

## Beethoven's "*Passion*" Sonata (No.23 Op.57)

### Musical characterization and performance analysis of the third movement

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**Abstract.** Beethoven's "*Passion*" Sonata, originally titled "*Piano Sonata No. 23*", Op.57", composed between 1804 and 1806, is one of the most important representative works of Beethoven's mature period, and is generally regarded as one of the most outstanding works of his piano sonatas. The third movement of the "*Passion*" Sonata is rich and varied in emotional expression, ranging from angry and resolute emotions to contradictory and soft emotions, and the dramatic emotional changes demonstrate the composer's diverse expressive abilities. This paper takes the third movement of the "*Passion*" Sonata (No.23 Op.57) as the object of study, and analyses the characteristics of the musical style, playing techniques and emotional expression of the piece.

**Keywords:** Beethoven, "*Passion*" Sonata, Performance Technique.

#### 1. Introduction

Beethoven's "*Passion*" Sonata is the 23rd of Beethoven's "32 piano sonatas", which is the treasure of the works of world music. The word "passion" precisely reflects the essence of this work, so it is still used today. The last movement of "*Passion*" Sonata (Chapter 3) strongly expresses that life is full of various contradictions and power struggles, and shows the fierce struggle consciousness. First, this article introduces the composer and the creation background. Secondly, the musical characteristics and technical difficulties of the music are analyzed from the form structure, texture level change, tonality and harmony. Finally, based on the author's playing experience, the article analyzes the playing skills of "*Passion*" Sonata from timbre processing, dynamics and speed control, chord playing and pedal application.

#### 2. Beethoven and the "*Passion*" Sonata

##### 2.1 Introduction to Beethoven

Ludwig van Beethoven was born in Bonn, Germany, one of the representatives of the Vienna School and a composer in the European classical period [1]. Beethoven composed a wide range of music themes, his important works include 9 symphonies, 1 opera, 32 piano sonatas, 5 piano concertos, orchestral overtures and violin and cello sonatas. He, Haydn, and Mozart are known as the Three Viennese Masters. [2] Due to his significant contributions to classical music and his development and innovation of the sonata form and symphony cycle structure, "*32 Piano Sonatas*" are renowned alongside Bach's "*Well-Tempered Clavier*" as works of outstanding contribution in music history. His music incorporates strong revolutionary elements and dramatic effects. For example, in *the Eighth Sonata "Pathetique"*, the first movement is full of solemn emotion and fire enthusiasm and excitement, the second movement is a Rondo form, using elegant *lento*, showing a noble, comfortable, innocent state of mind, and the final movement is a Rondo form full of fantasy and sensitivity. It not only embodies Beethoven's indomitable spirit of fighting against fate, but also reflects his passionate pursuit of democratic and free revolutionary spirit. He became a Synthesizer of classical music, but also a pioneer of romantic music, and was honored as the "saint of music" and the "king of symphony" [3].

## 2.2 The Creative Background of "*Passion*" Sonata

The "*Passion*" Sonata was composed between 1804 and 1806, a period when Beethoven's creativity was at its peak. This piece was dedicated to Count Franz von Brunswick. In 1804, Napoleon's coronation as emperor deeply disappointed Beethoven, leading him to realize that the people must fight for their independence and freedom. During the same year, Beethoven's deafness continued to worsen, causing him immense suffering. Influenced by the French Revolution and the Enlightenment, he integrated people's pursuit of "freedom", "democracy", "equality" and "universal love", the will to resist oppression, the determination to win and his courage to overcome disease into the creation of the "*Passion*" Sonata, which marks the formation of Beethoven's personal style. The "*Passion*" Sonata integrates the rigor of the classical period with the emotion of Romanticism [4], showing Beethoven's inner passion and rage, reflecting Beethoven's cognition of real life, expressing a strong power of courage, and profoundly revealing that life is full of contradictions and exploration, but still must have the will to face difficulties.

## 2.3 Current Research Status

The "*Passion*" Sonata can be considered a pinnacle of Beethoven's compositions, and thus, this work has attracted much attention from researchers. Currently, domestic and international research on Beethoven's musical works focuses on musical characteristics, performance techniques, and emotional expression. Zheng Xingsan's *A Study of Beethoven's Piano Sonatas* examines the musical structure, harmonic characteristics, rhythmic usage, melodic conception, and other aspects of each of Beethoven's sonatas, exploring the performance techniques of Beethoven's sonatas [5]. Yang Wen's *Creation Techniques and Performance Processing of Beethoven's 'passion' Sonata* reveals Beethoven's creative techniques and musical structure by analyzing the musical structure, including movement divisions, theme development, modulation, and harmonic techniques, while analyzing the conception and development of melodies as well as their correlation between different movements [6]. Li Huiyan proposes that the power of music itself is everywhere. Starting from the power of Beethoven's "*passion*" Sonata, she combines her understanding, performance experience, and performance environment to discuss how to handle and present the power of this piece [7]. Huang Chenxiang [8] and Zhang Hongxi [9] have studied the musical characteristics and performance techniques of the "*passion*" Sonata. In summary, the research by these scholars provides important references and guidance for understanding the musical characteristics and performance requirements of Beethoven's piano sonatas.

## 3. Analysis of Musical Characteristics of the Third Movement of "*Passion*" Sonata

### 3.1 Definition of Sonata

Sonata originated in Italy in the 16th century and generally refers to all instrumental music structures at that time. By the 18th century, the sonata had undergone fundamental changes in structure and musical style and was composed of three parts: exposition, development and *recapitulation*. A sonata is a multi-movement instrumental cycle played by one or two solo instruments (keyboard, violin, cello). A typical sonata is composed of three or four movements. The first movement is allegro, sonata form. The second movement is lento, two pieces or trilogy. The third movement is minuet or scherzo, with three stages. The fourth movement is allegro, rondo, rondo sonata form, or Sonata form.

In the second half of the 18th century, Haydn and Mozart eliminated the second or third movement and established the sonata structure of three movements (allegro - lento - allegro). Under Beethoven's development, the sonata genre took another step forward, approaching the symphony structure in its development structure. His thirty-two sonatas made a historic contribution to this genre, marking the development of sonatas into a mature period. [10]

### 3.2 Musical Features

Beethoven's "Passion" Sonata is considered one of the most important works of the classical period. "Passion" Sonata has a strong dramatic character. Dramatic character refers to "the composer's special treatment of timbre, pitch, intensity, rhythm, musical thought, theme, structure, etc., resulting in the transformation, change and strong contrast of emotions, evoking some dramatic emotional experience in the hearts of listeners" [11]. Beethoven uses unique creative techniques, so the music is full of fierce conflict and extremely dramatic development. This section discusses the musical dramatic features of Beethoven's "Passion" Sonata (No.23 Op.57) through the analysis of the form structure, tonality and harmony in the third chapter.

The form structure of this piece is a sonata form, which consists of five parts: introduction, exposition, development, *recapitulation* and Coda. The structure of the musical form is shown in Figure 1. [12]

Introduction		Exposition						
		First subject		Bridge	The second subject		The end subject	
		A	B	A	C			
		a	a	b	a	c	c1	
19		8	8	14	14	12	20	22
f					c			

  

Development		
D	E	
d	e	
24	26+44(ready)	
b-flat	f	c

  

<i>Recapitulation</i>						Coda			
The first subject		Bridge	The second subject		The end subject	<i>Episode</i>		Code	
A		B	A	C		E			
a	a1	b	a	c	c1	e	e		
8	8	14	14	12	20	20	8	9	37
f									

Figure 1. Form of the third movement of the "Passion" Sonata

The introduction is played continuously with dissonant diminished 7th and dotted points, bringing in a nervous mood. After the semiquaver descending play, and slowly strengthening, further strengthening the tension, and then the 13th bar to add the left hand, with the loudness of the octave relationship perfect integration, smoothly leading to the first theme. It seems to foretell the coming of a "storm" (music example 1). It creates an uneasy musical atmosphere and creates dramatic sound effects.

Music Example 1

As shown in music example 2, when the music crests to the 76th bar sforzando piano, the Neapolitan chord appears and changes the color of the music. The use of the sf sign and the Neapolitan chord make the emotional transformation more obvious and the expression of emotions more intense, deepening the audience's feelings of change and conflict, and further demonstrating the musical drama of the work.

Music Example 2

In the exposition, the running of the semiquaver in a high voice creates a passionate atmosphere. This subject takes 2+2+4 as a group, the musical mood rises to the top and then slowly fades (music example 3). Based on maintaining the same rhythm, the music changes, compared to the previous, this section gives a relatively soft freshness, after a short break into the second theme.

Music Example 3

The bridge of the exposition maintains the tonality of the first subject and is carried out based on 4 bars, emphasizing the first theme and producing a sense of being almost broken off but not quite. The low part of the second theme becomes a *half-diminished chord*, making the music more dynamic and thicker. The high part selects the first subject material and touches it based on 4 bars, making the melody more hierarchical and further strengthening the emotional color (music example 4).



Music Example 4

The ending is developed based on the first subject material, the high changes from a single note to a chord, the low part from a chord into a scale of running, and the overall melody layer by layer, the music reaches a climax in this part, enrich the acoustics, and then gradually calm down with the progress of the scale descending (music example 5). In tonality from the main key f minor key to its subdominant key, to lead to the development subject.



Music Example 5

The beginning of the development subject is developed using the material of the exposition subject, and the tenuto is added to the low part to increase the thickness of the music, which is a development process from one part to multiple parts gradually thickening (music example 6).



Music Example 6

The high voice of the second subject of the development subject begins with syncopation rhythms and staccato, giving the whole music a cheerful and relaxed atmosphere, while the *half-diminished Chord* of the low part is the background music, bringing the audience into an enthusiastic concert scene (music example 7). The F to G flat in the 147th bar comes up again in octaves, heightening the tension of the music and revealing a surge of emotion.



Music Example 7

In the 168th bar, the low part of the development becomes a staccato. The high part is a continuous octave, with percussive material (music example 8). After that, continuous arpeggios are added for increasing, which is a very free Bridge stage, and finally, the development ends in the pianissimo on the dominant of *homophony* (music example 9).



Music Example 8



Music Example 9

As shown in music example 10, the third movement recapitulation reprises the previous successive diminished 7th chord. However, the speed and intensity tend to ease here, which forms a great contrast with the tension in the *recapitulation* subject, highlighting the change of musical mood.



Music Example 10

The first theme of the *recapitulation* subject is reduced by a small number of phrases compared with the exposition part, in which the second phrase of the first subject transfers the first theme to the low part, turning the low part into a melodic voice (music example 11). The tonality regression of the second subject embodies the important characteristics of sonata form. The end subject becomes stronger to create an atmosphere for the coda (music example 12).

Music Example 11

Music Example 12

The Coda is divided into two subjects. The first subject is the newly introduced material, and it is also a *parallel period*. The staccato in the low part complements the main melody in the high part (music example 13). Both phrases are repeated, followed by the second subject of the coda.

Music Example 13

In the second subject of the coda, the high and low voices stagger in counterpoint. The second phrase is a high-octave version of the first phrase. This is followed by a reverse arpeggio, a final recap with the first material. Then, the homophony is reinforced again and a conclusion with three strong block chords (music example 14).

Music Example 14

Music Example 15

The sonata is mainly in the key of f minor, but in the development of the sonata, there will be changes and shifts in tonality, increasing the expressiveness and emotional tension of the music (music example 15).

In music example 15, starting with the 118th bar in b-flat minor, The first theme motive progresses from a single voice part to multiple voice parts.

#### 4. Interpretation of the Third Movement of "Passion" Sonata

This section will analyze how to interpret the dramatic characteristics of the third movement of the "Passion" Sonata through the changes in texture levels, timbre, dynamics, melody and rhythm, touch on the keys, and the use of the pedal.

##### 4.1 Texture level changes

Beethoven uses complex texture level changes in the "Passion" Sonata. Through using counterpoint and different fingers to create a rich musical effect. In different parts of the sonata, the texture level changes from monophonic melodies to heavy chord accompaniments and fast notes. (music example 16).



Music Example 16

In Example 16, the low part becomes a half-diminished chord, which gives the music more passion and thickness based on enthusiasm, reflecting the passionate mood.

##### 4.2 Timbre

Timbre is an important part of playing piano and an important way of musical expression. In the introduction, try to play as cleanly as possible, like a trumpet sound, giving a sense of forward movement. Beethoven skillfully used the characteristics of the piano timbre, through different playing techniques and techniques to create a rich and colorful timbre effect, including soft timbre, bright timbre and full of cheerful timbre (music example 17).



Music Example 17

In music example 17, 143th-144th bars in the high voice are continuously syncopation rhythms. The offbeat is staccato. The downbeat remains unchanged. 143th-144th bars have the effect of dancing, greatly enriching the timbre of the music.

The timbre of each part should be distinguished according to the direction of harmony, and the same is true for phrases and melodies. It is only raised by an octave, then the timbre will be different. To convey a sense of gradual progression and deepening layers. The timbre will be brighter and brighter.

### 4.3 Dynamics change

The dynamics of the "Passion" Sonata are very rich, from the soft timbre to the strong timbre, from the quiet part to the passionate part, the progressive layer by layer, there is an obvious contrast (music example 18).



Music Example 18

In the music example 18, the high and low voices of the first three bars are moving in opposite directions, creating a contracted emotional expression, foreshadowing the chord in the next three bars and paving the way for the powerful momentum of the last three bars.

### 4.4 Rhythm

The speed mark of this work is not too fast allegro, but the use of rich and varied rhythms, from rapid rhythm changes to stable rhythm patterns, and then to sudden rhythm changes, add vivid expression and emotional tension to the music (music example 19) [13][14].



Music Example 19

In music example 19, from Quavers to crotchets to minims, and finally through small dot into the recapitulation. *Broken* seventh chord contrasts sharply with the running of the following semiquaver. The player must follow the speed mark of the composer, but also incorporate his understanding of the piece. we must follow the metronome to play at the beginning of playing. The metronome can help us control the rhythm and speed. When the player can play the repertoire proficiently, the speed is practiced. The left hand is more difficult than the right hand, so the player can take the left hand out alone, and then play in a two-handed ensemble. Playing with a fast tempo means quick key touches, large amplitude of string vibration, concentrated sound, dynamic music, and a bright timbre will be produced. Conversely, with gentle dynamics and small amplitude of string vibration, a melancholic timbre will be emitted. In the preparation of the development subject, due to the large number of empty beats and the difficulty in grasping the rhythm, it is necessary to practice this part with a metronome. there are many, and it is difficult to master the rhythm, so this part must follow the metronome to practice.

The speed in the first part of the development subject of this piece (music example 6), the *half-diminished Chord* with the left hand (music example 4), and the final presto sections (Examples 13, 14) are relatively difficult to master. The first part is challenging because an additional voice part is added, requiring attention to three voice parts simultaneously, and the fingering can be somewhat confusing. Therefore, it should be practiced separately. In music example 4, since there are alternating third and octave in the left hand, the third of the left hand must be played evenly and not vaguely. we can practice separately with the 1st and 5th fingers, and then with the 2nd and 3rd fingers, and finally

combine the thirds and octaves together for practice. Meanwhile, the left and right hands should maintain synchronization.

#### 4.5 Touch and Timbre

The melody of this work is passionate and powerful, requiring quick and clear playing of each note on the touch of the key, showing a feeling of passion and fire.

The semiquaver run is a very demanding chapter for finger runs. When the semiquaver is running, the fingertip of the finger is used to touch the key vertically. Players Keep their fingertips close to the keyboard, trying to maintain the minimum distance from the keys. If the finger is raised too high, the speed will be difficult to increase, the sound should be concentrated and the dynamics should be even. In the 36th-49th bar, use more of the finger pads to play, making the sound softer. While playing this melody, try to minimize the distance between your fingers and the keyboard, but avoid playing in a romantic style. [2].

In the process of running a semiquaver, no matter how fast the speed is, it is necessary to start from the slow speed, so that the details of the work can have a better grasp and understanding. using the slow of playing, we need to maintain a gentle, smooth play. Although this method requires the fingers to be soft and flexible to touch keys, the sound is still slightly bright, generally suitable for playing more lyrical singing passages, such as music example 7, we can use this method to practice. Under normal circumstances, the left hand has more problems than the right hand, one of the main reasons is that our left hand's various abilities are worse than the right hand, and the second is that there is no systematic training for the left hand, so the left hand must have more practice [3].

#### 4.6 Use of pedals

Piano pedals are very important in piano performance, of which the most commonly used is the right pedal (*sustain pedal*), its role is to extend the hold tone, increase the dynamics of the tone. The use of the pedal will affect the effect of the work.

There are a lot of running notes in this piece, so the pedals need to be controlled, otherwise it will sound not very clear to the listener. Music example 1 requires only one pedal for the first four bars, but in actual performance, the pedal can be changed once in the 3th bar. In the bass zone, the pedal can be stepped on half. The pedals in the high zone, middle zone, and bass zone are different, there are deep and shallow, which need to be controlled. There are also places where you need to use a syncopated pedal, just press on the middle accent, so that the melody sounds less rigid.

There are many dynamics marks in the score, such as *sfp*, *sf* and so on. It is necessary to use pedals and touch keys at the same time in the position of downbeat and accent (example 12) to make the sound more three-dimensional. In places where the volume is relatively weak (Example 3), it is recommended to use a long tone pedal to ensure the fullness of the sound. In music example 6, the low part of the tenuto has increased the thickness of the music so that this place cannot use the pedal.

### 5. Sum up

The creation of Beethoven's "*Passion*" Sonata was influenced by the "freedom", "democracy", "equality" and "fraternity" advocated by the French Revolution, so it is a revolutionary and dramatic work. In terms of musical form, Beethoven broke through the traditional sonata form of the classical period, expanded the piano playing range, and enriched the piano playing skills. By studying the form, tonality and harmony of Beethoven's "*Passion*" Sonata in chapter 3, this paper expounds the dramatic characteristics of the music, and combines the playing experience to elaborate playing skills and emotional expression from the aspects of texture level change, timbre, dynamic change, melody and rhythm, touch keys and pedal use. Through the analysis of the playing techniques in "*Passion*" Sonata, we can master the technical difficulties and playing elements in the work, and deeply feel the composer's revolutionary work.

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