MAO FUJITA

piano

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)
Piano Sonata No. 1 in F minor Op. 2 No. 1
Allegro
Adagio
Minuetto. Allegretto
Prestissimo
(approx. 19 minutes)

RICHARD WAGNER (1813–1883)
Ein Albumblatt WWV 94
(approx. 3 minutes)

ALBAN BERG (1885–1935)
Twelve Variations on an Original Theme
(approx. 11 minutes)

FELIX MENDELSSOHN (1809–1847)
Variations sérieuses Op. 54
(approx. 12 minutes)

JOHANNES BRAHMS (1833–1897)
Piano Sonata No. 1 in C major Op. 1
Allegro
Andante (nach einem altdeutschen Minneliede)
Scherzo. Allegro molto e con fuoco
Finale. Allegro con fuoco
(approx. 28 minutes)

RICHARD WAGNER (1813–1883)
Isolde's Liebestod (arr. Franz Liszt)
(approx. 8 minutes)

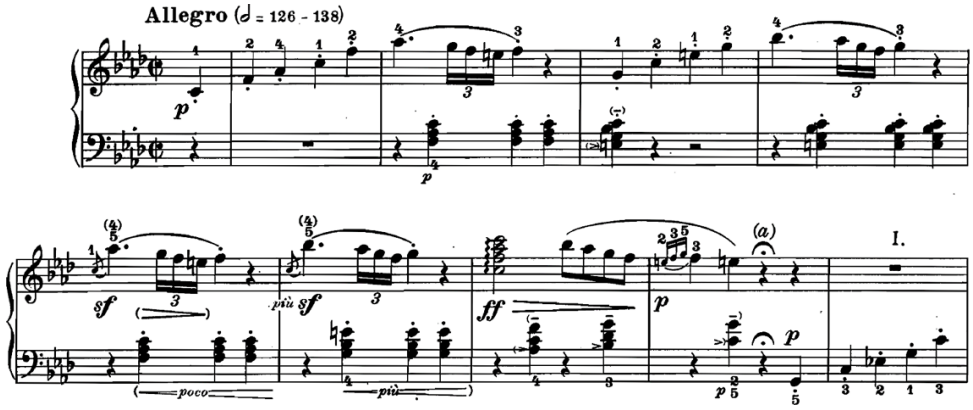
Ludwig van Beethoven

Piano Sonata No. 1 in F minor Op. 2 No. 1

The first of Beethoven's 32 sonatas was an audacious debut for the young composer in 1795. Markedly Mozartean in its external forms and unmistakably Haydnesque in its procedures of motivic development, it is even more boldly Beethovenian in the way it uses both form and procedure to express a new spirit of individualism that will dominate serious musical culture in the coming Romantic era.

The high seriousness of Beethoven's approach to the sonata is everywhere apparent. At a time when piano sonatas were normally written in three movements, Beethoven writes four, adding an extra minuet movement normally reserved for the more serious forms of symphony and string quartet. And at a time when sonatas were mostly aimed at amateur musicians looking for cheerful entertainment, Beethoven thumbs his nose at the popular market by writing a moody, angst-ridden sonata of above-average difficulty, in an eccentric minor key with four flats. Topping it all off, there is an aggressive, slightly anti-social edge to the outer movements, both set in "punchy" cut time, with two beats to the bar.

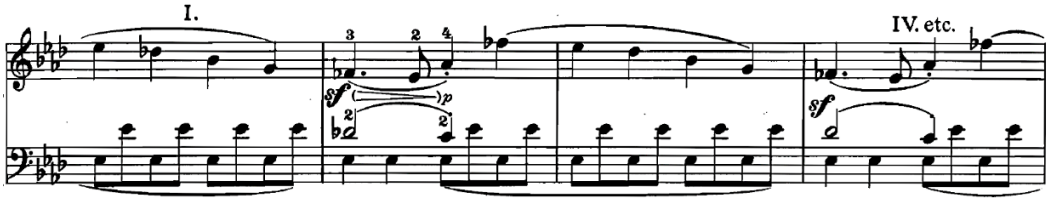
The core motivic material on which the first movement is based is given in the first eight bars.



And in typical Beethoven style, this first "theme" is not really a melody but rather a series of related small phrases accelerating in intensity to a mini-climax, followed by a pause for theatrical effect. In this opening section two catchy motives are hammered into the ear by dint of frequent repetition. Both were first popularized earlier in the century by the Elector Palatine's orchestra in Mannheim under composer Johann Stamitz (1717–1757).

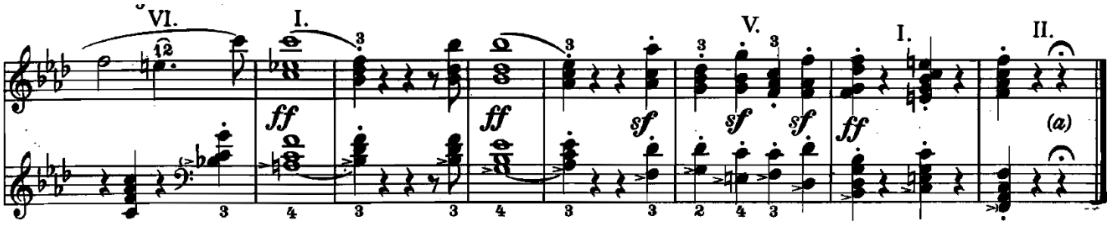
First there is an ascending arpeggio figure, or "Mannheim rocket" (also featured in Mozart's C minor Sonata K. 457 and in his Symphonies No. 25 and 40, both in G minor), which is then crowned by a short twiddle in triplet 16ths, an example of the famous "Mannheim bird call."

These two motives will dominate the entire movement, with the rocket figure (in inverted form) even structuring the movement's second theme, which by traditional practice would be in the relative major, A-flat, but with its unusually "leering" F-flats takes a menacing short detour into A-flat minor.

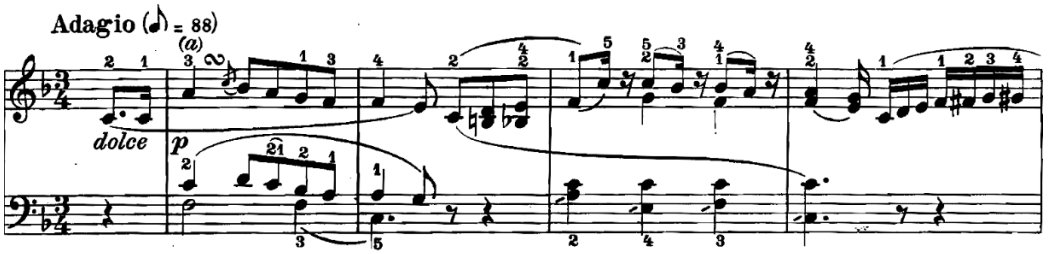


This use of the same musical material in both first and second themes must have brought a smile to the face of Beethoven's teacher, the monothematically inclined Joseph Haydn (1732–1809), to whom the three sonatas of Op. 2 were dedicated, and who was in the room when Beethoven performed these works for the first time publicly in 1796.

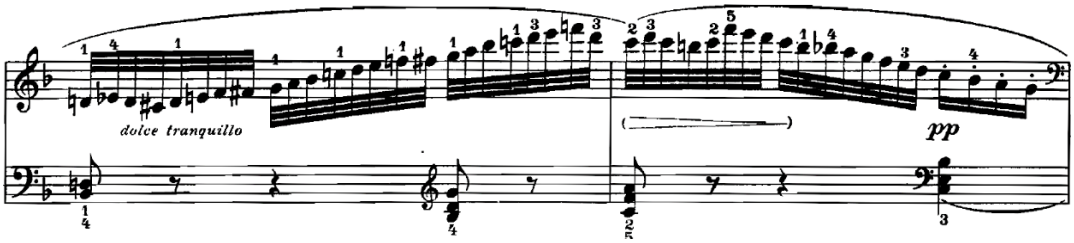
The development section does little to calm things down after this dramatic exposition and drums up as much excitement through its constantly thrumming tremolo accompaniments as from its obsession with the minor-mode colouring of the movement's second theme. After an economically short recapitulation, the movement ends with a machine-gun rat-a-tat of angry chords, a kind of "So there!" gesture so rudely abrupt, it's as if Beethoven had thrown down his cards in anger, pounded his fists on the card table and stomped out of the room.



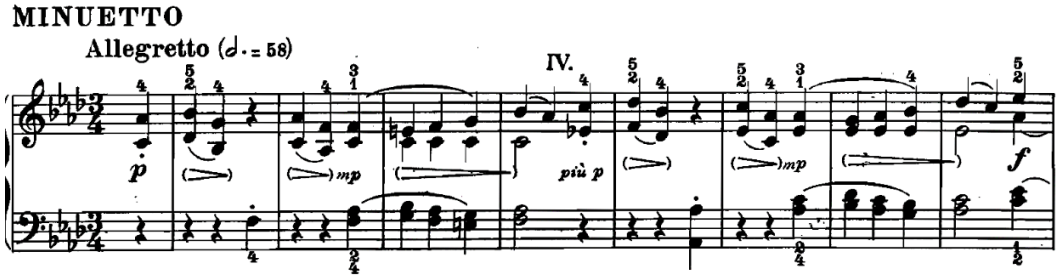
Ludwig is on his best behaviour, however, in the very Mozartean *Adagio* with its simple serene melodies lavishly ornamented with opera-style decorative embellishments.



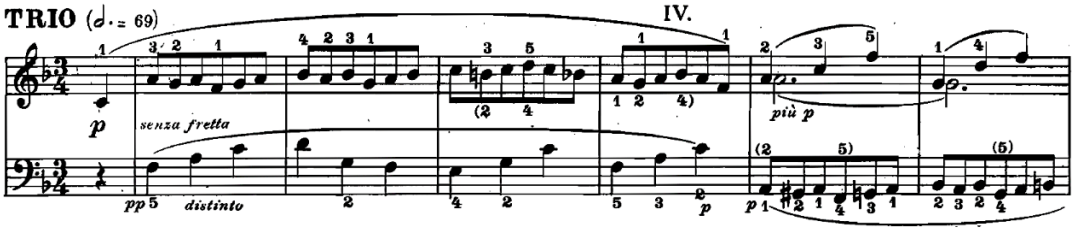
Structured in a truncated sonata form (i.e., without a development section) this movement offers the listener the only overtly "pretty" music in the whole sonata, and its dramatic action centres around the many decorative ways in which its melodic material can be tastefully dressed up, of which the following ecstatic passage is a typical example.



Moody moves and shady goings-on return in the following *Allegretto* that features a minuet tune in the minor mode pieced together, like the opening of the first movement, from repeated melodic fragments of a slightly anxious character.

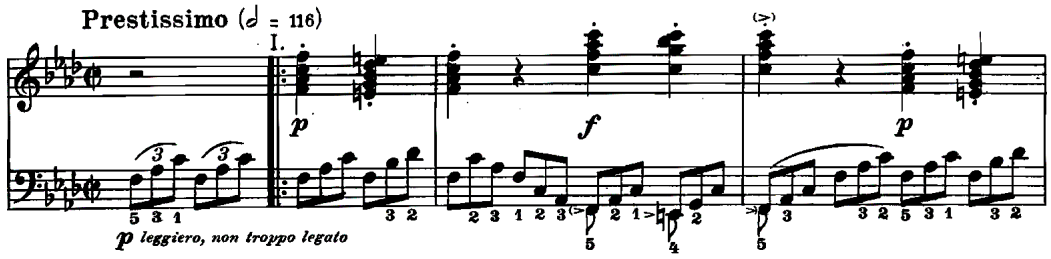


The convulsive momentum generated by these short, repeated "hiccup" motives is disturbing in a dance movement, an effect that the smooth two-part counterpoint of the major-mode Trio section does its best to counteract.



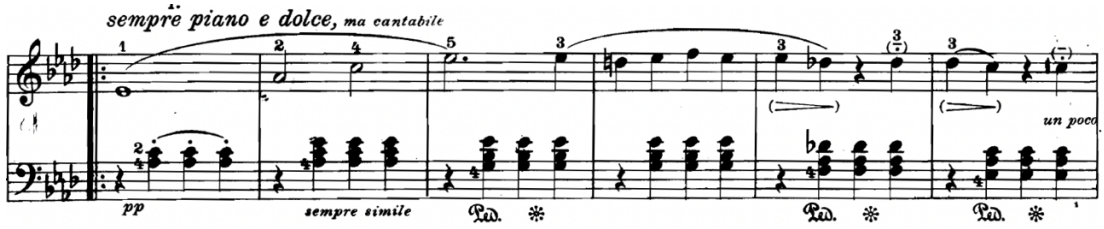
In the Classical period, the last movement of a sonata was expected to be the lightest, a kind of musical "dessert" after all the emotional heavy lifting of the previous movements was over and done with. Not so with Beethoven, whose tendency to create end-weighted multi-movement works would only increase as his career advanced.

Beethoven's finale in this sonata is what Sir András Schiff calls a "riding movement, similar to Schubert's Erlkönig." It opens with a fierce, heavy and almost pitch-less knock-on-the-door motive in the right hand over a roiling accompaniment of furiously bubbling arpeggiated chords in the left hand.



This is full-contact piano music, played with the arms as much as the fingers. It requires a radically different approach to the keyboard, one far removed from the sedate posture and finger-focused performing style used in playing Mozart.

The mood is not all *Sturm und Drang*, however. Perhaps to compensate for all the dyspeptic turmoil of the exposition, Beethoven provides emotional contrast — and breaks with tradition — by introducing a completely new theme at the beginning of the development section, a pleasantly poised theme of a relaxed character, the sort of thing you could easily find yourself humming in the shower.



But you just know it can't last, and the impetuous "knock-knock" motive gradually insinuates itself back into the proceedings and takes over, driving with unstoppable momentum to the recapitulation, which ends even more abruptly than the first movement.

This is a sonata that must have left its first listeners breathless, some in admiration, others in exasperation. The so-called "Classical style," developed in Vienna between the years 1770 and 1800, may well have had Mozart as its architect, and Haydn to install the furniture, but as this sonata shows, Beethoven was its poltergeist, moving objects around the room without permission.

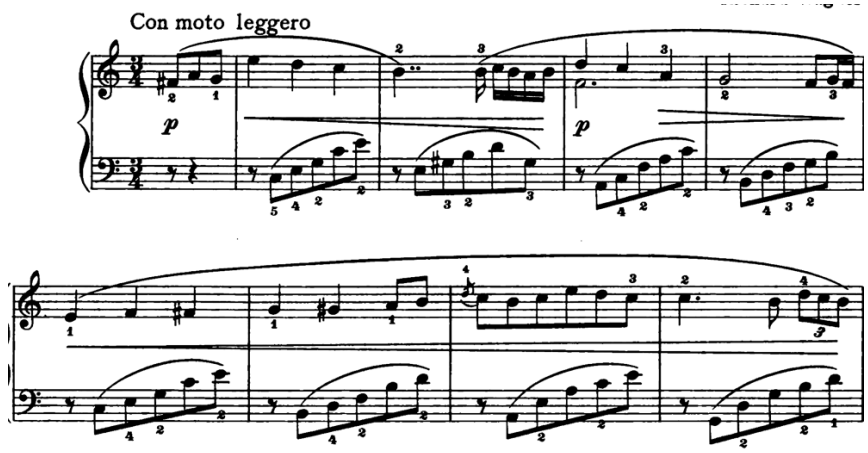
Richard Wagner

Ein Albumblatt WWV 94

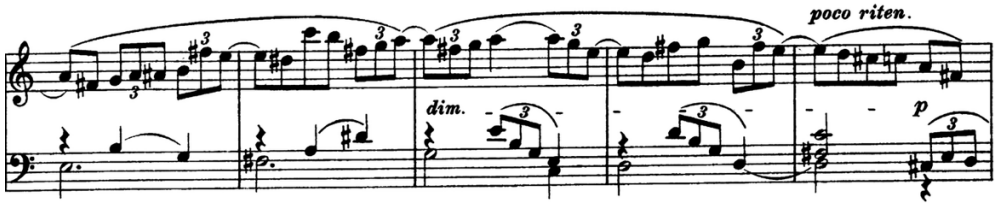
An *Albumblatt* or "album leaf" was a short, pleasant composition, normally for piano, intended to be a "leaf" (i.e., page) in the "album" (i.e., store of memories) of the dedicatee for whom it was written.

In 1861 Wagner wrote just such a piece as a kind of thank-you note to Princess Pauline von Metternich (1836–1921), the socialite wife of the Austrian ambassador to France, who had used her influence in that year to procure a production of *Tannhäuser* at the Paris Opéra.

While written in the style of French salon music of the time, it displays some characteristic features from Wagner's operas. The composer's taste for climbing chromatic lines is evident in the second line of the opening,



while his penchant for expressing yearning in music through "endless melody" is featured in passages with notes tied over the bar such as this:



Both of these tendencies will be on full display in the closing work of this recital, the *Liebestod* from Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*.

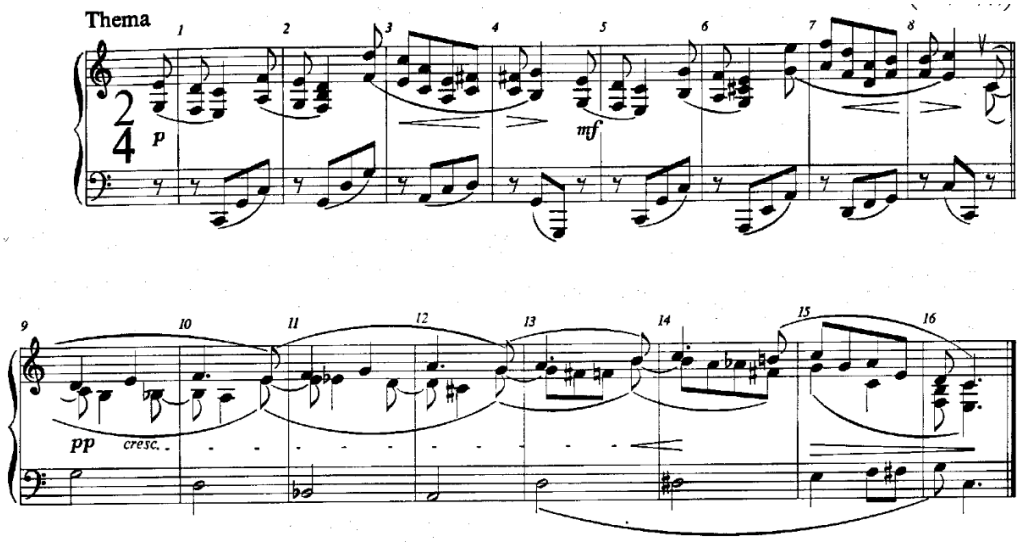
Alban Berg

Twelve Variations on an Original Theme

The departure from traditional harmonic practice in Western music was presided over at the beginning of the 20th century by Arnold Schoenberg, aided and abetted by his pupils, Alban Berg and Anton Webern.

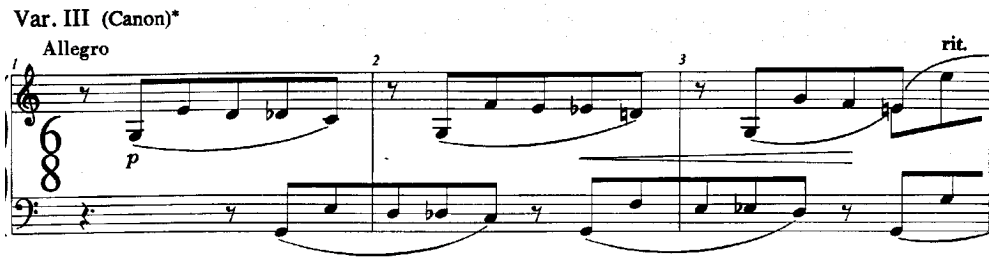
But of the three of them, it was Alban Berg who most felt the tug of Late Romanticism's emotional rhetoric, as is evident in early works such as the Twelve Variations on an Original Theme. Written in 1908 while the composer was still studying with Arnold Schoenberg, it uses a tonal language largely reminiscent of Schumann, Mendelssohn and Brahms.

Berg's self-composed theme is the soul of simplicity, with sequential repetition of motives and clear harmonic movement.

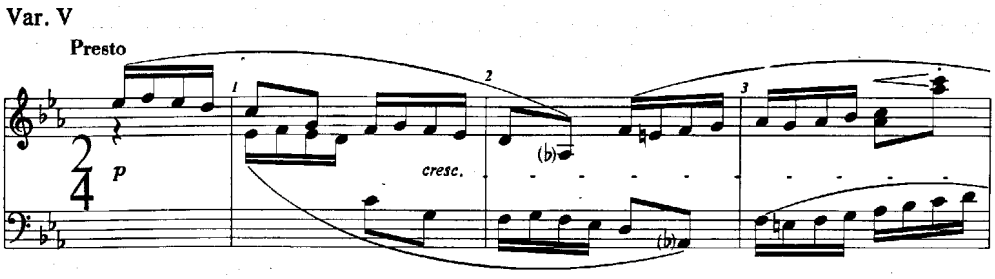


Schoenberg described his student Berg as being especially impressive in counterpoint, and it really shows in this work. While many variations are traditionally "decorative" or develop the theme's principal motives, others launch into remarkable displays of contrapuntal prowess.

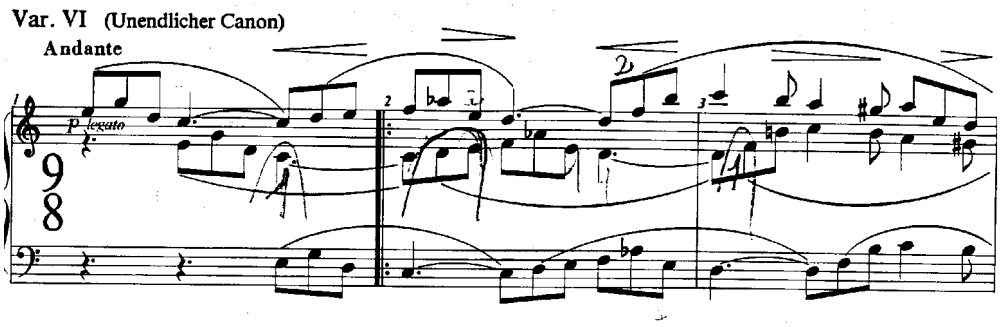
Variation 3 is a two-voice canon:



Variation 5 is freely canonic:



And Variation 6 is a full-on triple canon:



This idea is not new, as Bach included an orderly series of canons in his *Goldberg Variations,* and even Mendelssohn gives us a rapid-fire canon in the fourth variation of his *Variations sérieuses*, to be heard next the program.

But it does show us the "intellectual" leanings that Berg had, even before he turned to compose in the manner of Schoenberg's 12-tone system.

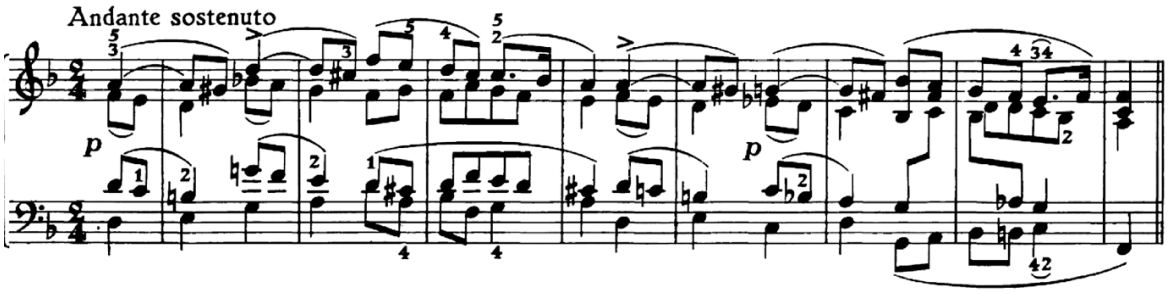
Felix Mendelssohn

Variations sérieuses Op. 54

Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses* were 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.

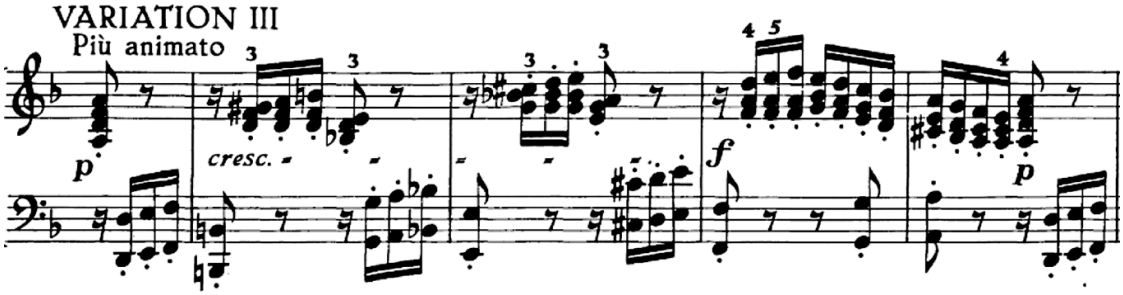
And this work is indeed "serious," starting with its inward-looking, almost self-pitying variation theme in D minor, presented in the learned four-voice setting of a Bach chorale.



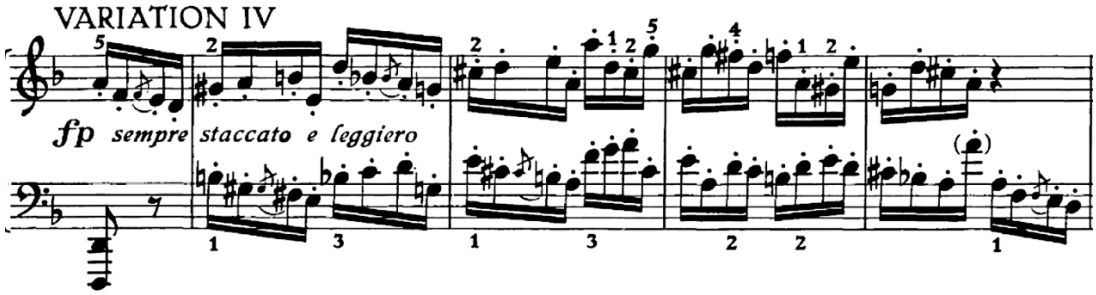
This is a theme that simply oozes pathos, structured as it is in a series of two-note sigh motives and drooping descending lines. Moreover, these sigh motives, being suspended over the bar line, are one beat out of sync with the downbeats of the prevailing metre. And they all "resolve," as much as they do, 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.

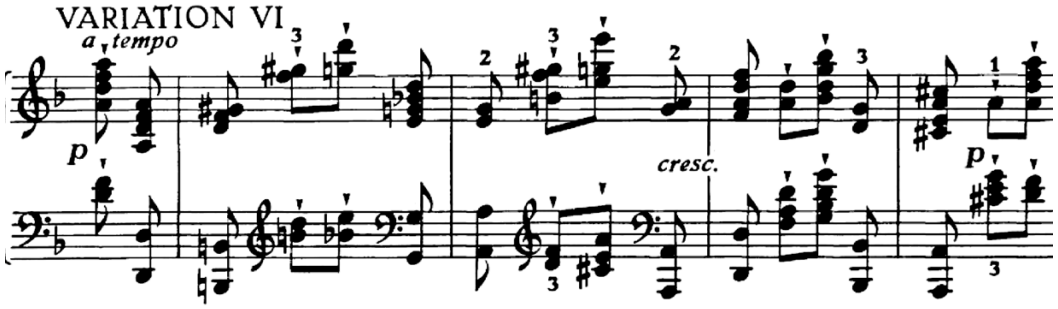
In his first two variations Mendelssohn merely decorates the theme with ornamental filigree, leaving the melody line to sing out clearly at the top of the texture. But more muscular pianistic figuration emerges in Variation 3.



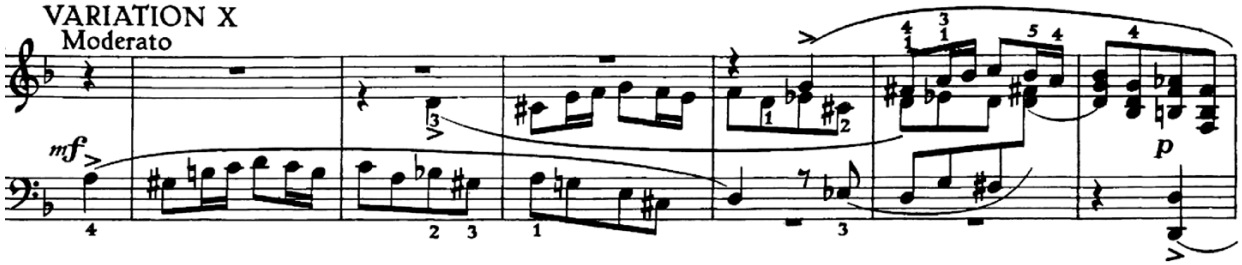
Bolstering the "learned" credentials of the set is the canon cleverly embedded in the chirpy chatter of Variation 4.



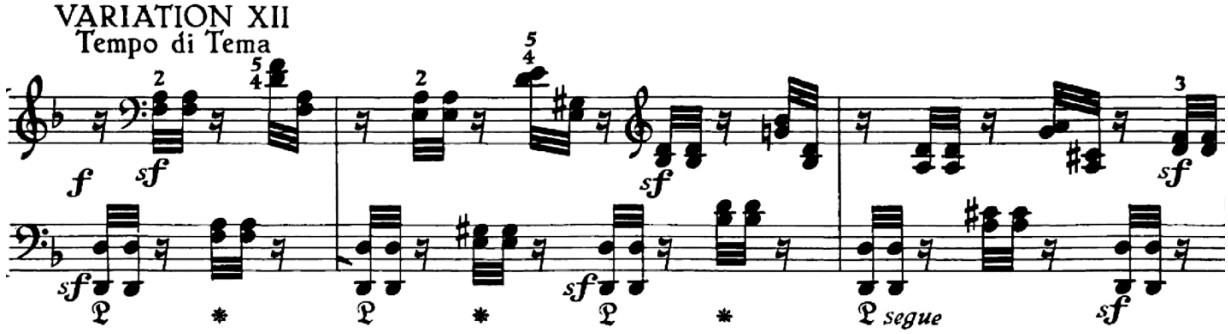
Each variation builds on the momentum and excitement of the previous one, either by upping the tempo or by expanding the area of keyboard "real estate" used, as in the athletic register-leaps of Variation 6.



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 the first book of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*.

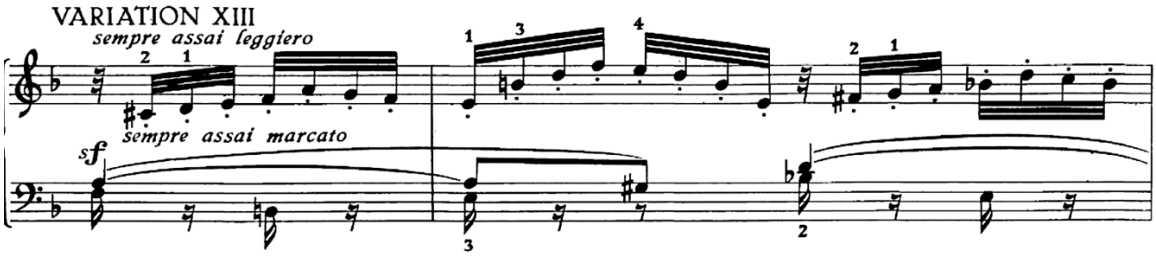


This and the very poetic and dreamy Variation 11 provide a pause in the action until the pace picks up again in the forceful pianistic rhetoric of Variation 12.



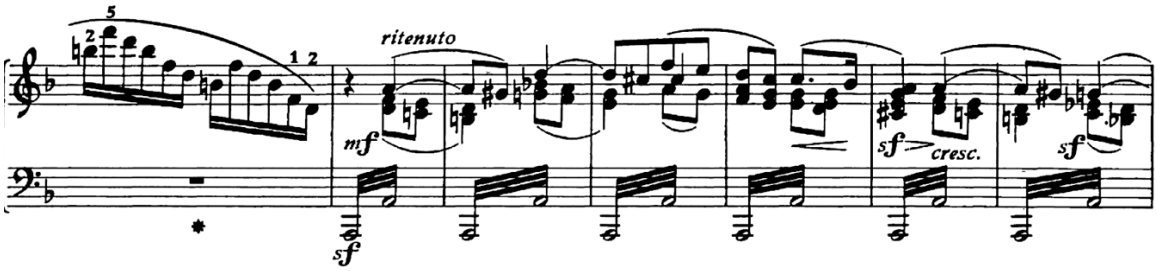
And it is hard to know whether Mendelssohn is being ironic in Variation 13 when he imitates the "three-hand technique" invented and exploited by Liszt's famous rival Sigismond Thalberg (1812–1871).

The theme is buried in the tenor, with filigree seemingly played by two other hands, above and below it.



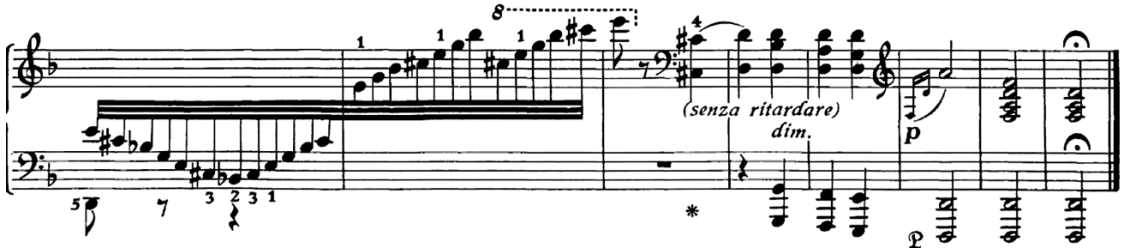
Mendelssohn takes another pause in the traditionally placed *Adagio* of Variation 14, the only variation of the set to be in D major rather than D minor.

And then it's off to the races again, with a steady progressive build-up of rhythmic excitement and pianistic exuberance until the virtuoso figurations racing up and down the keyboard in the final Variation 17 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 epic manner of the Commendatore's fateful appearance in the final act of Mozart's *Don Giovanni* — that 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.



Johannes Brahms

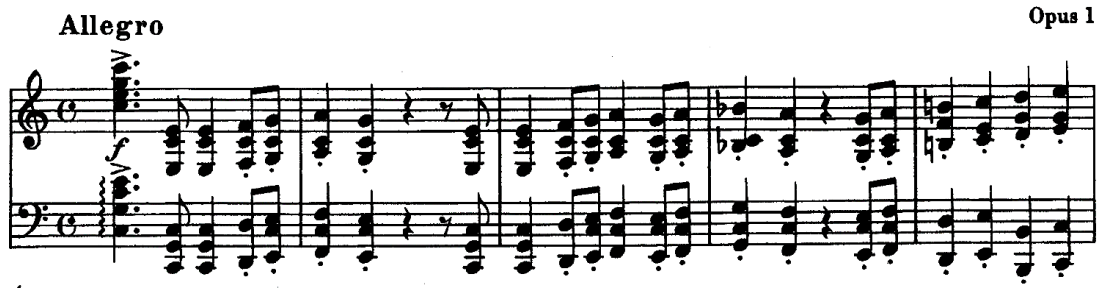
Piano Sonata No. 1 in C major Op. 1

Brahms' first published work, his Piano Sonata No. 1 in C major, is boldly virtuosic, full of the explosive energy of youth and raw in its directness of expression. Composed in 1853 when Brahms was barely 20 years old, it may well derive some of its uninhibited élan from the composer's recent tour through Europe playing folk-inspired music with Hungarian violinist Edouard Reményi (1828–1898).

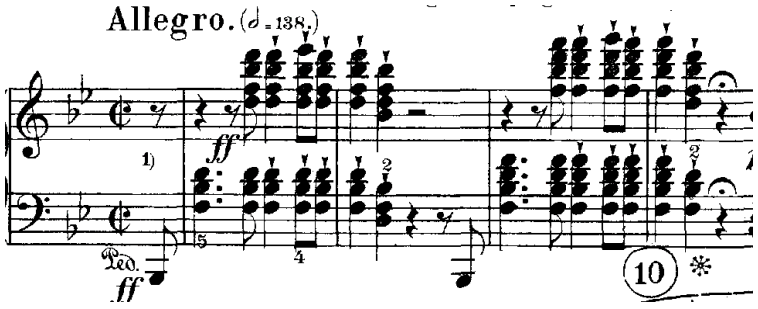
And yet, as has been pointed out, it already displays some of the features of Brahms' mature compositional style, including

> *a preference for dense sonorities with many parallel thirds and sixths, frequent pedal points, harmonies that tend to turn toward the 'flat side,' and a fondness for metric displacement.* (Leon Plantinga, *Romantic Music: A History of Musical Style in Nineteenth-Century Europe,* p. 412.)

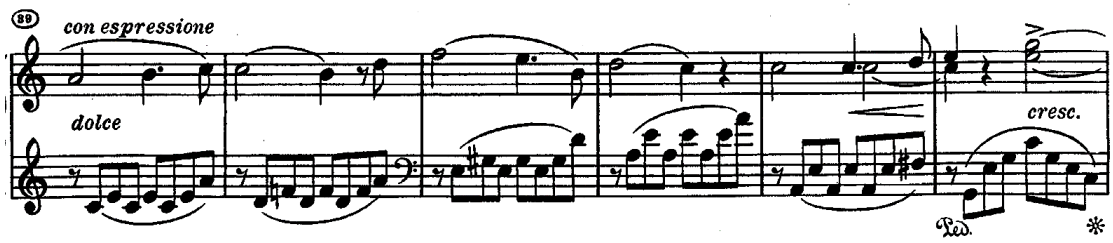
The work opens with a call to sit up straight in your seat and listen carefully to what sounds like an important announcement,



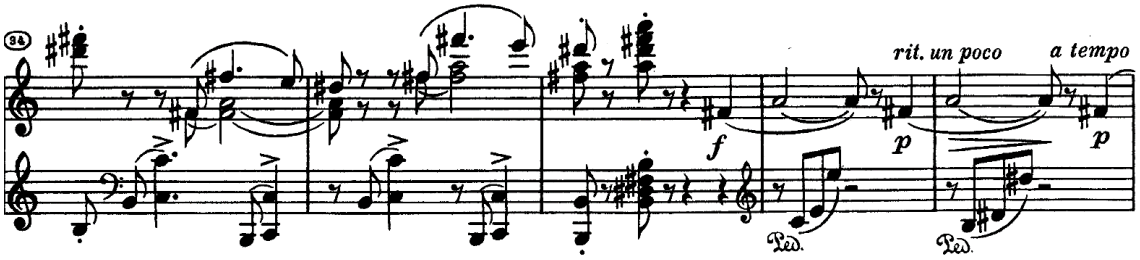
which many have compared to Beethoven's "Hammerklavier" Sonata in B flat Op. 106, so similar are the rhythms of the two works' opening bars.



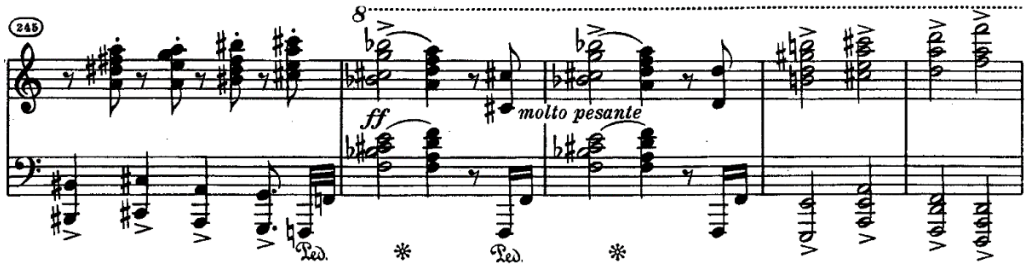
The work's lyrical second theme, though, is far less rambunctious, and despite its Romantic-era tonal colouring is characterized by an almost Mozartean textural simplicity.



What is remarkable about this movement as a whole is its symphonic style of scoring, with even simple transitional passages like this one moving between registers like the resounding echoes of instrumental choirs in an orchestra.



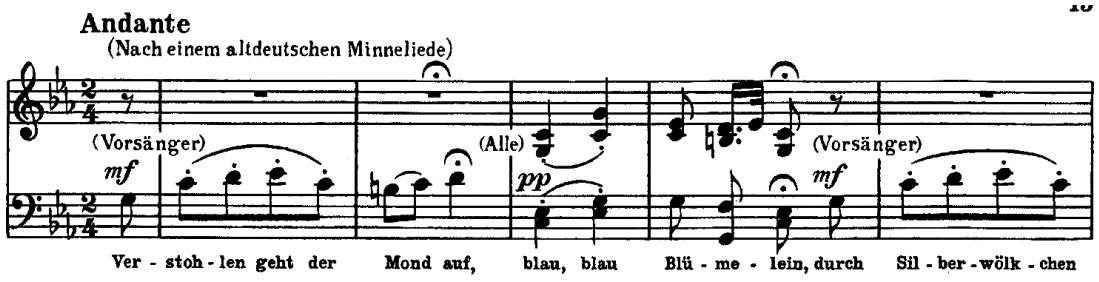
This wide range of sonority is even better exemplified in the movement's utterly over-the-top coda, which presents challenges of tonal balance to the pianist in passages with as much as a six-octave range between top and bottom notes.



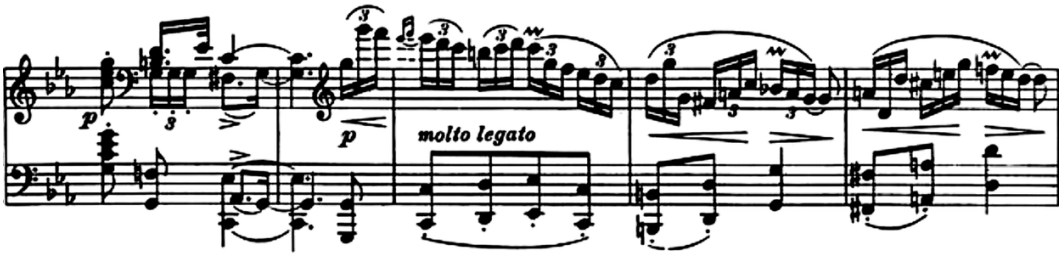
Brahms' *Andante* is a theme-and-variations movement based on what Brahms believed to be a medieval *Minnelied* or "love song," the metaphorical opening line of which is:

Verstohlen geht der Mond auf	The moon steals its way up (to the sky)
Blau, blau Blümelein!	Blue, oh blue little flower!

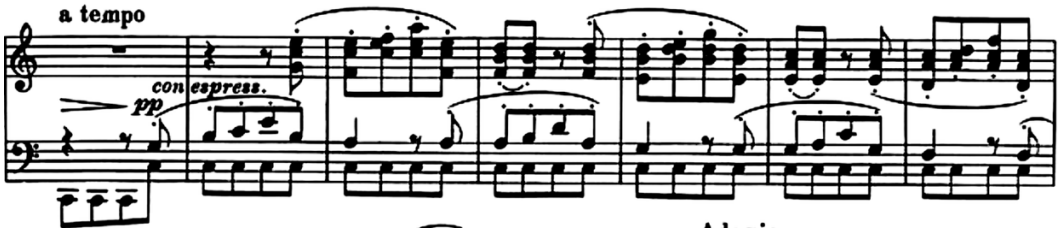
The melody is structured in alternating phrases between a soloist (Vorsänger) and chorus (Alle), a structure that is maintained in the three variations that follow.



The minor-mode seriousness that pervades the first part of this movement is odd for a love song, but perhaps this is meant to suggest the harmonic vocabulary of the Middle Ages. It certainly does not distract from the graceful filigree with which the tune is soon embellished.



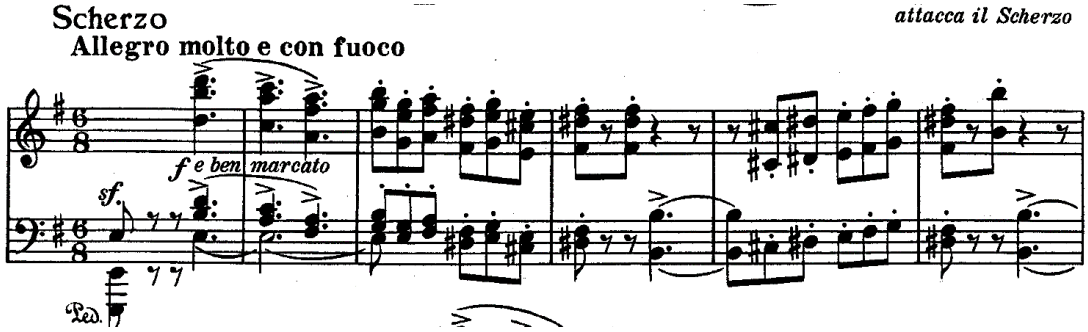
And the movement ends in a major-mode "lullaby" with a consoling pedal point pulsing gently in the bass.



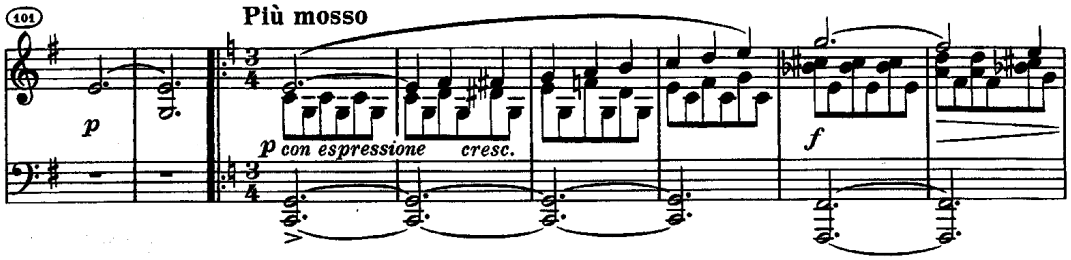
With the *Scherzo* we are back in virtuoso territory, as the tempo indication *Allegro molto e con fuoco* might suggest.

This is a classic scherzo in the Beethovenian mold, with pervasive repetition of small motivic units, bold contrasts of dynamics and register and antic acrobatics aplenty.

The octave runs alone would be a formidable challenge, given the tempo, but Brahms raises the stakes even further by adding an upper 3rd to many of them.

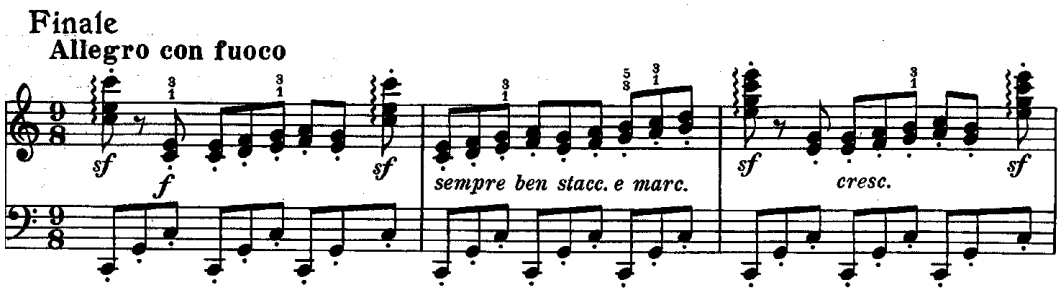


The Trio section in the major mode brings much-needed relief with its flowing melody and brighter mood



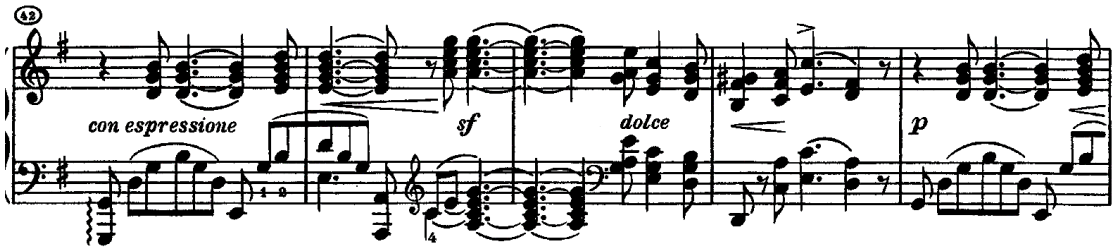
before a *da capo* indication at the end sends us back to the opening section for more clattering keyboard chaos.

But the Scherzo, it seems, was just a warm-up for the rondo finale, where double 3rds (in a speeded-up version of the first movement's opening call to attention) are added to the mix, combined with daredevil leaps just to keep things "interesting" for the performer.



But this movement, in its first episode, also contains one of the loveliest, most relaxing tunes of the whole sonata.

This first episode uses a melody called *My heart's in the Highlands* from a poem of Robert Burns, luxuriantly harmonized with generous dollops of diatonic "whipped-cream-for-the-ear" 7th chords.



And of course, Brahms being the clever classicist that he is, he just has to bring these two themes even closer together on his way to a whirlwind ending, all the while alternating between duple 6/8 and triple 9/8 metre.

Richard Wagner

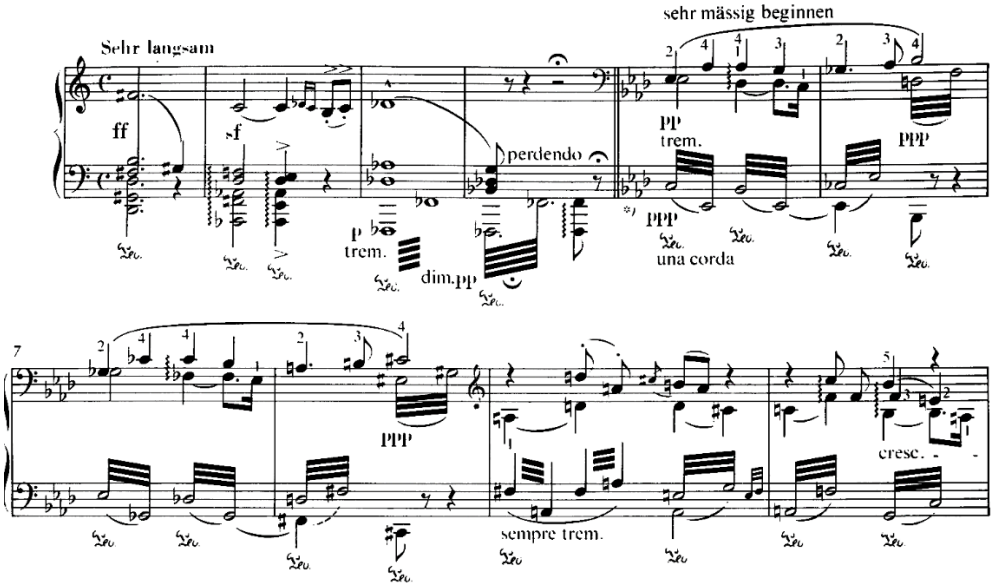
Isolde's Liebestod (arr. Franz Liszt)

The 19th century in Europe was an age in which psychological states went mainstream in the arts, becoming a particularly powerful stimulus for musical expression. No 19th-century composer went further in marshalling the resources of musical expression into direct and compelling proxies for emotional experience than Richard Wagner. And none of his operas exhibits a more focused concentration on one single emotion, romantic love, than *Tristan and Isolde* (1859).

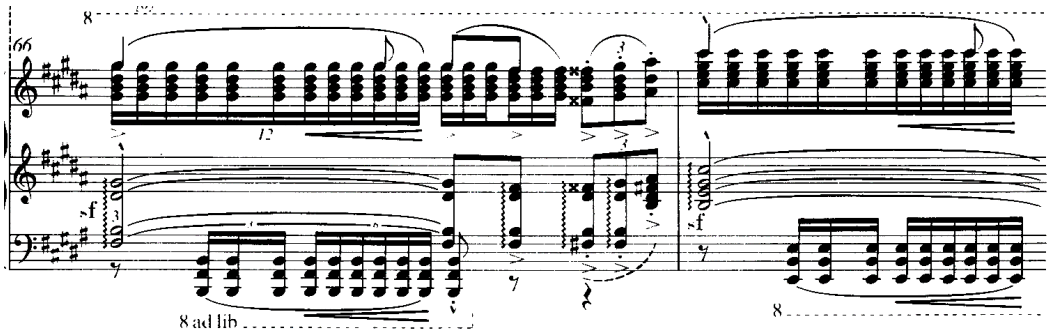
Wagner's opera tells the tale of Isolde, an Irish princess promised in marriage to the King of Cornwall who, on her way over to be married, falls in love with his nephew Tristan after they drink a love potion together. Tristan's death in consequence of this betrayal sets up the final scene of the opera, the *Liebestod* ("love-death") scene, in which Isolde, standing over Tristan's dead body, commemorates him rapturously by imagining their passion and his death alloyed into a single indissoluble unity.

Wagner vividly brings to life the insistent quality of the emotion of love by his use of the same phrases repeated over and over again in a continuous chain of chromatic harmonies that seem to open up new vistas of experience with each occurrence. The feeling of yearning and love-longing is so tellingly conveyed by the use of suspensions and delayed resolutions that it is hard not to feel like an adolescent again while listening.

Liszt lavishly layers his transcription with keyboard tremolos to evoke the fine gradations of orchestral colour in Wagner's score, first to evoke the hushed murmurs of love's awakening as the piece opens



and then at the work's apotheosis in an ecstatic climax of rapidly pulsing chords to convey the impact of a full orchestral tutti.



These techniques inevitably raise questions of musical taste, suggesting, as they might, the kitschy excesses of staged melodrama or silent-film music.

But this work is aimed at the heart, not the critic. And the heart knows that love, at its core, is neither "tasteful" nor "garish." It simply, undeniably and overwhelmingly *is* what it *is*. And few musical works in the Western tradition convey the force of that realization better than Wagner's *Liebestod.*

Donald Gíslason 2026