this first variation by the use of chains of trills.



The **second variation** takes this increased animation as a cue for giving the F-minor theme more energetic ornamental treatment as well, upping the ante to 32nd notes, while still maintaining and even intensifying its serious mood.

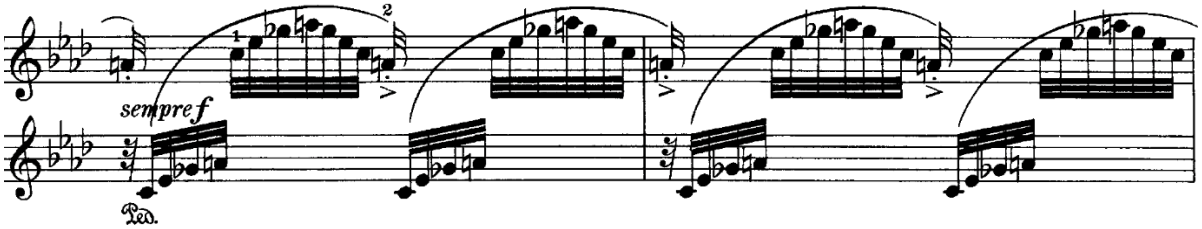


The F-major theme then comes back with its own version of this ornamental move, turning its former playfulness into utter flouncing hop-scotchy frivolity.

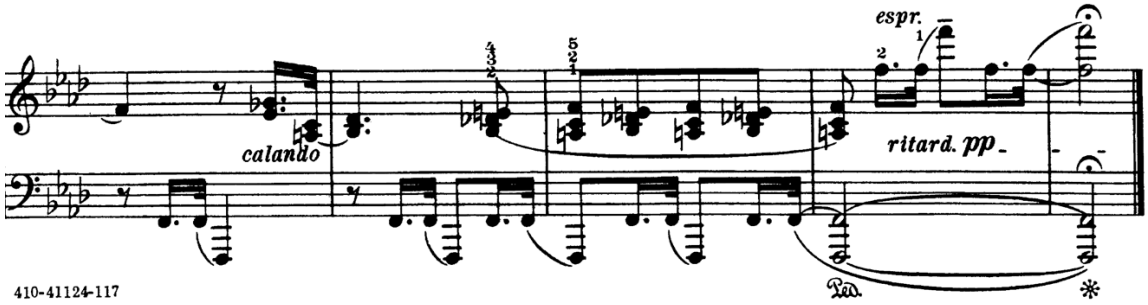


All revelry comes to a halt, however, when the opening F-minor theme returns in the coda for what seems like a Goldberg-Variations-style nostalgic farewell, but that is not what happens.

Instead, Haydn launches into a kind of piano fantasy in which the gloves come off, tonality is abandoned in favour of chromatic wanderings and surging waves of arpeggios sweep wildly across the keyboard.



But then the fever breaks, and the opening theme returns, in fragments, its sobbing dotted rhythm standing in for the melody as a whole.



While this F-minor theme, ending as it does in F major, might seem to have come through its troubled past to find solace in the major mode, the echoing insistence on this dotted rhythm, even in the final gestures of the melody in the high treble, leaves ample room for doubt.

And thus, the mysterious mood evoked in the work's opening hangs heavily in the air after the final notes are sounded.

Charles-Valentin Alkan

Symphony for Solo Piano Op. 39 Nos. 4–7

The brilliant but reclusive pianist-composer Charles-Valentin Morhange, known professionally as Alkan, is one of the great enigmas of 19th-century music. Admitted to the Paris Conservatoire at the age of six, he went on to win first prize honours in piano, harmony and organ, and published his Op. 1 at the age of 14.

In the 1830s he formed a close friendship with Chopin, whose music he greatly admired, and was one of only three names mentioned in Chopin's will. As a pianist he was recognized as one of the leading virtuosos of his time, on par with Chopin, Thalberg and Liszt. And his catalogue of published music, the vast majority of it imaginative and finely crafted works for piano, extends to more than 70 opus numbers.

How then could he have remained so neglected in the piano repertoire, virtually absent from the concert stage until the late 20th century?

The answer may be that while he possessed many talents, a talent for self-promotion was not one of them. Shy and almost misanthropic by nature, he gave few concerts and disappeared completely from view for long periods of time, so the public was largely aware of him through his publications alone. And therein lies the rub, since these works present challenges that won them few public performances on concert programs during the composer's lifetime.

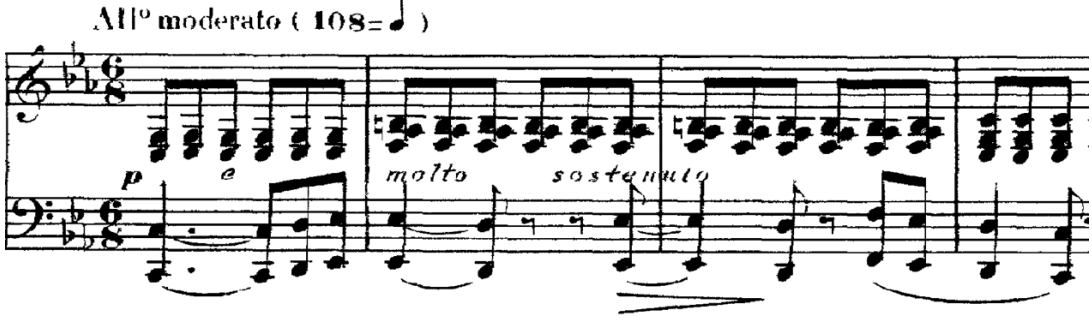
His scores are daunting, black with notes, and often written in remote keys with numerous sharps and flats (he actually wrote a piece in A-flat minor). Moreover, their technical demands placed them out of reach of all but the top-ranked performers of their day.

* * *

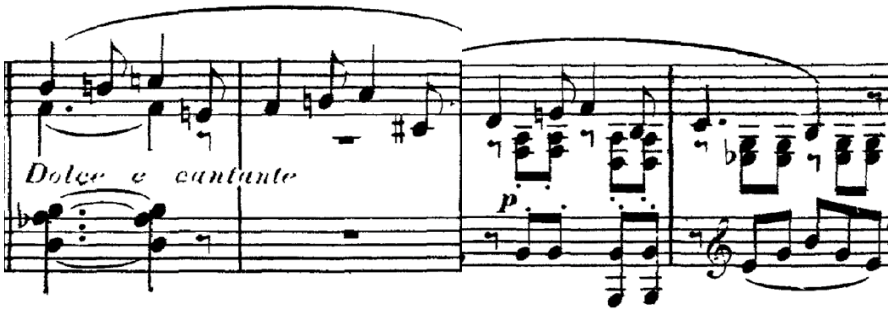
Alkan's epic *Twelve Études in All the Minor Keys,* Op. 39, published in 1857, is generally regarded as his most important work. In this collection Alkan enlarged the scope and ambition of the piano étude genre by incorporating textures and formal principles typical of large-scale symphonic works.

Études 4 to 7 are intended to represent a "keyboard symphony" in four movements, with a first movement in sonata form, a funeral march slow movement, a third-movement minuet and an energetic if not outright madcap sonata-rondo finale.

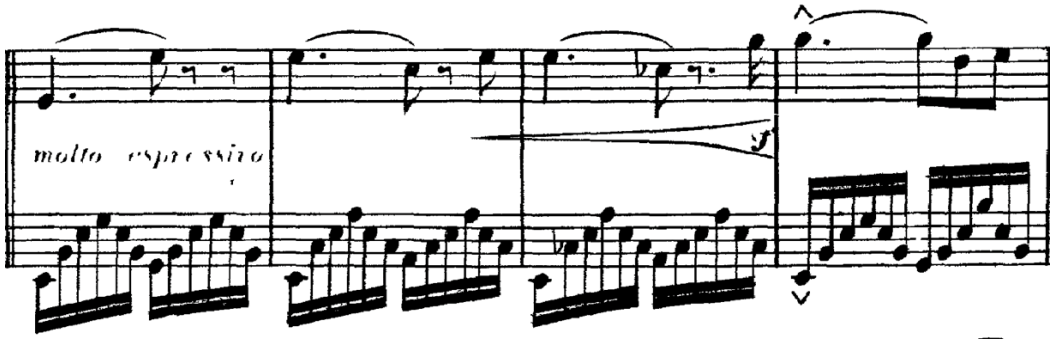
The classically proportioned first movement opens with a turbulent theme in the low "strings" of the piano's "orchestra," a restless and convulsive theme rife with sigh motives and syncopations over the bar line that set the right and left hands metrically against each other.



This theme is swept along, surging to many great climaxes, until a contrasting theme of Schumannesque melodic character emerges, unfolding in the gentle rocking rhythm native to the 6/8 time signature over a pedal tone in the bass.

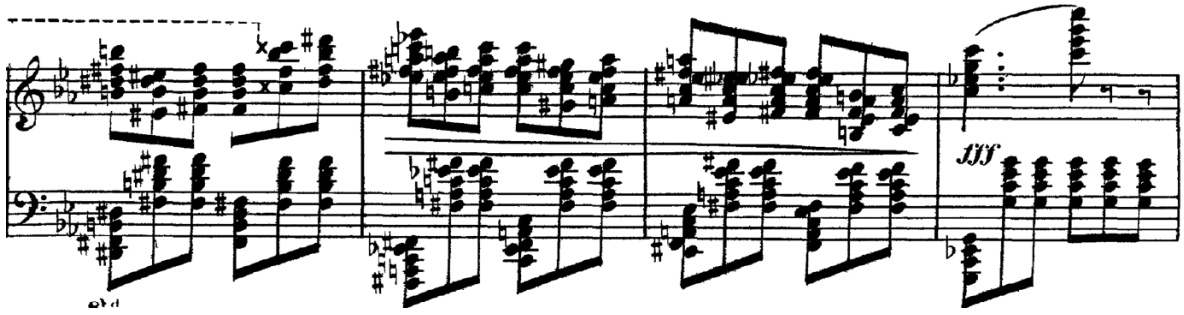


And just before the exposition ends, a closing theme appears, featuring a lively leaping motive over a warm, rippling accompaniment of arpeggiated chordal harmonies in the left hand.

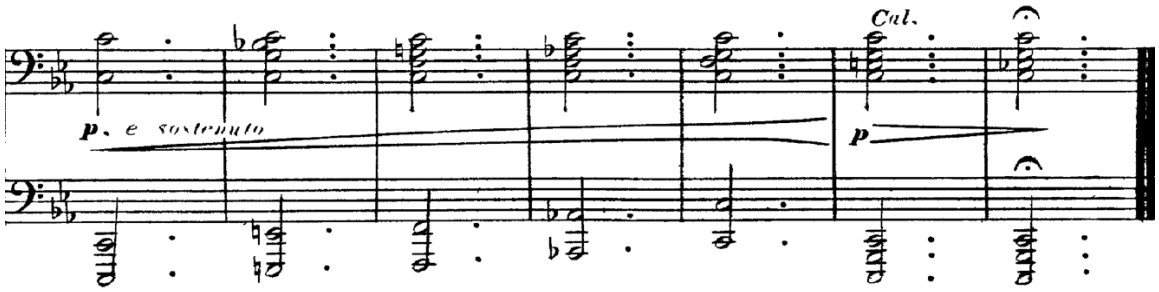


The development section is long and involved, occupying itself principally with the theme that opened the movement. Elements of a Beethovenian sense of "struggle" are readily apparent in this section.

Also apparent is the massive "symphonic" wall of sound that Alkan wishes to pull from the keyboard, with four- and five-note chords in the left hand where a more "pianistic" texture would have simple octaves.



But this is balanced by Alkan's intuitive sense of drama that leads him to close out the movement in the same low register in which it began, but whispering its harmonic message softly into the listener's ear.



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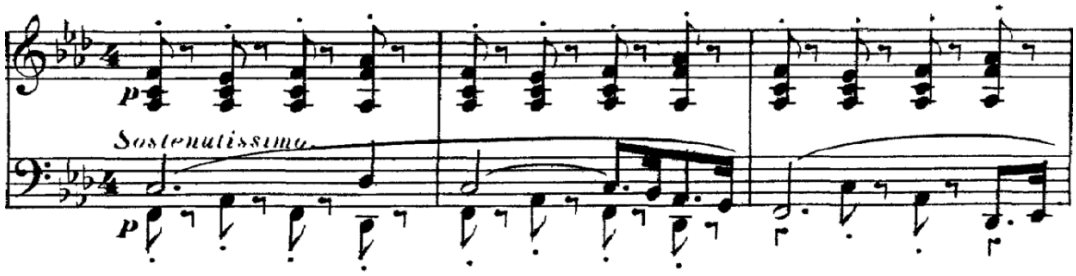
Alkan's second movement is a funeral march, a genre of slow movement that had emerged in Europe in the wake of the French Revolution and the Napoleonic wars.

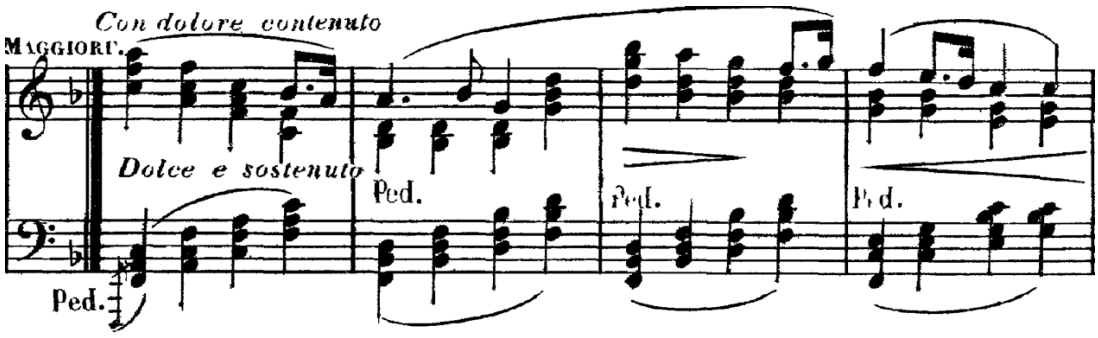
These are conflicts that had generated scores of noble victims and heroic figures worth commemorating in civic ceremonies of public mourning. Beethoven's "Eroica" Symphony No. 3 (1803) and Chopin's B-flat minor Sonata (1839) are merely the most famous examples of the genre.

And in a pointed reference to Beethoven's famous symphony, this movement is also dedicated "to the memory of a great man," that man presumably being the composer's recently deceased father, whose first name, Alkan, he had taken as his own.

The "étude" quality of this movement lies in the requirement that the pianist play the funeral march melody, with its characteristic dotted rhythm, as well as a contrasting staccato accompaniment — all in the left hand.

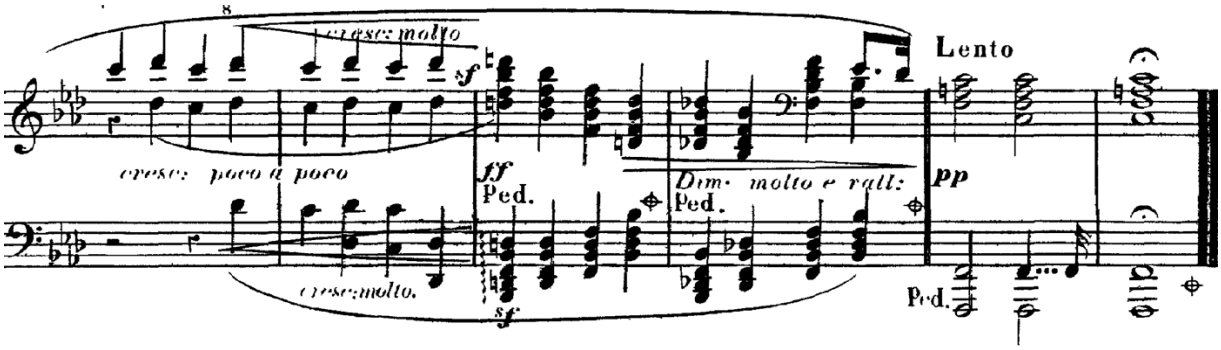


There is a sense of restrained melancholy in this opening melody. Where more red-blooded emotion bursts forth, surprisingly, is in the Trio,

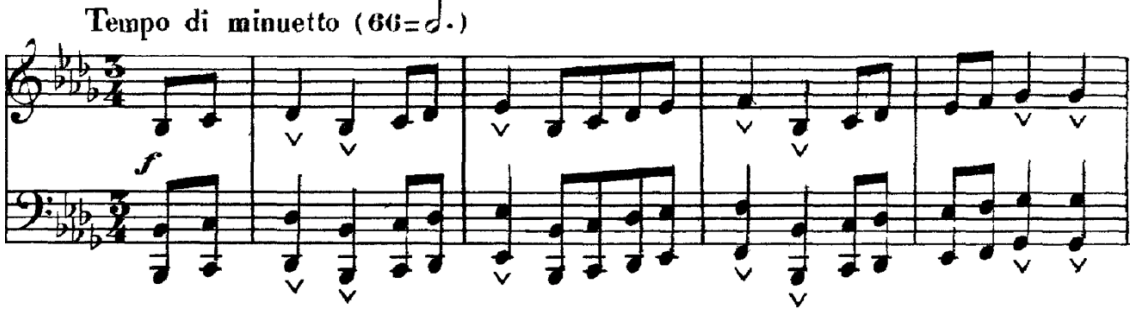


which builds to an impressive climax before the opening march returns.

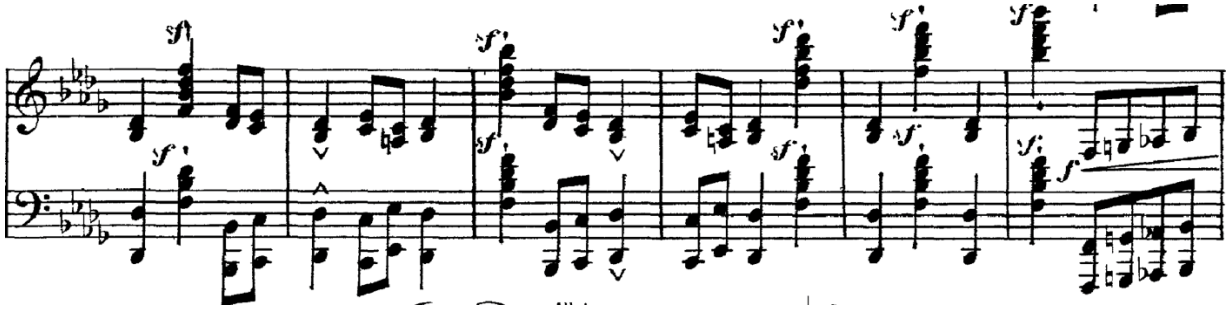
And once again, Alkan gives us a dramatic surprise at the movement's close as both opening theme and Trio say their farewells at contrasting dynamic levels.



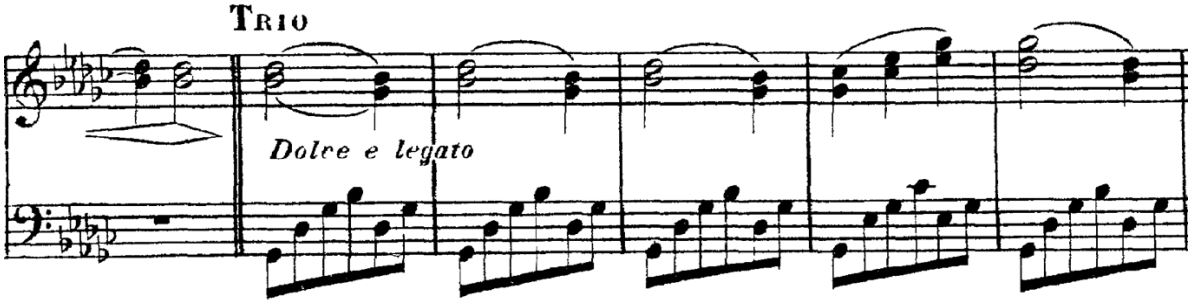
The third movement is labelled a "minuet," but it is closer in its rambunctious character to a Beethovenian scherzo. The heavily accented octaves of its opening are far removed from the graceful refinement expected in the traditional minuet.



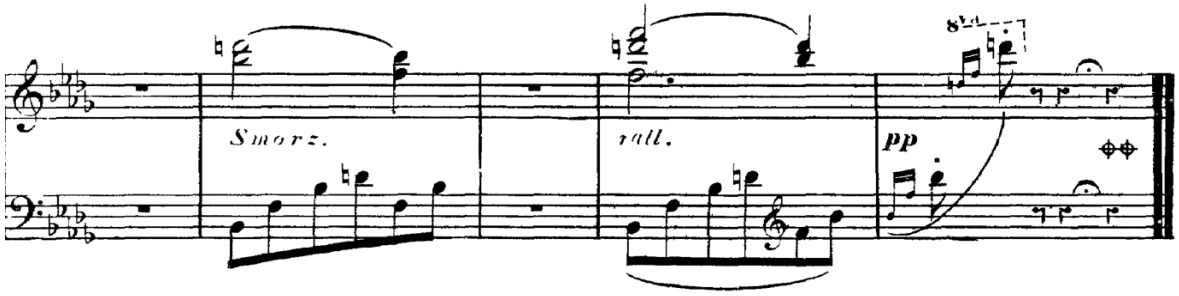
Not to mention the metrical ambiguity of its wildly leaping hemiola figures that only distance it further from the norms of aristocratic dancing.



By contrast, the Trio middle section is almost a barcarolle of gently rocking rhythms and peaceful melody-making.

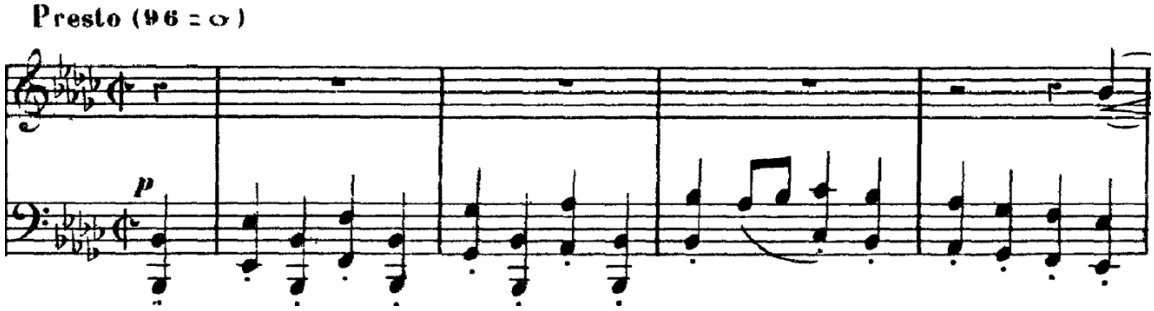


And for the third time in this work, a bold start gets a quiet end.

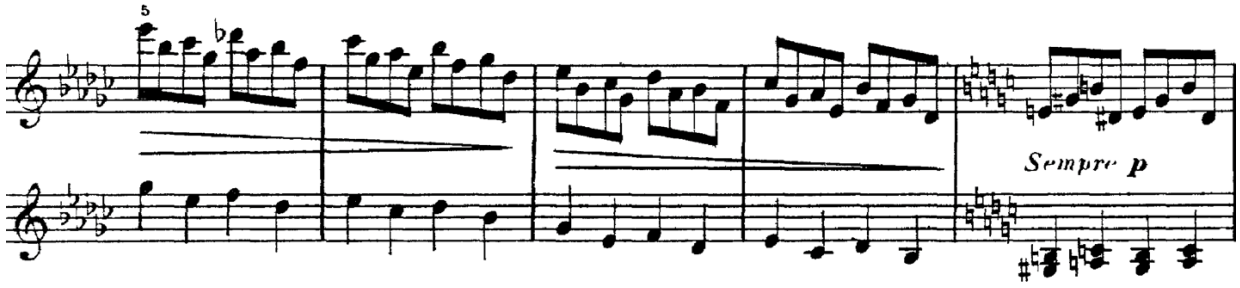


The finale has been described by pianist Raymond Lewenthal as more of a ride *in* hell than a ride *to* hell.

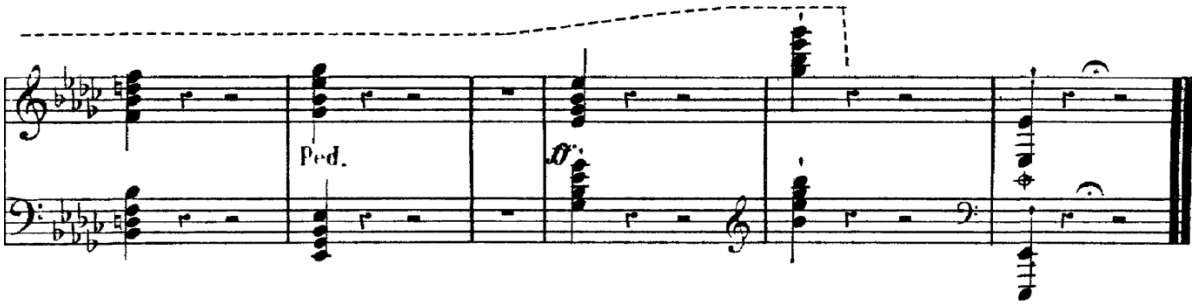
Structured as a sonata rondo in ABACADABA form with a coda, its sectional divisions are largely masked by the pervasive jolting presence of its opening staccato figures.



As Alkan develops his material, the only relief from this incessant quarter-note drumbeat comes in passages of scurrying scamper in even faster 8th notes.



But for this breathless movement, Alkan does not relent at the end as he did in previous movements but gives us the big-bang finish we have all been waiting for.



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