VÍKINGUR ÓLAFSSON

piano

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)

Prelude in E major BWV 854 from *Well-Tempered Clavier* I

(approx. 3 minutes)

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

Sonata No. 27 in E minor Op. 90

Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck

Nicht zu Geschwind und sehr singbar vorgetragen

(approx. 14 minutes)

JOHANN SEBASTIAN BACH (1685–1750)

Partita No. 6 in E minor BWV 830

Toccata

Allemande

Corrente

Air

Sarabande

Tempo di gavotta

Gigue

(approx. 32 minutes)

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797–1828)

Sonata in E minor D 566

Moderato

Allegretto

(approx. 20 minutes)

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

Sonata No. 30 in E major Op. 109

Vivace

Prestissimo

Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo

(approx. 22 minutes)

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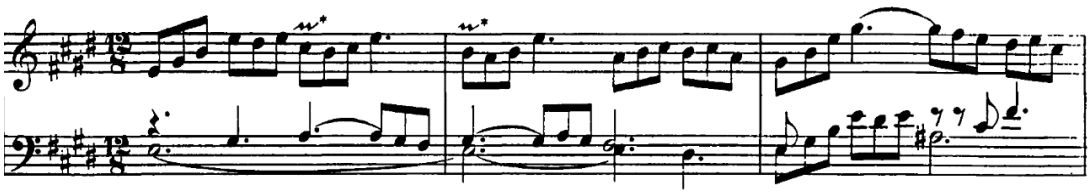
Johann Sebastian Bach

Prelude in E major BWV 854

The Baroque prelude served a dual purpose, both establishing the key of the following piece in the listener's ear and giving the performer's fingers a chance to warm up.

To that end it was generally characterized by an overall homogeneity of texture and the repeated use of the same musical motives throughout.

Bach's ***Prelude in E major*** from Book I of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* (1722) is typical of the genre with its continuous rolling pattern of triplet 8ths outlining in arpeggiated form the important harmonies of the E-major tonality.



It has a gentle pastoral quality, conveyed by a drone tone in the bass in its opening bars, and its bright mood of childlike innocence might well be explained by its having originally been written for the ten-year-old Wilhelm Friedemann Bach (1710–1784).

Ludwig van Beethoven
Sonata No. 27 in E minor Op. 90

The use of the piano sonata in marriage counselling has not found wide adoption within the helping professions since Beethoven is said to have first introduced the practice with his *Sonata in E minor* Op. 90. The curious story associated this sonata runs as follows:

Beethoven's biographer Anton Schindler relates that in 1814 the composer's boon companion, Count Moritz von Lichnowsky, was having girl troubles. The Count, younger brother of Beethoven's patron Prince Karl von Lichnowsky, was romantically entangled with a stage actress many years his junior — a woman of undoubted charms but few dynastic connections — whom he wanted to marry. The Count's family, of course, took a dim view of this prospect, but marry her he did, and it was not long afterwards that Beethoven informed the Count that a new sonata, dedicated to him, was soon to be published.

Do tell, replied the Count, or words to that effect. And what might it be about? Making obvious jocular reference to the Count's recent marital deliberations, Beethoven is said to have replied that the first movement of his Op. 90 sonata was "a struggle between the head and the heart" while the second depicted "a conversation with the beloved."

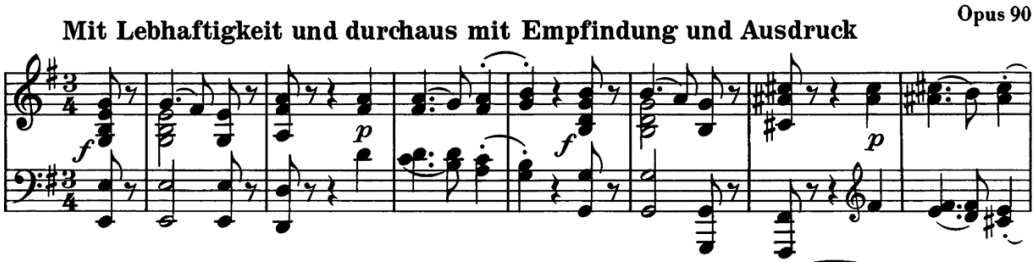
But hold on. Had not Beethoven been a student of Haydn? Was he not a master of classical form and motivic development in the tradition of pure "absolute" music?

Are we to believe that this sonata was just a piece of "program" music, little more than a kind of film score to a Viennese "Pretty Woman" romcom?

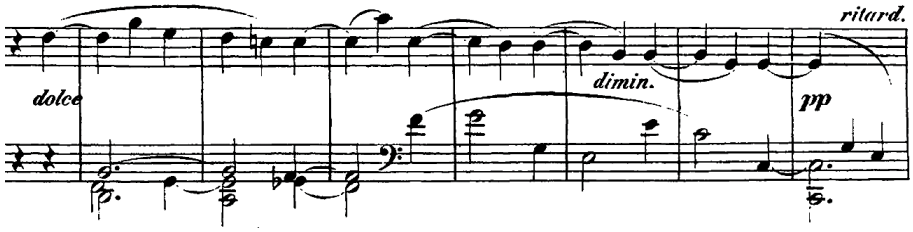
Absolute music and program music, its quarrelling proponents would have us believe, are as different as chalk and cheese. And yet both have valid claims to make in this unusual work.

Partisans of the "chalk" faction might rightly defend the sonata's two-movement structure as a perfectly normal inheritance from Haydn, who wrote many a two-movement sonata. They might point to the formal clarity of each movement: the traditional sonata-form structure of the first movement and sonata-rondo layout of the second.

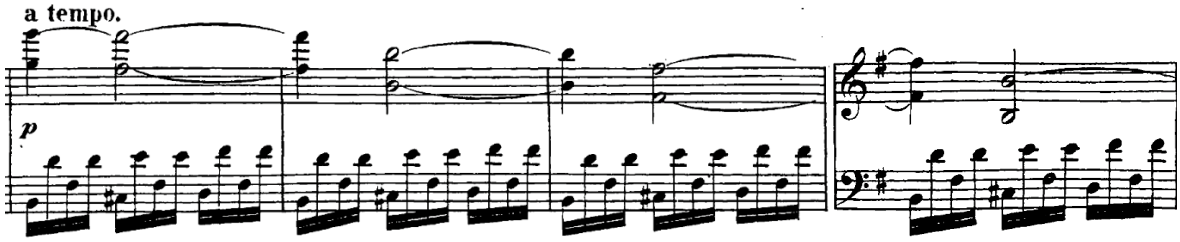
And they quite justifiably might remark further on the intensity of motivic development in this sonata, particularly the importance of the first movement's falling 3rd motive (G-F#-E) announced at the opening, this being typical of Beethoven's way of constructing themes not as "melodies" but rather as a "mosaic" of small motives (as in the famous Fifth Symphony).



Those of the "cheesy" persuasion, however, would point to the contrast in dynamics between the opening's bold *forte* pronouncements and more subdued *piano* echoes that come in reply. Clearly, they would say, a struggle between head and heart, with the heart continuing to plead pitifully for its voice to be heard in the pathos of the following syncopations over the bar line.



But isn't the second theme, comprised of large intervals, the perfect formal contrast to the largely stepwise motion of the first theme — proof positive of the "absolute" music composer's mind at work?

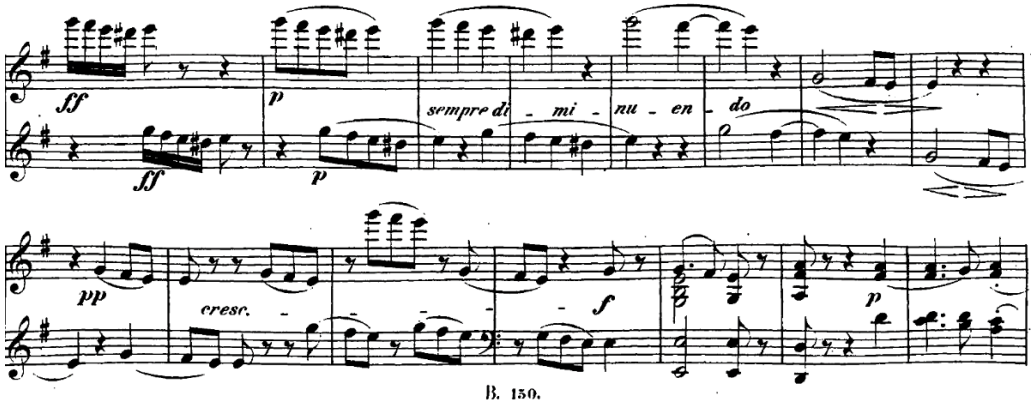


Ah yes, but look at the agitated accompaniment, the "program" enthusiasts would say. There is obviously a mental struggle going on here.

Indeed, the whole first movement seems to thrive on vivid contrasts of mood and texture — to Team Chalk the sign of careful formal planning. To the *esprit de fromage*, however, these contrasts depict the interior dialogue of a mind in conflict: forceful statements of irremovable principle made by the head alternate with more submissive, emotionally inflected phrases pleaded by the heart, in a discussion that reaches its peak of argumentative intensity in the development section.

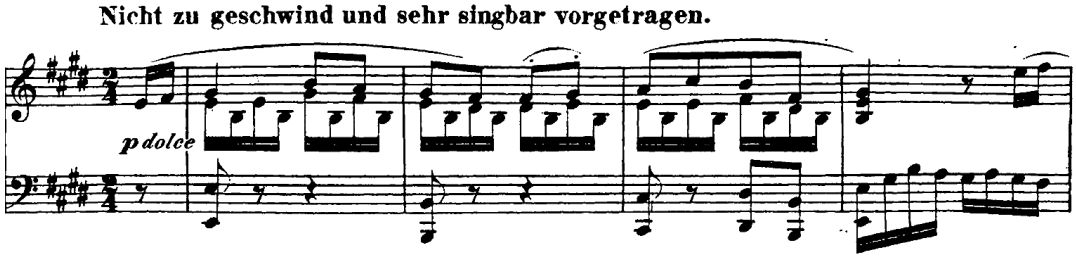
Especially intriguing in this movement is the retransition (where the development leads to the return of the opening thematic material in the recapitulation), which features two lone voices in stretto.

This is typically the sign of a musical argument reaching peak intensity (in a formal sense), but it also perfectly represents the opposing sides of an argument speaking on top of one another, repeating over and over the falling scale motive G-F#-E (the reverse of E-F#-G that opened the movement), slower and slower, as if gradually coming to the realization that they don't disagree at all, since they are arguing the same point.



And all is well.

The second movement wondrously transforms the "falling minor 3rd" motive that opened the first movement into a "rising major 3rd" to begin this rondo's opening refrain — much to the delight of "absolutist" aficionados amongst its listeners.

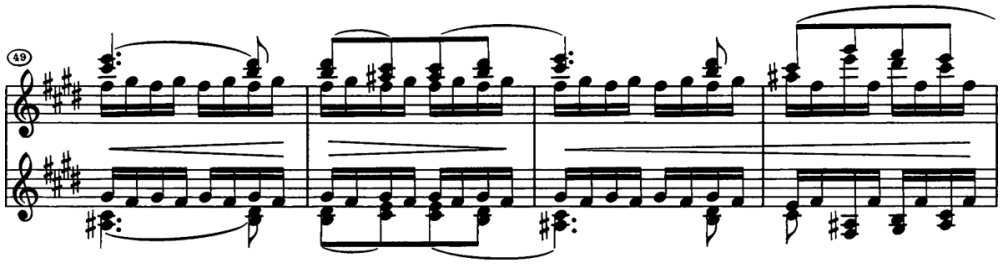


But to believers in this sonata's programmatic intentions, this gloriously songful melody could well represent Count Moritz's honeymoon and the "conversation with the beloved" envisaged by Schindler.

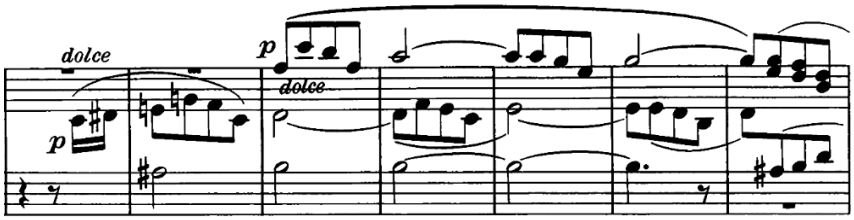
The vocal character of this theme might almost make one suspect Beethoven of channelling Schubert here, but for the fact that young Franz was only 16 at the time that this sonata was composed, so the influence is more likely to have flowed in the other direction (see Schubert's E-minor Sonata D 566).

This classically balanced, simply harmonized melody flows effortlessly between sections of episode in this movement without glaring contrasts of mood or tone.

We do notice, however, a hint at a kind of texture that will increasingly gain importance in Beethoven's last sonatas: a "wall of sound" created by filling in the middle of the sound range with pulsations of keyboard timbre to beef up the rhetorical impact of the whole by thickening the texture.



The last appearance of the refrain, presented in a "love duet" alternation of tenor and soprano voices,



confirms this match as a happy one, and the aptness of Beethoven's own happy marriage of "absolute" and "program" music in this sonata.

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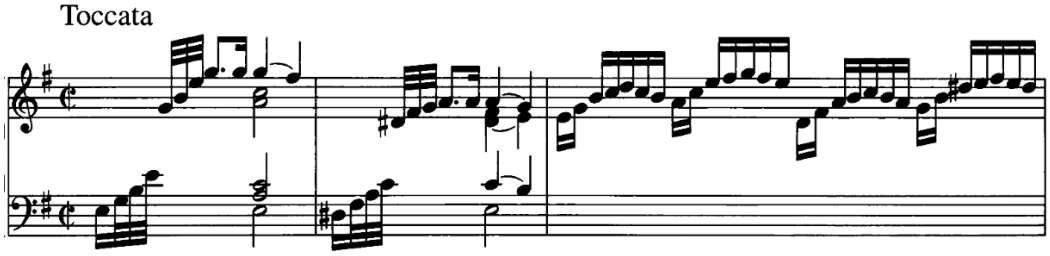
Johann Sebastian Bach
Partita No. 6 in E minor BWV 830

The partita in late Baroque parlance was just another name for a dance suite, a multi-movement work made up of the four canonical dance forms — allemande, courante, sarabande and gigue — with the occasional addition of some kind of prelude at the beginning and optional fancier dances called *galanteries* (minuets, bourées, gavottes) inserted right before the zinger finale, the gigue. Each dance is in binary (two-part) form, each part to be played twice.

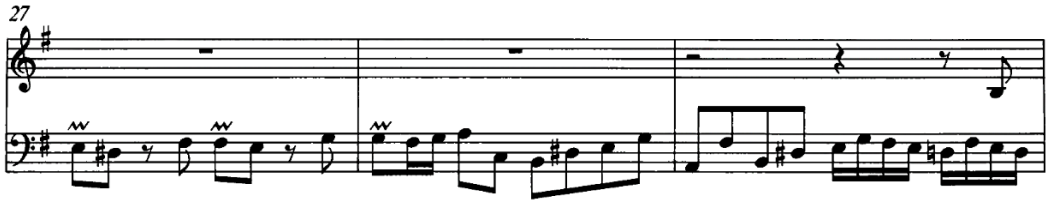
From 1726 to 1731 Bach published one partita a year. When published together in 1731, these partitas formed Part One of a four-part series that he called *Clavierübung*, i.e., "Keyboard Exercise." And a good deal of "exercise" these six partitas did indeed provide to the middle-class amateur musicians who were their target audience.

The crowning glory of the set is the *Partita No. 6 in E minor* BWV 830, which begins with a grand *Toccata* (the longest movement in any of the Partitas) structured in three parts. The Toccata opens somberly with a prelude in free improvisatory style, leading without a break to a fugue that then issues into a postlude, returning once again to the fantasy-style material of the opening.

Unifying the movement is a plangent "sigh" motive that sits atop the many sweeping arpeggio gestures that open and then regularly punctuate the prelude.

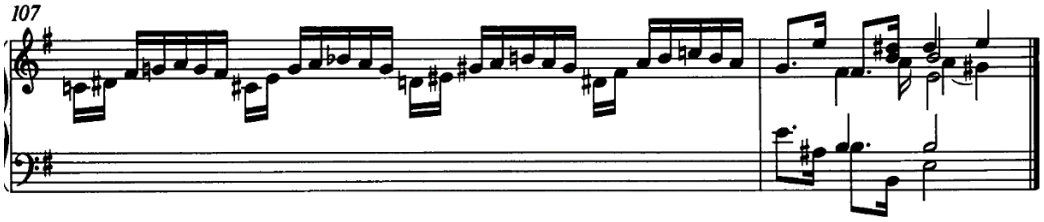


These sweeping gestures alternate with colourful cadenza-like flourishes until a fugue breaks out with the opening "sigh" motive as its principal subject, made all the more ear-catching with the addition of mordents.



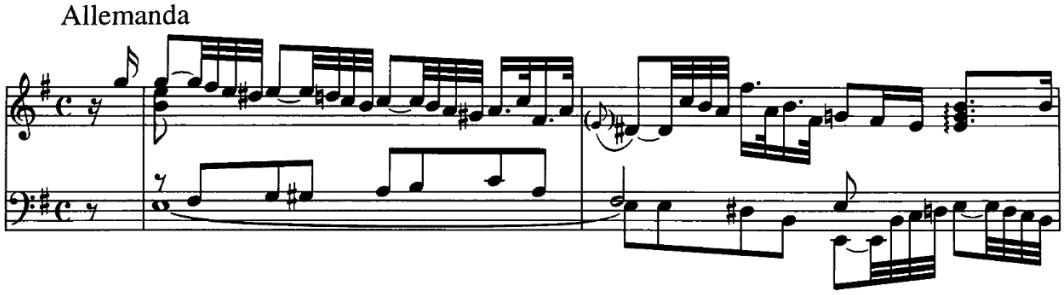
The fugal entries, when combined with the countersubject, are as colourfully dissonant as the prelude's opening flourishes, but are relieved by being interspersed with contrasting episodes of a "flatter" diatonic character.

But the postlude restores chromatic "dazzle" once again



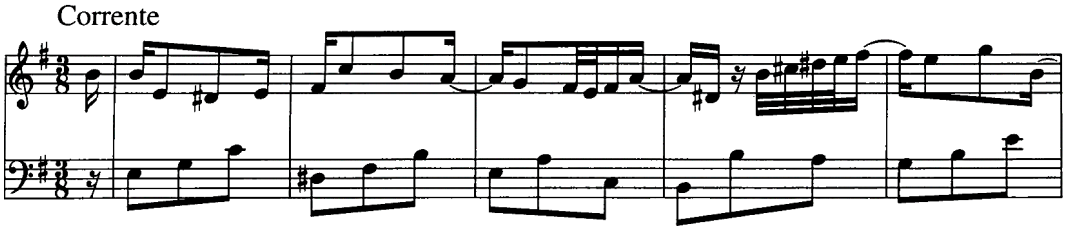
to end the movement in as dramatically emphatic a manner as it began.

The *Allemande* is a remarkably chatty conversation between the right and left hands, each taking part in the extravagantly ornate melodic lines in its two-part texture.

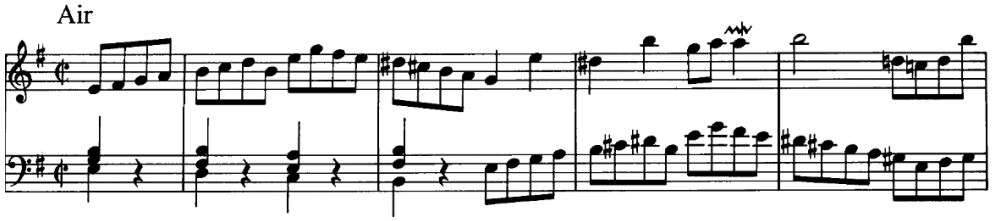


Stop-and-start runs alternate with perky dotted rhythms to keep the ear engaged throughout.

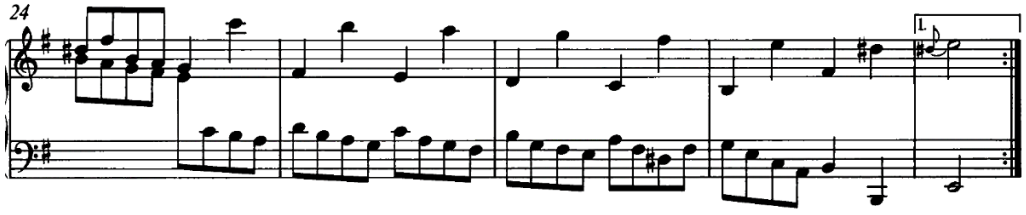
The *Corrente* is whirlwind virtuoso piece peppered with off-beat right-hand syncopations dancing merrily in and around the steady plodding beats of the left hand's regular 8th-note pulse.



Bach then gets us rhythmically back on track with a "bonus" movement, a breezy and carefree *Air* in a simple texture constructed almost entirely of just 8th notes and quarters.

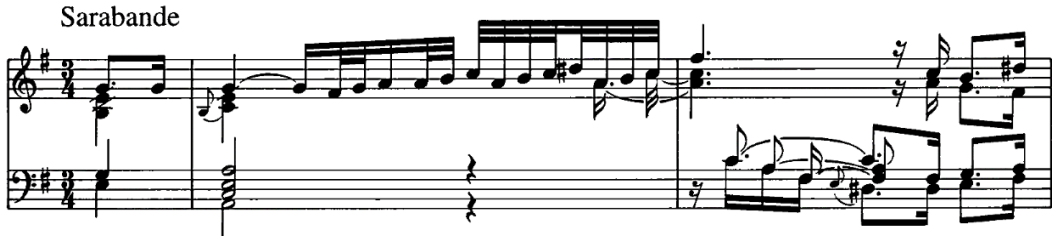


The movement ends its second section with a series of gleeful leaps the first time around



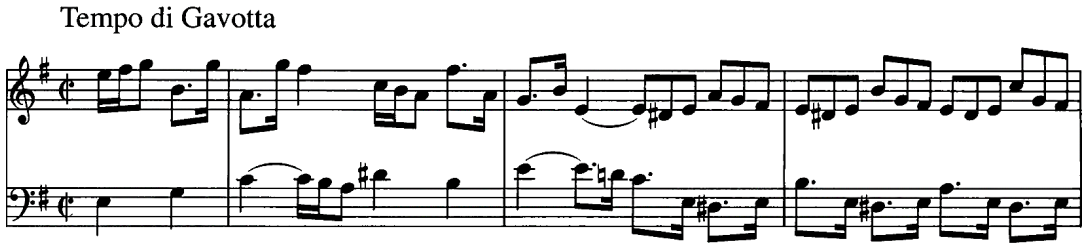
and an even more riotously animated version the second time.

The reflective *Sarabande* is an emotional copy of the yearning sighs and rhetorical pauses of the Toccata's opening gestures.

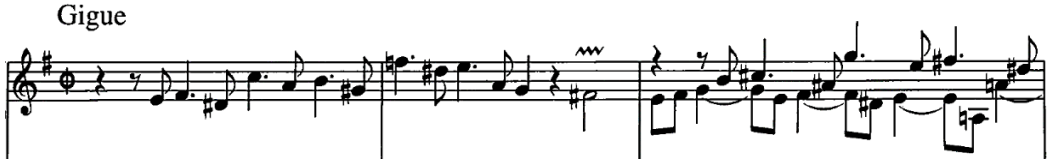


With some of the most florid melodic decoration of any piece to come out of the Baroque era, it seems to elaborate for us confidentially in private what the Toccata could only hint at with its bold sweeping gestures in public.

The penultimate movement of this suite is labelled *Tempo di gavotta* from its stomping half-bar upbeat, typical of the peasant dance from the French countryside that became popular at the court of Louis XIV.



Lively and rollicking in character, it infuses the listener's ear with the spirit of the dance — in a way that the following *Gigue* finale most definitely does not.



This strange but compelling finale has all the leaping melodic lines and toe-tapping regularity of rhythm expected in the gigue genre, but its melodic shape is distinctly angular, its tone abstractly fugal and bewilderingly chromatic.

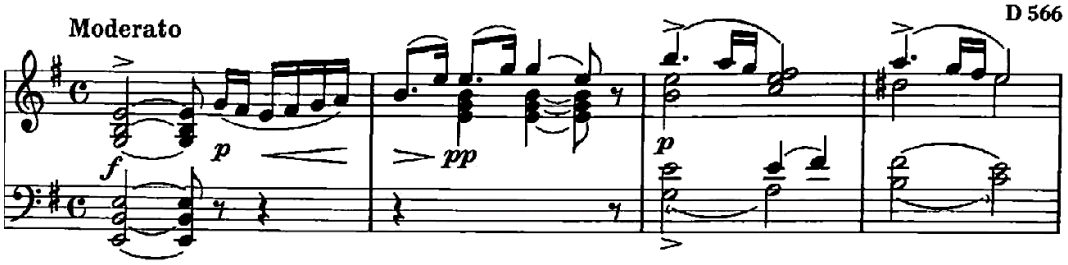
This is surely one of the most bizarre "dance" pieces in all of Bach's keyboard works.

Franz Schubert
Sonata in E minor D 566

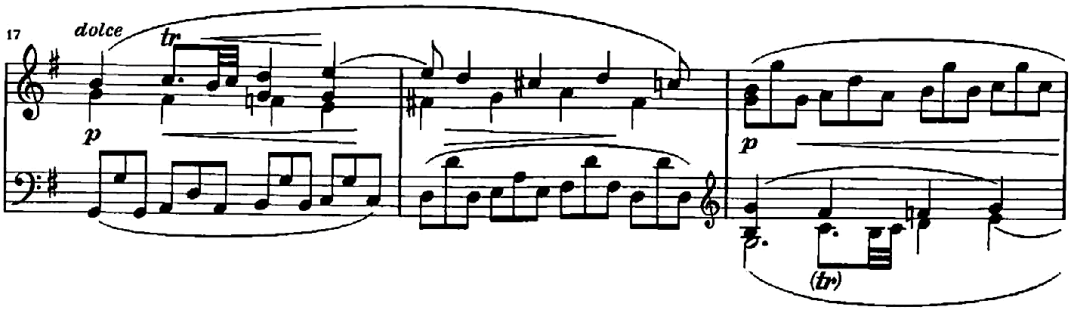
The influence of Beethoven is clearly discernible in several of Schubert's earliest piano sonatas, especially between works in the same key. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the ***Sonata in E minor*** composed by the 20-year-old Schubert in June of 1817 featuring a first movement in sonata form followed by a songful *Allegretto* clearly patterned after the second movement of Beethoven's E minor Sonata Op. 90.

But clearer still is Schubert's unique voice and an emerging compositional style that pairs a Beethovenian penchant for the repetition of *instrumentally* inspired motives with an ever-present urge to spin out relaxed *vocally* inspired melodies.

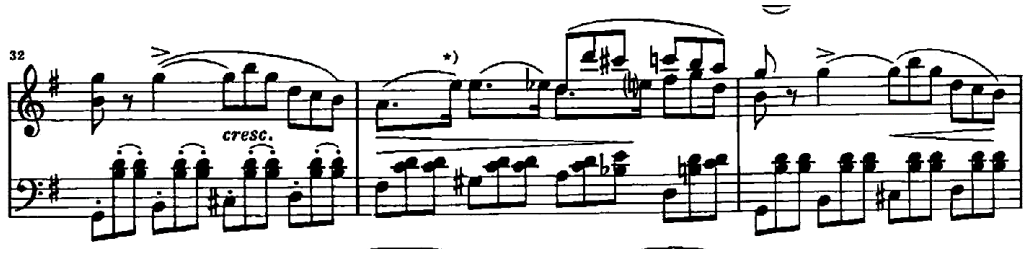
The ***Moderato*** first movement opens with a solemn meditation on the E minor triad that rises up, only to fall back down again in a series of drooping sighs reminiscent of the pathos evoked by the syncopations at the opening of Beethoven's Op. 90.



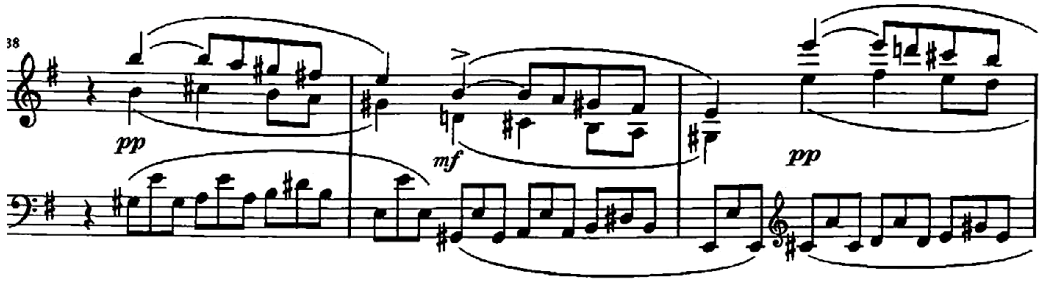
By contrast with this motivic "mosaic" of a widely ranging first theme, in a four-square stop-and-start rhythm, Schubert's second theme is a soprano-bass duet of flowing vocal melody traversing barely a 5th — its carefree nature reinforced with "tra-la-la" trills and a rippling accompaniment in triplets that gently bump elbows with the syncopated melody above.



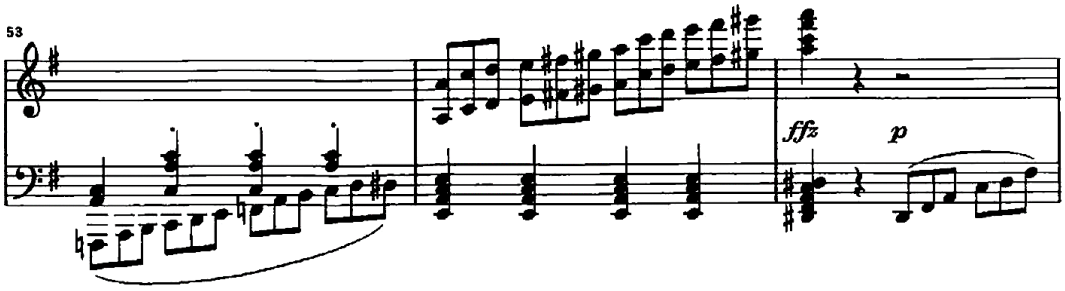
And because this is music aimed at a Viennese audience, Schubert simply can't help but give us a little dance with an "oom-pah-pah" accompaniment to round out the exposition.



But what captures his attention to begin the development section is this sequentially repeated cadencing formula in 6ths from the end of the second theme,



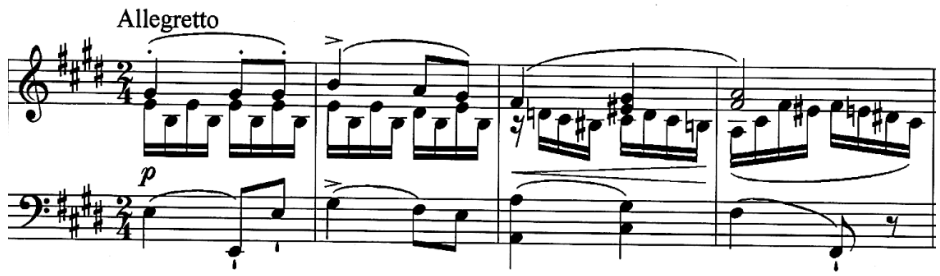
which then must yield when the innocently burbling triplets in the accompaniment highjack the texture by turning into octaves. This open display of Beethovenian "muscle" leads inevitably to the climax of the movement.



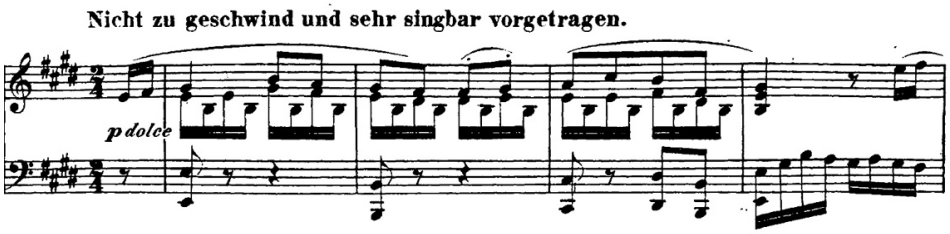
And with a recapitulation that brings no surprises, Schubert displays how he can ably fit his often wayward emotional impulses into the straightjacket of classical sonata form.

Schubert's homage to Beethoven is even clearer in the second movement *Allegretto,* as can be seen in a comparison with the opening bars of Beethoven's Op. 90 second movement.

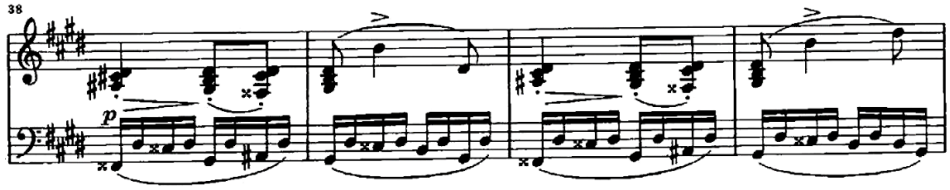
Schubert:



Beethoven:

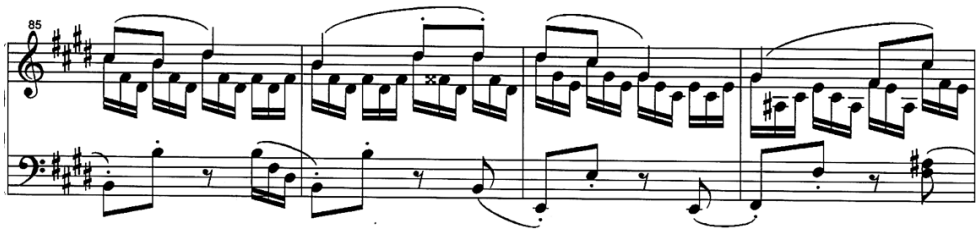


Schubert's Allegretto, like Beethoven's, is remarkably uniform in mood, with minor-mode episodes such as this



representing only a slight frowning eyebrow over the proceedings, largely because such sections maintain the repeated-note rhythm of the opening theme and are thus still part of the same musical "discussion."

What Schubert does do, however, is employ a form of "developing variation" as the movement proceeds, to frame his lyrical impulses in new melodic variants with fluttering keyboard textures that still maintain the delightfully buoyant "cello pizzicato" bass line that has been present since the opening.



Schubert would go on to develop the creative tension in his piano sonatas between formal restraint and lyrical expansiveness, right to the end of his short life.

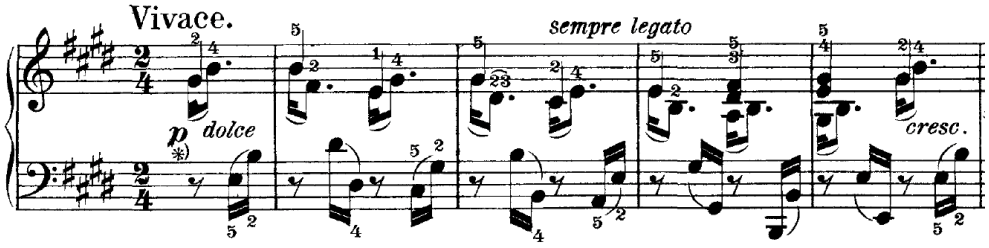
Ludwig van Beethoven
Sonata No. 30 in E major Op. 109

The Sonata in E major Op. 109 is a product of Beethoven's last years, one of three composed between 1820 and 1822. Despite its three-movement structure, this sonata may be thought of in two halves.

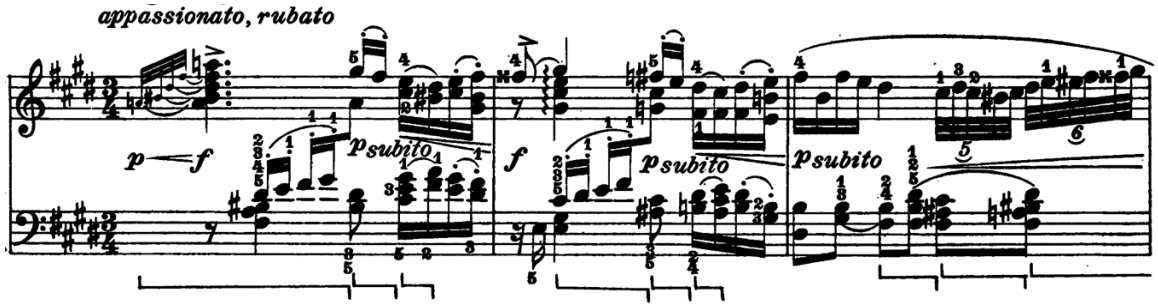
First comes a complementary pair of emotionally contrasting movements, both in sonata form, joined together without a pause, the first a dreamy star-gazing fantasy in moderate tempo, the second a frighteningly focussed *agitato* of nightmarish intensity.

The emotional volatility of these two movements is balanced and resolved by the poised and serene set of variations which serves as the sonata's finale. These variations are based on a melody of such quiet dignity that they virtually erase all memory of the emotional wanderings of the previous movements.

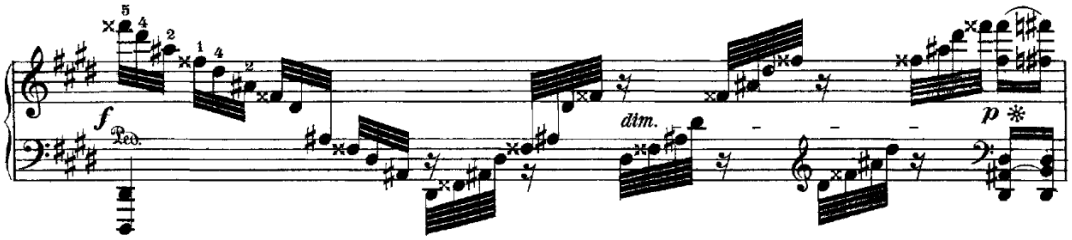
The compression of form of which Beethoven is capable in his late works is evident in the first movement, the exposition of which is complete in a mere 16 bars. It opens with a melody buried within a delicate tracery of broken chord figuration that flutters innocently as if floating suspended in the air.



But it has barely breathed out its first two phrases and is moving to cadence when it is interrupted by a disorienting diminished 7th chord that leads nonetheless to a lovingly lyrical duet between left and right hand.



But this “duet” second theme has time to sing out only a few bars itself before breaking out, cadenza-like, into a keyboard-spanning series of rapturous arpeggios and scale figures.

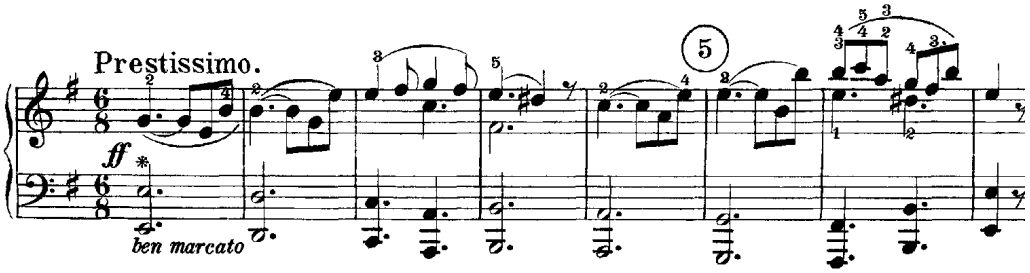


And then…the exposition is over, on the very first page of the score.

These three contrasting elements — fluttering broken-chord harmonies, lyric duet and keyboard-sprawling figuration — form the entire content of the movement, dominating its development, recapitulation and coda.

But it is the first of these, the fluttering broken-chord harmonies, that Beethoven is obviously in love with. It pulses through the entire development, building to a climax for the return of the opening material, presented with the hands at the extreme ends of the keyboard. A coda then seems to merely drift to its conclusion, ebbing away rather than emphatically ending.

All the more shocking, then, is the contrast between this improvisatory first movement in E major and the arrival of E minor, its evil twin, in the turbulent *Prestissimo* second movement that follows on without a pause.



The musical drama of this movement comes from the struggle of a frantically rising right-hand figure and a sternly descending passacaglia-like bass line.

This is no scherzo: there is no peaceful, contrasting “trio” middle section. Rather, it is another sonata-form movement, and a highly unorthodox one at that, more concerned with continuous contrapuntal development than the contrast between first and second subjects and their respective key centres.

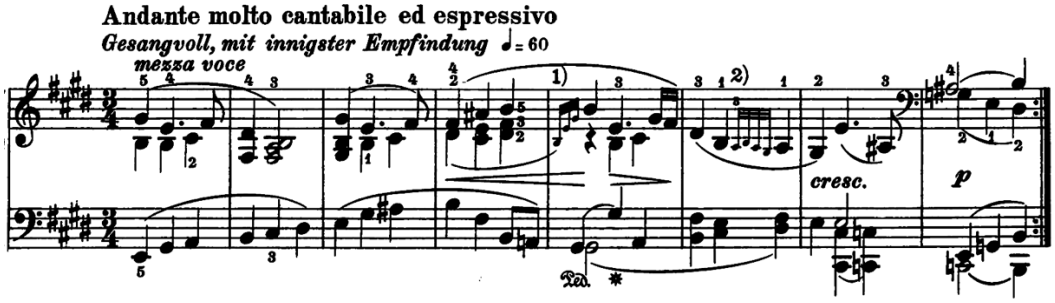
Despite the breakneck pace, pervasive chromaticism serves to give a sharp edge of pathos to this movement’s sometimes mysterious murmurings and frequent violent outbursts.

Remarkable in this movement is the way in which Beethoven manages to express such extremes of emotional violence within a texture so starkly ruled by the strictures of imitative counterpoint.

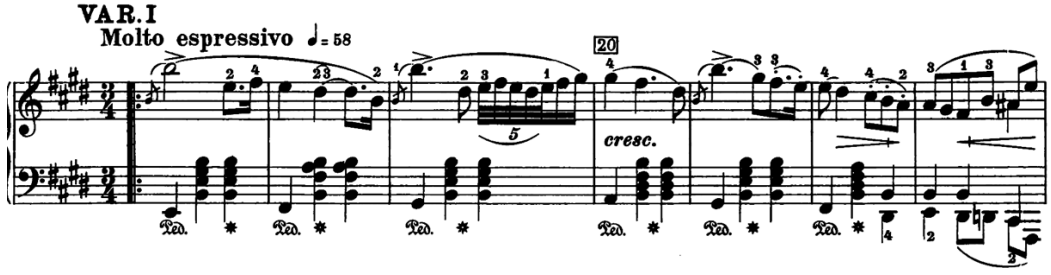
The last movement *Andante* is a theme and variations that ends this sonata in a spirit of peace and reconciliation, flecked at times with a tinge of religious ecstasy. And how could it not, given the shadow of J. S. Bach that has hovered over the sonata from its opening bars?

The broken chord figuration of the opening movement looks back to similar homogeneously "patterned" textures in the preludes of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, and the movement's cadenza-like exaltations of arpeggios find their correlative in similar outbursts of spiritual bravura in Bach's organ toccatas. More explicit reference to Baroque practice is made in the second movement, which is shot through with canons and passages in double counterpoint.

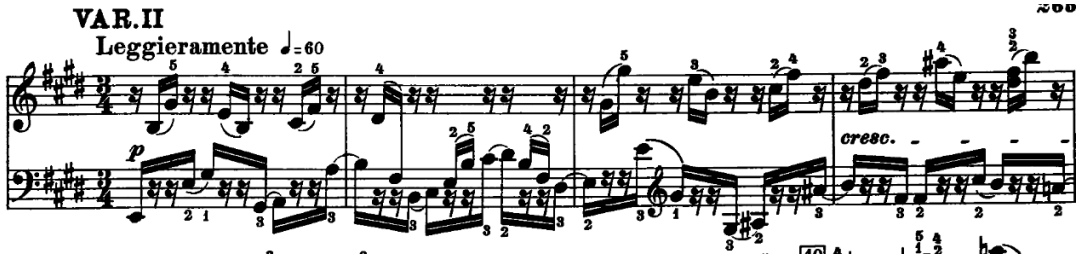
And now, in the concluding movement, we encounter a variation melody characterized by an almost religious serenity, with the rhythmic imprint of the sarabande (emphasizing the second beat of the bar) and harmonized with the melodically conceived bass line of a four-part Lutheran chorale.



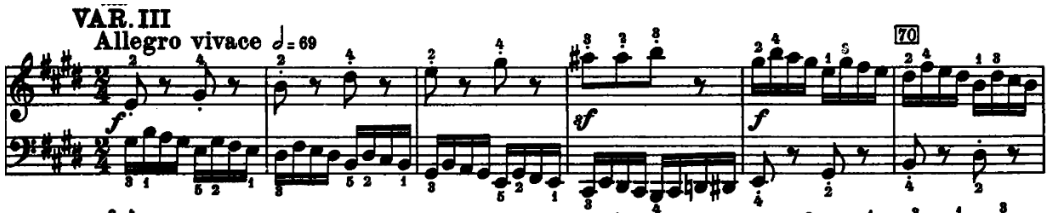
The first variation is an Italian opera aria for keyboard, marked *Molto espressivo*, with an elegantly expressive melody and a clear bass-and-chord left-hand accompaniment.



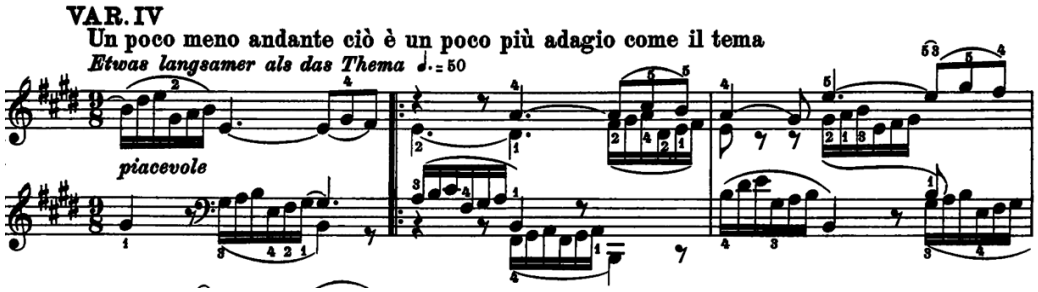
Variation 2 lightens the texture with a hocket-style alternation of the hands that presents the harmonic and melodic outlines of the theme in interlocking stroboscopic flashes of melody.



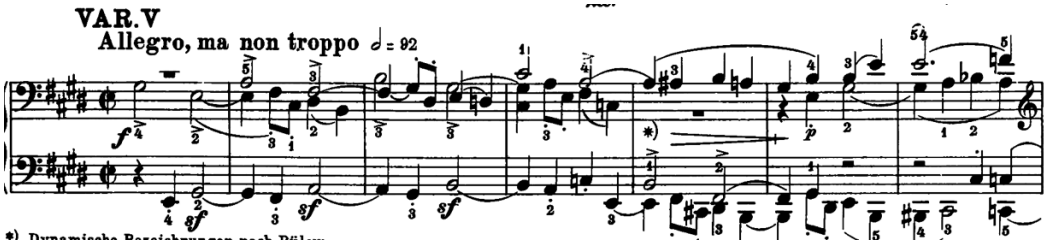
Baroque instincts come to the surface in Variation 3, a vigorous exercise in two-voice double counterpoint, with the right and left hands regularly swapping melodies in the course of presenting the theme.



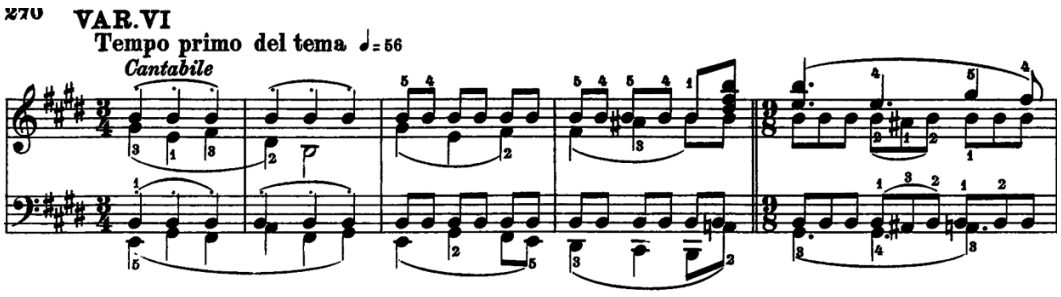
Variation 4 moves the time signature to 9/8 for a change of pace and thickens the texture to a full four imitative voices.



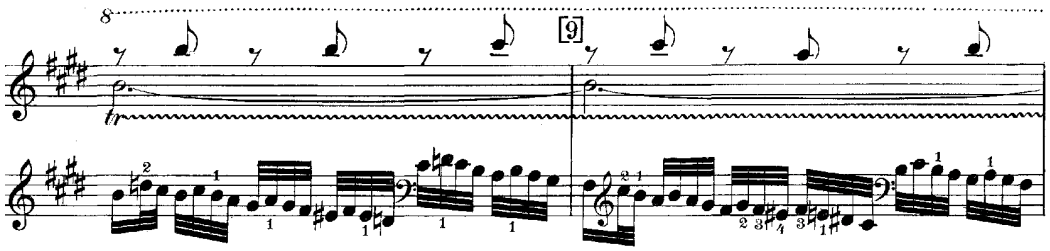
Variation 5 is a contrapuntal tour de force, the most "Baroque" of the whole set of variations.



Beethoven's own synthesis of old and new emerges in the final variation, which moves from a simple chordal statement of the theme to a gradual accumulation of rhythmic energy.



This slow build-up of rhythmic energy finally develops into a texture of whirling trills and flecks of melody flickering in the high register over cascading runs below, creating the type of massive “sound wall” that characterizes the “apotheosis” moment in Beethoven’s last sonatas.



But instead of ending this increasingly brilliant set of variations with a showy display of keyboard virtuosity, as many other composers would do, Beethoven opts for a simple quiet recall of the original theme, in the style of Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, to end the sonata in a mood of reverence and spiritual peace.

Donald Gíslason 2026