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Writing Moonlight: An Analysis of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Opus 27 No. 2 in C Sharp Minor

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I am a chemical engineering major and a Gaines Fellow for the Humanities in my senior year here at the University of Kentucky. While at UK I have been blessed with Goldwater, Udall, and Beckman scholarships. The creative process that fueled my submissions to Kaleidoscope has been one of the most important and meaningful components of my undergraduate education. Outside of the humanities I also enjoy applying a different aspect of the creative process through research in environmental chemistry. I hope to combine the qualitative analysis of the humanities with the quantitative analysis of science and engineering in my future career.



Faculty Mentor:
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I am pleased to be able to commend Andrew Lynch's essay to you because it represents a student's very real attempts to comprehend the affective power of music and describe the intangible in pragmatic ways.

Andrew is not a music major, nor is he a usual consumer/listener of music. What makes this startling is that this is the *one* piece of music that has somehow captured his attention, and he naturally wants to know why this is so. This essay is incited by genuine personal curiosity so it is intensely subjective. At the same time, it is a thoughtful rumination and analysis of the music itself, so it is completely objective. Thus, Andrew marries the subjective and objective in gaining insight into the musical material that creates the emotional affect of a musical composition. This is not, strictly speaking, a research paper, but it is not a creative bit of prose either. It is a thoughtful meditation and analysis upon a musical work that has surprisingly haunted the author. He has created a genuine and largely effective essay on his relationship to the *Moonlight Sonata*.

Writing Moonlight: an Analysis of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Opus 27 No. 2 in C Sharp Minor

Abstract

An analysis of the first movement of one of Beethoven's most popular sonatas, the Moonlight Sonata, by a chemical engineering major who is a relative outsider to music. Analysis proceeds systematically: line by line and stanza by stanza. The goal of this analysis is elucidation of Beethoven's methods for producing the atmosphere of haunting desire which pervades the piece.

Introduction

I don't own a single music CD. I don't download music off Napster or Kazaa. While I occasionally listen to radio in the car, I usually just listen to news and talk. I really don't "listen" to music at all in the colloquial sense. There is one exception to this: Beethoven's Piano Sonata Opus 27 No. 2 in C Sharp Minor. It is better known as the "Moonlight" sonata, or, as he called it, the "Quasi una fantasia" or "Like a Fantasy" sonata. Ever since I first heard it a few years ago I have been captured by it, inspired by it, and haunted by it. This is the main reason I chose to analyze it. I want to understand why it has exerted such a hold over me. In this regard, its simplicity adds to its mystery.

The fact that it is a solo piano sonata of simple melodic form makes me even more interested in dissecting it. A last feature that draws me to the *Moonlight Sonata* is that I have no associative connection to it through such avenues as meaningful lyrics, movie soundtracks, or early childhood memories. It does not remind me of some sad breakup or of the first battle in *Gladiator* or of some pleasant experience I had when I was young. I am enraptured by the *Moonlight Sonata* for its sake alone. I cannot say this for any other piece of music.

The Piano

Because the *Moonlight Sonata* is a piano sonata, I will begin its analysis with a discussion of its connection to the piano. The question I seek to answer is whether the instrumental texture of the piano is central to the *Moonlight Sonata*. I wonder whether several or even many instruments could play the piece equally well. Pragmatically, the piano is clearly the ideal instrument due to its capacity for the simultaneous combination of harmony and melody. However, what if several musicians played the piece together, splitting up the parts? Would the piano still be uniquely desirable?

I believe that the *Moonlight Sonata* should only be played with a single instrument. The use of only one instrument is especially important in creating the atmosphere of solitude, deep introversion, and perhaps even loneliness of much of the work. This is particularly poignant at the beginning of the piece, which is limited to the repetition of a single simple musical phrase by only one instrument, a piano, and indeed only one piano. This conjures the lonely tone that would be inappropriate if orchestrated for a group of instruments.

Beyond requiring a solitary instrument for its best expression, I believe the *Moonlight Sonata* also requires a certain timbre. While the beauty of the *Moonlight Sonata* could indeed be transmitted through a number of different instruments, I believe the crispness of tone, powerful bass, and deeply rich, haunting timbre of the piano is uniquely suited to the *Moonlight Sonata*'s deliberate, striking chords, predominance of low-pitch notes, and darkly emotional atmosphere. Because the *Moonlight Sonata* was written for the piano, it is likely that the inherent tone quality of the instrument at least partially inspired the writing of the Sonata itself. In this sense the piano is as much a part of the *Moonlight Sonata* as its musical score.

Figure 1: First line of Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata

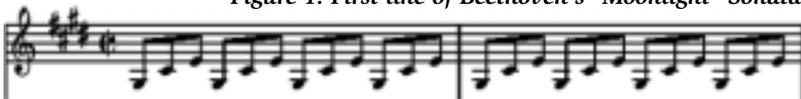


Figure 2: First line of Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata (including melody)



Figure 3: Second line of Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata



The Ostinato Triplet

I will now focus my attention on analyzing the beating heart of the *Moonlight Sonata*: the rolling triplet accompaniment and the accompanying melody. I consciously use the word "accompanying" because the harmony is so integral to the haunting atmosphere of the piece; it is the most recognizable musical feature of the work. The sonata is played in 4/4 meter and proceeds at a relaxed, almost lethargic tempo, adding to the dreaminess and fantasy it epitomizes.

The sonata is divided into three movements, the first of which is the most well-known and celebrated. Because this is the part of the sonata I associate most strongly with the piece, because it is the part I most enjoy, and because of the space constraints of this analysis, I will focus my analysis on this movement. It starts with the ostinato triplet that figures prominently throughout the sonata. This repetition is highly effective; it contributes to the feeling of emotional brooding that develops in the sonata and also functions to tie the different portions of the movement together. Figure 1 shows this opening ostinato triplet.

The entire first movement is played mostly pianissimo (quietly) and no louder than mezzo-forte (moderately loud); as Beethoven dictates, it should be played "as delicately as possible and without dampers." This technique applied to the somber, ostinato triplets sets the mood and creates a deep, dream-like atmosphere. The depth of this atmosphere is then enhanced by the melody (right hand of the piano player), shown in Figure 2.

The Melody

While playing a seemingly small role in this part of the work, the melody transforms the simple ostinato triplet into an introduction to a dream. The melody is subtle, and many listeners do not notice the long, deep notes of the melody at this point in the piece. The ostinati triplets continue, as does the melodic accompaniment. In the next two stanzas the key is transposed upward slightly, by half a step (Figure 3), but this subtle shift changes the sense of brooding and dreaminess of the first two stanzas into a feeling of hope near joy — a pervading optimism, yet ultimately a fragile and short-lived one. In the last two stanzas the pitch center returns to its original key, then falls further, as a deepening sense of doubt develops. This evolves into a delicate climb in pitch from very low to higher than it has ever been, producing a feeling of lamentation, of loneliness, desperation, and lack of hope. It is like a moment of quiet yet intense introverted sadness, a solitary yearning question posed to God and the world as to why things must be the way they are.

Figure 4: Lines three and four of Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata



Figure 5: Fifth line of Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata



Figure 6: Ninth line of Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata



Figure 7: Lines eleven and twelve of Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata



Elaboration

The next few stanzas (Figure 4) repeat this climb and elaborate on it. This changes the initial moment of desperation and anguish to a more controlled feeling of emotional confusion, sadness, and loneliness. It is as if the song gets a hold of itself after a moment of madness and returns to its normal state of longing and depression.

A few stanzas further on, a new form of the triplet ostinato is encountered, this time with an extremely low pitch (see arrow in Figure 5).

This is soon followed up by an even lower set of ostinati triplets coupled with an even more dramatic ascension in pitch (Figure 6).

New Depth and Emotion

One might expect the new depth in pitch and subsequent higher ascents to mark a point of even greater madness and even greater anguished desperation than in the first lowering in pitch, but this is not the case. Because the melody is now higher than the triplet harmony, the ostinati now create an impression of fatigue and pleasant sleepiness. It is as if the intense anguish and desperation of earlier stanzas has taken a great deal of energy out of the sonata and it is tempted to surrender to sleep and forget its worries.

However, it is not sleep that is suggested but, rather, the incredible sense of longing that I regard as its most central emotion. At this point the longing is expressed in a series of climbs up and down wild plunges and mad ascents but within the bounds of the delicacy engendered by the sonata (Figure 7).

The ascents at times feel unwieldy, as if the sonata is thinking, both mentally and emotionally, too fast and it begins to lose its footing through the wild ascents to the heights of love, triumph, and euphoria, and the descents to the depths of loneliness, destruction, and anguish. Throughout, though, the melody keeps a long, low, somber accompaniment that serves to anchor the harmony and allow the piece to reach equilibrium again (Figure 8).

Figure 8: Line fifteen of Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata



Figure 9: Line twenty-three of Beethoven's "Moonlight" Sonata



The Triplet Again

Here we return to the initial triplet ostinati that we started with and a melody of even greater power due to the initial inclusion of three-note chords. The feeling of longing begins to deepen. We begin to forget the first burst of desperate madness, the feeling of fatigue thereafter, and the swooning ascents and descents of a heart and mind feeling too fast. We settle into the rhythm we began with, the beautiful, haunting triplets ostinati that imbue a sense of solitude yet not desperate loneliness, poignancy yet not anguish. We are left beyond all else with a feeling of reach exceeding grasp, of a desperate, all-encompassing longing for love and heaven and triumph that requires a sacrifice of comfort and peace. We are left with a fragile hope that holds off encroaching doubt. And yet, through all this, the *Moonlight Sonata* expresses a sense of inexplicable meaningfulness and richness. It leaves us wanting more, our hearts full to bursting with hope and doubt, joy and pain, love and loss. What we are left with are the following two phrases (Figure 9).

Finale

This finale of the movement is highly appropriate. The earlier ascents and descents in pitch are imitated in much more restrained fashion and with a delicacy that suggest the brief time when one wavers between consciousness and sleep. The increasing feeling of balance and peace is reflected in the last two sets of chords, which for the first time are of both high and low pitch together. This final set of melodic chords brings the feeling of sleepiness to fruition through their extremely soft and delicate pianissimo expression and the first movement of the *Moonlight Sonata* surrenders to the moonlight and fantasy of dreams that it so embodies.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Professor Ron Pen for his generous willingness to help a music illiterate analyze a sonata of such nuance. Without his help this paper would not have been possible.