

# Analysis of the Performance of Ludwig van Beethoven's "Pastoral" Piano Sonata

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**Abstract.** This paper analyzes Beethoven's "Pastoral" Sonata from the perspectives of both its formal structure and performance techniques. This paper indicates that structurally, the sonata creates a sense of static spatiality through sustained tonic notes and unifies the entire piece with cyclical motifs, achieving a dialectical unity of grandeur and tranquility. In terms of performance, it emphasizes the meticulous control of rhythm, dynamics, and pedal to translate these formal characteristics into musical expressions of natural imagery and inner emotion.

**Keywords:** Beethoven; Piano Piece; Performance Analysis.

## 1. Introduction

Ludwig van Beethoven, a central figure of the Viennese Classical School, was born on December 16, 1770, in Germany. He was a renowned composer, pianist, and conductor [1]. He studied under eminent musicians such as Mozart, Haydn, and Salieri, and his musical works bridge the Classical and Romantic periods. His creative output can be divided into three stages: His early period (1778 – 1802) was heavily influenced by Haydn and Mozart. The works from this time are characterized by a light, bright style with Classical features. Structurally, they generally adhere to traditional sonata form but begin to show signs of individualistic treatment. Representative works include the Pathétique Sonata (Op. 13) and the Moonlight Sonata (Op. 27 No. 2). In the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata (Op. 27 No. 2), Beethoven broke with the convention of an allegro first movement in a sonata, beginning instead with a slow adagio. However, it still implies the "theme-development-recapitulation" structure, and the persistent triplet arpeggios create a hazy, moonlit atmosphere [2]. The middle period (1802 – 1815) marks the maturation of Beethoven's sonata style. He began to break free from Classical constraints and move towards Romanticism. Firstly, while building upon traditional sonata form, he increased the complexity and drama of the development sections. His use of harmony became more daring and complex, frequently employing dissonance and chromaticism to enhance musical tension and expressivity, resulting in works with strong dramatic impact and intensity. The Symphony No. 6 in F major, Op. 68, composed during this period after he had become completely deaf, consists of five movements, breaking the traditional "fast-slow-dance-fast" sequence of symphonic movements. Through this work, he expressed his profound feelings for nature and depicted rural life. Similarly, the Appassionata Sonata (Op. 57), also from his middle period, is renowned for its intense drama. Sudden changes in tempo (accelerations and slowdowns) increase the music's expressiveness and dramatic quality, making the musical imagery more vivid. The use of figuration such as broken chords, tremolos, and sequences enriches the musical texture and emotional expression, enhancing the overall drama [3], as shown in Music Example 1. The late period (1815 – 1827) represents a phase of even greater depth and philosophical introspection in Beethoven's sonatas. The works from this time feature freer structures and more complex handling of harmony and rhythm. Emotional expression became more reserved, profound, and filled with philosophical contemplation, as seen in the Hammerklavier Sonata (Op. 106) and the Piano Sonata No. 32 in c minor (Op. 111). The Hammerklavier Sonata (Op. 106) makes extensive use of counterpoint, particularly fugues. Furthermore, the themes are fragmented into motifs, which are then subjected to constant variation and development, revealing rich connotations and making the music more complex, profound, and technically demanding. In March 1825, he completed the Missa Solemnis [4]. Beethoven died in Vienna on March 26, 1827, at the age of 57.

# SONATE.

415

Op. 57.

Dem Grafen Franz von Brunswick gewidmet.

Allegro assai.


1) The pedal indications are Beethoven's. 2) Trill from below, with an anticipation (*e'*) inserted into the Nachschlag; the shorter execution perhaps thus: . 3) In the autograph and original edition (Bartus de Arx, Vienna) the trill has no addition to it; here one might add *e'* as a short *anticipazione*. 4) Only the original version of the *ritornello* fits the musical masses.

Figure 1. Music Example 1. "Appassionata" Sonata (Op. 57)

This paper takes the Pastoral Piano Sonata as its subject, examining its creative background, musical structure, and performance aspects to illuminate Beethoven's innovative approach to musical form and his profound exploration of emotional expression.

## 2. Analysis of Creative Background and Musical Structure

### 2.1 Creative Background

The "Pastoral" Sonata was composed in 1801. The title was not given by Beethoven himself but was added by the publisher Cranz during its first publication in 1838, depicting a natural and serene rural atmosphere [5]. From the late 18th to early 19th century, European Romanticism emerged, emphasizing the expression of emotion, nature, and individuality. Consequently, although the "Pastoral" Sonata shows influences of the Classicism of Haydn and Mozart, Beethoven introduced innovations in structure and harmony, such as the use of drone bass to imitate bagpipe effects, foreshadowing the development of Romantic style. In 1801, Beethoven faced the crisis of deteriorating hearing and sought recuperation in the village of Heiligenstadt on the outskirts of Vienna. Located along the Danube River, Heiligenstadt was surrounded by fields, forests, and vineyards. This pastoral scenery directly inspired Beethoven, leading him to create a tranquil and natural musical language that expressed his longing for nature, as well as his hope and positive attitude toward life [6].

## 2.2 Analysis of Musical Form and Structure

The "Pastoral" Sonata follows a traditional four-movement structure. The first movement is an Allegro in D major, written in sonata form. Its structural layout is illustrated in Figure 2, comprising the Exposition, Development, Recapitulation, and Coda. Exposition - Main Theme (Measures 1-39): This section is in simple binary form. Beginning from the second measure, the main theme unfolds with a simple pentatonic melody (D-A-B-A-D), accompanied by a sustained bass (Bassetto) in the left hand that imitates rustic bagpipes, creating a pastoral idyll atmosphere. The theme is then repeated an octave higher. The descending and ascending lines in the first ten measures, along with the polyphonic harmony, establish a serene and flowing musical character for the entire piece. The slightly arched, stepwise descending "second" interval contributes to the smooth and fluid development of the theme. Transition (Measures 40-62): This section employs sequential modulation in fifths, expanding and modulating to introduce the subordinate theme. Following the pastoral melody (Measures 40-48), persistent eighth-note ornamental figures weave around sustained tones, gradually subsiding only just before the new theme commences. Subordinate Theme (Measures 63-135): Set in A major as a parallel period, this section features tonal shifts between F-sharp minor and A major. From measure 77 onward, to musically depict rushing stream currents, the rhythm creates a tremulous effect through interlocking eighth-note patterns in two voices, combined with harmonic oscillations that progressively intensify the sonic texture. The closing section is measures 135-162 in A major, and the overall sound gradually becomes quiet. The development section is measures 163-268, which unfolds counterpoint with the first theme material, and the harmony flows between D major and A major. By using irregular rhythms (accent shifts) and compound rhythms (alternating between two beats and triplets), tension and natural beauty are created. The overall style is laid-back. Through irregular phrases and rhythmic changes, it showcases the flow and transformation of nature, reflecting Beethoven's innovative approach of abstracting natural images into musical logic. Recapitulation (Measures 269-437), This section primarily restates all thematic material presented in the exposition. Coda (Measures 438-461) This concluding segment evokes a poetic, natural landscape. The harmonic foundation of the first movement is centered in D major, establishing a stable and expansive sonic canvas through the alternation of the dominant seventh chord (A7) and subdominant chord (G major). The pervasive iambic rhythm (short-long pattern) throughout the movement, exemplified by the "dotted rhythm + sustained note" combination in the right hand in measure 1, creates a rustic, skipping pulse reminiscent of pastoral vitality.

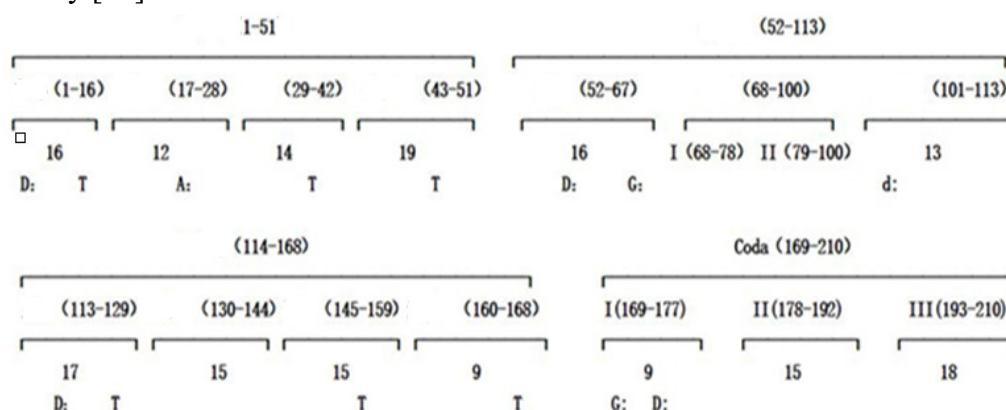


Figure 2. Form structure diagram of the first movement

Second Movement: Andante in d minor. This movement is in ternary form (ABA), featuring a serene and profound melody. Section A consists of two phrases in a symmetrical 4+4 measure structure. The tonality modulates from d minor to a minor. The second phrase forms a parallel structure to the first through a sequential modulation at the third interval, with the principal triad of the parallel major key responding to the main triad of the preceding tonic key. The upper voice employs chordal texture, while the lower voice utilizes a leaping broken-chord texture [7]. Section B employs new thematic material in a symmetrical 4+4 measure structure, entirely unfolding over a dominant pedal tone of the main key. The compositional approach shows influences reminiscent of Chopin's mazurkas. The recapitulation of Section A presents only a single expanded phrase lasting six measures. Finally, the coda concludes the movement in A major. Beethoven utilizes a heterophonic texture, evoking the joy of direct engagement with folk improvisational music and traditional instruments [8]. The variations featuring thirty-second notes vividly demonstrate the flexibility characteristic of folk rhythmic and melodic ornamentation.

Third Movement: Scherzo (Allegro vivace). This movement in D major adopts ABA form. The transition between sections A and B typically employs variations or modulations. Section A is structured as a binary form with repetition. Each subsection consists of four phrases, all following an eight-measure structure, with tonality alternating between D major and A major. The subsequent three phrases are derived from three variations based on the first phrase. The second subsection comprises four phrases: the first two are built from contrasting motifs, while the latter two reintroduce earlier motivic material. Section B is structured as a binary form without repetition. Each part consists of two phrases. This movement demonstrates dynamic shifts in tonal color and register [9].

Fourth Movement: Rondo Sonata Form (Allegro, D major). The movement unfolds with a main theme (measures 1-16) that establishes the tonic key of D major through a perfect cadence. Its initial statement is characterized by flowing sixteenth-note arpeggios that create a murmuring texture. This thematic material undergoes immediate development in the subsequent section, where the first 16 measures present varied restatements of the motif before exploring tonal transformations through modulation. The central developmental portion intensifies the musical discourse through contrapuntal treatment. An initial phase develops the material using parallel tenths and contrary motion in sixths, followed by a second phase that navigates through shifting tonal centers from G major to D major. This culminates in an extended dominant preparation in d minor that builds anticipation for the return of the principal material. The last part belongs to the continuous phase in the key of d minor. The recapitulation introduces the theme in a variation way, embellishing and strengthening measures 51-67. Its connecting part changes the harmony of measures 17-28, while the secondary part is decorated on the basis of measures 28-42, resulting in a tonal return. At this point, it has returned to the key of D major and ends with a perfect termination in D major. The coda introduces the thematic material over a chromatically ascending bass line in G major, establishing a dominant pedal point that reinforces the tonal structure. Throughout the movement, the rondo theme maintains its folk-dance character (reminiscent of the Ländler), with its distinctive fifths leaps and repetitive patterns preserving a sense of rustic vitality [10].



**Figure 3.** Form structure diagram of the fourth movement

It can be seen that when Beethoven composed this piece, although it followed the four-movement structure of Haydn and Mozart, through the popularization of the theme, sustained bass and natural rhythm, he transformed the classical sonata into a "wordless pastoral poem", foreshadowing the romantic musical thinking. This piece is mainly in the key of D major and enriches the variation of harmonic color through tonal transitions, such as from d minor to F major, from B major to b minor, from D major to G major, and from E major. The rhythm of this piece is rapid and changeable. Through quick notes and strong contrasts, it simulates the dynamic changes of nature.

### 3. Analysis of Playing Techniques

The rhythm and dynamics construct a grand and vast pastoral picture in the pastoral piano piece. The first movement depicts a beautiful rural scene. When playing, the rhythm should not be too slow. The music should flow naturally and the rhythm should remain consistent from beginning to end. The continuous repetition of the dominant notes (D and A) in D major by the left hand in a fifth bass mimics the sustained bass of bagpipes in the countryside, laying the foundation for a serene and broad rural tone. When playing, this bass line must be extremely smooth and even, without fluctuating speed or uneven dynamics. Provide a solid support for the singing of the melody. When playing the connecting part (measures 40 to 62), the quarter note in the left hand should be paused, while the four parts in the right hand need to remain stable. The playing of long notes should continue without any pause. In measure 48, *fp* is adopted. The eighth note should always entangle the second note, and the rhythm needs to remain smooth and natural throughout. From measures 63 to 76, there is a guiding connection to the theme. Measures 63 to 69 focus on the staccato of the left hand, which has a somewhat humorous and witty feel. Therefore, it needs to be played very vividly and the touch of the keys should be very elastic: as shown in Figure 4. From measure 77 onward, the rhythmic pulse becomes crucially important and must remain exceptionally steady. The inner-voice accompaniment pattern, initially featuring quarter-note low D, gradually subdivides into eighth-note tremolos resembling ripples on water's surface. The melodic line must maintain its tension until measure 90, where the strained melody finally finds release. By measure 97, the gradual crescendo slowly dissipates, ultimately resolving into a *sforzando* (*sf*) full cadence on the A major tonic chord. The subsequent descending scale passages require precise rhythmic execution, with clear differentiation between triplets and quintuplets. Fingertips must maintain consistent attack speed to ensure each note sounds distinct and powerful, avoiding any blurred or muddled execution. Moreover, throughout the composition, Beethoven's dynamic markings are exceptionally detailed, serving as the primary means of expressing subtle emotional shifts and contrasts of natural light and shadow in this "Pastoral" work. As shown in Example 5, from measures 29 to 32 of the first movement, *sf* (*sforzando*) appears on weak beats, requiring careful emphasis in performance with appropriate prominence. In the passage from measure 99 to 108, the music builds through a continuous crescendo. It's effective to begin softly and gradually ascend toward the climax. Particular attention should be paid to the third beats in measures 100, 101, and 102, all marked with *sf*. The right hand must execute these with firm determination. Additional *sf* markings in measures 103 and 105 require not only dynamic emphasis but also full duration of the notes. The scale passages from measure 104 to 108 should evoke the image of rushing river currents. Perform these with crisp rhythm and fluid melody. For the two quarter notes in the left hand, play them for just one beat before immediately releasing. From measure 119, where the secondary theme enters, *sf* appears consistently on the third beat of each measure. These accents should be clearly articulated yet never sound harsh or forced. The final eight measures feature a continuous dynamic intensification, bringing the musical theme to its conclusion with growing power. Furthermore, the first movement also incorporates *diminuendo* markings, as illustrated in Example 6. In measure 166, a *decrescendo* appears where the left hand's quarter notes should be played with gradually reduced key velocity, creating a corresponding decrease in volume. Starting from measure 168, the dramatic contrast between high and low registers should be emphasized, utilizing dynamic variation to enhance the emotional vitality of the phrases. When approaching

measure 228, the intensity should diminish with softened volume, allowing the lower voice to emerge as the dominant melodic line. Throughout measures 240-247, the right-hand chords require delicate execution with subdued dynamics, producing a tranquil and gentle sonority. A gliding touch technique is recommended for these passages. The movement's lyrical melody possesses strong singing qualities, making direct pedaling appropriate - changing the pedal with each new harmony. This approach helps create dynamic melodic lines that evoke a sense of serene delight in listeners. At measure 63, particular attention should be paid to strengthening the melodic line in the right hand's fifth finger while maintaining fluid execution. The pedal should be synchronized precisely with the right hand's movements. For measure 104, the pedal should briefly enhance the first note before being immediately released.



Figure 4. 63-69



Figure 5. 29-32



Figure 6. 166

In the second movement, the rhythm becomes more relaxed and flexible, characterized by greater lyrical flow and elasticity. During performance, the opening section should maintain a steady, unwavering tempo. The middle section in D major is predominantly staccato, conveying a brighter mood that can be interpreted with slightly more animation. The recapitulation employs extensive thirty-second notes presented in variation style, creating an exceptionally sweet and touching effect. The coda introduces a subtle sense of questioning and anticipation, using solemn resonances to express profound longing for happiness and love, then gradually slowing the tempo into silence. During the initial Section A, the right-hand chords should remain legato while the left hand primarily executes sixteenth notes, embodying a singing quality. In Section B, each repeated bass

note in the left hand must be played with clear articulation and evenness. When performing the recapitulation of Section A, the right-hand octaves require thoughtful fingering arrangements to achieve maximum continuity. In measures 25-26, the persistent staccato in the right hand demands precise rhythm, flexible wrist motion, and consistent tempo to create a humorous atmosphere. Finally, the movement incorporates numerous triplets. During execution, the right hand mainly features legato double notes while the left hand's staccatos introduce a touch of cheerfulness within the overall tranquility. In the middle D major section, where both hands play staccato, particular attention should be paid to the rhythmic accuracy of dotted staccato notes and triplet staccato patterns. The wrist should remain supple while maintaining strict tempo stability, evoking the feeling of a lively dance with strong humorous undertones.

The third movement is a scherzo, characterized by its playful and lively nature. Consequently, the performance requires strong dynamic contrasts. The opening broken octaves should resonate like tolling bells. In the first four measures, the rhythm must be executed with precision. Measures 71 to 78 are particularly spirited and should be played with vivacity. From measure 79 to 94, the key shifts to the warm tonality of D major-careful attention should be paid to the harmonic changes, and the performer should produce varying tonal colors in response to these harmonic shifts. Beginning at measure 79, the phrase is in D major with slurs in the left hand that require legato execution. The right hand's F-sharp can be voiced with warmer, softer touch. Furthermore, throughout the entire middle section, there are eight F-sharp notes in total that should be articulated with contrast to create musical intrigue (as shown in Figure 7).



**Figure 7.** The third movement

The fourth movement evokes a bright, relaxed, and comfortable atmosphere. Its performance requires careful dynamic control. The movement begins with a soft left-hand pickup, followed by the right hand introducing the main melody. The first phrase should fade at its conclusion before transitioning into the second phrase. From measure 10, the highest notes in the right hand should be emphasized. Starting at measure 16, numerous broken chords are introduced, building from soft beginnings to increasing intensity, gradually leading the music to its climax.

Beginning at measure 28, both hands employ fugal techniques, creating a call-and-response effect. The touch here should be light and delicate. From measure 36, the right hand begins playing triads as the musical intensity gradually strengthens, leading to a series of octave passages. By measures 50-51, the music should echo the opening section. This movement contains numerous octaves and scale passages, particularly during joyful passages where the melody's playfulness should be enhanced through fortissimo execution, creating a mischievous and cheerful character. Finally, the conclusion requires sustained pedal technique - the final chords should use a long pedal without change, though each ending chord should receive individual pedal emphasis.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Beethoven's "Pastoral" Piano Sonata, a work from his middle period, embodies a profound and warm sense of harmony reflecting a return to nature. This study first examined the work's formal structure, proposing that while the first movement adheres to standard sonata form, it employs a sustained tonic (pedal point) as its foundational acoustic background. This technique blurs the boundary between the introduction and the main thematic section, creating a static, spatialized

soundscape that breaks from the dynamic opening model typical of Classical sonata form. Latent connections of thematic motifs across movements, combined with the use of polyphonic textures and an emphasis on variation technique, portray both the work's grand scope and its pastoral tranquility. This represents Beethoven's deepening and sublimation of Classical forms, informed by his own performance experience. Secondly, this paper elucidated the performance techniques required for the sonata through discussing flexible rhythmic treatment, layered dynamic contrasts, and pedaling strategies. These elements are essential for interpreting the natural imagery and its intrinsic connection to inner emotion within the "Pastoral" Sonata.

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