

Beethoven: Sonata no. 9 for Piano and Violin, op. 57 - Kreutzer Sonata

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This grand sonata, in three movements, was composed in May 1803, between the oratorio "Jesus in the Olive Mountain" op. 85 (first version) and the third symphony op. 55 in E-flat – "Eroica", namely, within Beethoven's "heroic period". In the first edition Beethoven wrote that it is "very concertantic" (Solomon 269). And indeed, like the shortly coming Eroica symphony and piano sonata in C op. 53 ("Waldstein"), it has immense dimensions for its kind – it is not only the longest among the piano and violin sonatas, but perhaps the longest sonata written up to its time (and for many years to come – even longer than the Hammerklavier sonata for piano op. 106). It is grand not only in its length but also in its tone-range (particularly in the violin part) and its dynamics.

It was performed, right after its completion, in May 1803 by Beethoven and the distinguished English violinist George Bridgetower, who was its intended dedicatee. Bridgetower is reported, however, to have offended a woman Beethoven knew, while drinking with the composer in a bar. They quarreled, and the raged composer withdrew the intended dedication, and dedicated it to the French violinist R. Kreutzer, who probably never played it, claiming that it was unplayable. He was very wrong and the sonata became not only very popular, but considered by many as the crowning example of its genre.

The sonata is known as being in A major, but only its last movement is in that key, and the first movement, in spite its key signature which indicate that key, is in fact in A minor. The middle movement is a theme and variations in F major. For the following discussion I assume a general knowledge of the diatonic tone system, the elementary rudiments of Harmony, and of the structure known as "sonata form".

First Movement – Adagio sostenuto – Presto

The movement begins with a slow introduction, which is full of surprises and, as quite characteristic of Beethoven's slow introductions, with hints to the coming events.

The image displays a musical score for the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata No. 9 for Piano and Violin, Op. 57. The score is in A minor (three sharps) and 3/4 time. It shows the beginning of the 'Adagio sostenuto' section. The piano part starts with a dynamic of 'f' (forte) and 'p' (piano). The violin part enters with a dynamic of 'fp' (fortissimo) and 'cresc.' (crescendo).

The first surprise is the opening festive and majestic chordal statement (4 bars) by the violin solo. This, if I am not mistaken, is unprecedented: I don't know of any previous piano and violin sonata to begin with the solo violin. The statement moreover is chordal and very unfavorable to the violin. This statement is indeed in A major, though the movement as a whole is in A minor.

Second surprise – the piano then begins as if repeating this phrase, but soon turns it into a minor mode, in which the bulk of the movement is to proceed.

Third surprise – in b. 7 the piano enters into a "deceptive cadence" (F major instead of A minor) and then, in a chordal dialogue with the violin, modulates into C major – the relative major of A minor – and then to D minor.

This highly modulative character of the introduction is also replete in minor-seconds moves (bb. 8-18), which develop into a more elaborate chromatic progression (11-13). We shall call it "the minor-seconds motive". Another conspicuous motive is the descending thirds of the beginning. We shall call it the thirds motive.

All these elements are going to be of great significance throughout the movement.

First theme, in presto, enters with the violin playing on the minor-seconds motive.

The image shows a musical score for the first theme, consisting of two staves: a violin staff on top and a piano staff on the bottom. The key signature is one flat (F major/A minor), and the time signature is 2/4. The tempo marking is 'Presto.' The violin part begins with a melodic line, and the piano part provides a chordal accompaniment. The score includes dynamic markings such as *sf*, *cresc.*, *rallent.*, and *sf*.

Both the sliding to C major and the chromatic move we encountered in the introduction are immediately operative here (bb. 36-45). Here from b.18

We then have another deceptive move: after a fanfare cadence (bb. 81-90) we move into a nice melody in E major (b. 91). This may appear to be the first significant establishment of A major as the tonic. However, it is deceptive since it immediately turns into the minor mode (E minor) in which the secondary theme group proceeds. Using the minor V as the key of the secondary theme in a minor-key movement in sonata form is quite common in Beethoven. Therefore, this also confirms A minor as the tonic. In between there is an additional theme in the secondary group, which many may hear as the secondary theme proper (bb. 116-144). This theme exploits a motive in the first theme over which we skipped in silence (bb. 45-48). It consists of a sort of a dialogue of ascending and descending thirds between the violin and the piano.

The last section in the **secondary theme group**, which many hear as the secondary theme proper, is definitely in E minor and proceeds by exploiting the minor-seconds motive over the broken chord of E minor (b. 144). So, all main themes build on the minor-seconds motive.



The development begins with this last part of the secondary group on F major – obviously hinting at the deceptive F major of the introduction – which soon modulates into F minor (b. 230), in which most of the development proceeds. A particularly beautiful combining of the minor-seconds motive (in the violin and the upbeat of the piano eights) and a development of the thirds motive (in the piano part) modulates through various scales reaching D-flat major (b. 258). Here is the thirds motive from the first subject (b.45-48)



And here is the beginning of the combining section in the development (from 221)



And if anybody still doubts the connection between this section in the development and the thirds motive (of bb. 45-48), here comes the second half of the development (bb. 270-300), modulating on various scales, in which the connection to the thirds motive is even clearer. The rest of the development (bb. 300-344) modulates with great rhetoric emphasis of the minor-seconds motive, back to A minor where the recapitulation begins.

The **coda** is marked by its excessive use of the minor-seconds motive and its expansion into a full chromatic scale (bb.537-547) – something that was already hinted at in the introduction. At the end of this chromatic rising our thirds motive re- appears with

great emphasis (bb. 547-559). The movement ends with a bravura coda to the coda, which definitely emphasizes A minor as the tonic of the whole preceding edifice.

Second movement – Andante con Variazioni

Beautiful as the variations are, this movement gets its charm mainly from the delicate beauty of the theme. It has a duple structure: phrase A in F major has 2x8 bars, and keeps the tension to the real cadence to F up to the last bar. Then comes phrase B in C major with 11 bars. This duple structure repeats with slight changes to the end of the theme.

1st variation – maintains the structure, the harmony, and the general melodic line of the theme in a completely different texture of staccato triplets. It is mostly a piano piece, where the violin adds slight rhythmic decorations.

2nd variation – is, in contrast, definitely a violin piece, with minimal and simple piano accompaniment. Its texture is again different, blurring the syncopated character of the theme.

3rd variation is in F minor. It again keeps the general structure, with the repeats marked, again as in previous variations, by double lines. Melodically it goes further from the theme than the other variations, and is marked by a thick and rich harmony.

4th variation – the last one, returns to F major, and is again in a completely different texture – much more pianistic and virtuoso.

The movement ends with a sort of a free, fantasia-like **coda**, which, in contrast to the previous variations, which followed the theme rather strictly, is a "free variation", for which the theme is nothing but melodic and harmonic inspiration.

Third Movement – Finale – Presto

This is the only movement in the sonata, which is in A major. It was originally written as the final movement of the sonata no. 6 in A major, op 30/1 (Solomon, 150). The movement is in sonata form. It is dominated by its rapid and sweeping rhythm, and role-exchanges between the piano and violin. However, one cannot miss the emphatic role of the minor second, which connects it to the first movement. This is clear already in the abrupt and energetic **First subject**, which starts in a sort of contrapuntal section in three voices. And when it gets to the more stretched out and steady **second subject** in E major (bb. 62-68), in which the affinity to the second theme and the minor-seconds motive in the first movement becomes clear. Here from b. 62:



The **Development** starts at modulating the second theme through C, D minor, E minor/major, and then, instead of coming to A it gets into a long section in F major (213-230), which begins a long section developing the first subject. The reader may recall that a surprising F major was important both in the introduction and the beginning of the development of the first movement.

A peculiar feature of the **recapitulation** is that it starts on VI (F#) minor, and then proceeds with slight changes to A.

The movement ends with a very long **coda** consisting of several parts, all of whose elements are derived from motives of the first subject: The dramatic first part (bb. 455-488) reaches a dominant-seventh. The second transitory part with two adagios (bb. 489-501) emphasizes with unusual rhetoric gestures (with "German chords") the germ motive of the primary subject. The third – a bravura ending, from b. 501 to the end.

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