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**A PERSONAL INTERPRETATION OF LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN'S  
LAST PIANO SONATA, OP. 111, FROM A SPIRITUAL VIEWPOINT**

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by

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**Treatise**

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To my God,  
To my parents,  
To my husband,  
To my brother and sister-in-law,  
To my teachers, and  
To my church family

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PIANO SONATA, OP. 111, FROM A SPIRITUAL VIEWPOINT

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Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) composed thirty-two piano sonatas during his lifetime, and each of the sonatas has its own characteristics. Among them, the last sonata, Op. 111, has been discussed from many different viewpoints, yet no theory completely fulfills our curiosity even today. The purpose of this treatise is to approach this work in terms of its spiritual aspects to a performer. This treatise will discuss mainly Beethoven's last piano sonata, Op. 111, interpreting it from a spiritual perspective based on Beethoven's final years of life.

In this treatise, the first part discusses Beethoven's final years as well as several special features of Op. 111. The second part delineates how I apply a spiritual interpretation to Op. 111 based on Beethoven's life and his musical world. No one doubts that Beethoven's music contains certain spiritual aspects, especially in his final period of composition. Without understanding the spiritual element, no one can understand and interpret his music properly. Martin Cooper said in the preface to his book, *Beethoven: The Last Decade*, "...it was during those ten years that Beethoven finally came to realize the potentialities of both his art and his nature...." I also believe that Beethoven's music from his last period contains several special and unique features that can be distinguished from his earlier works.

In Op. 111, I strove to find Beethoven's spiritual meaning and apply it to the context of a performer. My main sources have been J. W. N. Sullivan's *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development*, and Wilfrid Mellers' *Beethoven and the Voice of God*. As these sources also do, I include many spiritual statements with religious substance. Since I strongly believe that Beethoven was a religious person, his spiritual world cannot be separated from the religious matter, even though it still carries controversy.



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## Introduction

There are many different points of view regarding Ludwig van Beethoven's late period works. Among them the most controversial subject is the relationship between his musical world and his spiritual world. This relationship is difficult to define or analyze. Many scholars and critics have written their personal theories. However, it appears that there is not a single theory that completely satisfies our curiosity and desire to understand Beethoven's late works. In order to acquire a better comprehension of what Beethoven really wanted to express through his music, we must understand his circumstances and the elements that affected his compositions.

In general, Beethoven is known as a forerunner of the new Romantic period. From this viewpoint we may think Beethoven's late works foreshadowed many Romantic aspects even though he stayed within the Classical style. There are obvious individual and unique features not only in style and form, but also in interpretation. However, this is not simply due to chronology; as Carl Dahlhaus stated, "Late works' do not belong, in terms of either cultural or musical history, to the eras in which chronology has placed them, yet they do not find spiritual homes in other eras."<sup>1</sup> According to Dahlhaus, the 'late works' communicate 'timelessness,' which, characterized while still new, is inwardly alien to the age to which it outwardly

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<sup>1</sup> Carl Dahlhaus, *Ludwig van Beethoven: Approaches to his Music*, translated by Mary Whittall (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 219.

belongs. In other words, it is a strange and elusive relationship to past and future alike.<sup>2</sup>

In this concept, Beethoven's last piano sonata is one of the most wonderful examples to understand about his 'timeless' late works. Beethoven's last piano sonata has marked an important turning point in music history. For the performer, performing and interpreting Beethoven's piano sonatas of his last period are some of the most difficult tasks. In particular, the C Minor Sonata, Op. 111, presents unprecedented challenges in both performance and interpretation. While there are many ways of interpreting this piece, I will focus on metaphysical and transcendental implications in order to get a glimpse of Beethoven's mind and spiritual world.

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 219-220.

# **Part I**

## **Perspective: The Final Stage**



## **Beethoven's final period**

David Tame asserted that Beethoven's music and his life can only be understood and appreciated correctly from the spiritual perspective, even though conventional Beethoven biographies and scholarly musicological commentaries have never sufficiently emphasized the essential spiritual nature of Beethoven's life.<sup>3</sup> To this day, Beethoven's music has been regarded as one of the most valuable and important achievements in music history, and it is viewed from many angles. However, as David Tame mentioned, one perspective we cannot overlook is that Beethoven's music always carries spiritual aspects. As we know, Beethoven's life was full of struggles and pains. By following Beethoven's life story, we might be able to learn more about how find out that Beethoven's spiritual development overcame his difficulties in life.

Beethoven's early life distractions may have started from his father, Johann van Beethoven, who had an ambition to turn his son into a musical genius similar to Mozart. Consequently, young Beethoven had to endure brutal training from his drunkard father. Even though Beethoven had an outstanding musical talent comparable to that of Mozart, he was not educated very successfully during his childhood. Beethoven is often described as an untamed, rough, even a temperamental student in biographies. In my opinion, Beethoven's inability to socialize seems to be

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<sup>3</sup> David Tame, *Beethoven and the Spiritual Path* (Wheaton, IL: Theosophical Publishing House, 1994), 1.

rooted in his poor relationship with his family members. Beethoven loved his mother very much; however, his mother lived a very unhappy life. From this unhappy family background and childhood, Beethoven probably learned early about the dark side of life.

To this day, there have been many discussions about Beethoven's life and music. We already know that Beethoven's complete deafness came in the final decade of his life. As a human being, Beethoven had a life full of pain and torment. As already mentioned, he did not have a happy childhood. His education was unsatisfactory, and he was not well taken care of, even though his father had great ambition for his son. After his beloved mother had died, Beethoven had to assume all of the family duties. Unfortunately, and despite his talent, Beethoven struggled financially his entire life. Beethoven also struggled with his sister-in-law over his nephew, Karl, for whom he was the guardian and financial executor in his final phase. It is also known that Beethoven had several other medical problems besides deafness.<sup>4</sup> However, above all, I personally think nothing could be worse for a musician than a hearing deficiency.

We cannot know exactly how Beethoven tried to counteract his deafness mentally or spiritually, but according to Maynard Solomon, he regarded it as a

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<sup>4</sup> Leon Plantinga, *Romantic Music* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1984), 50-51. See also Anton Neumayr, *Music and Medicine*, translated by Bruce Cooper Clarke (Bloomington: Medi-Ed Press, 1994).

wounding, a punishment from God, an evil, and a retaliation.<sup>5</sup> Once Beethoven made special note of a passage dealing with physical deformity and its transcendence:

How unjustly do those act, who . . . despise, or treat with asperity, those of their fellow-creatures who have bodily defects . . . The perfections of the soul alone give man true merit, and render him worthy of admiration . . . Have we not seen persons, who were neither distinguished by birth nor fortune, render the most important services both to church and state? Often crippled or deformed persons have shown more magnanimity of soul, than those who were favoured with the most beautiful and majestic form.<sup>6</sup>

As a result of several of his statements, it is evident that Beethoven sometimes despaired of his physical imperfections along with his deafness, and he sometimes tried to assert superiority of soul from a narcissistic viewpoint. But, nevertheless, it seems that his physical condition and health did not block his creativity, which culminated in works such as the C Minor Sonata, Op. 111.

Beethoven's musical depth continued to grow with his maturity. Beethoven did not try to escape from his life problems and sufferings; instead, he realized the suffering and sublimated it to his mature musical language, which was his great achievement.<sup>7</sup> With this in mind, I believe two different elements co-exist within his late works. One could be explained as a reflection of his sufferings from the external world, and the other could be explained as his transcendence or sublimation through the internal world. This could be the most important reason why Beethoven is

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<sup>5</sup> Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven Essays* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988), 96.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 97. It is in Beethoven's copy of Sturm's *Reflections on the Works of God in Nature*.

<sup>7</sup> J. W. N. Sullivan, *Beethoven: His Spiritual Development* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1972), 67.

regarded as a spiritually special composer in music history. J. W. N. Sullivan stated, “Beethoven’s late music communicates experiences that very few people can normally possess. But we value these experiences because we feel they are not freakish.”<sup>8</sup> This statement may not reflect only Sullivan’s perspective. Many critics are still arguing about Beethoven’s last period of music. The unique features of Beethoven’s late-period music cannot be understood simply from one viewpoint.

Each person has his or her own different life experience, which is unique and individual. In my opinion, that is the interesting aspect of life God gave to humans. However, at the same time, we each have the capacity to share and feel each other’s experiences even though they do not directly belong to us. Sullivan’s assertion can be appreciated from this viewpoint. We may not be able to understand or even imagine how Beethoven could compose such great works without being able to hear the actual sounds. However, Beethoven was able to hear deeper and more sensitive sounds from within, an ability which ordinary people hardly possess, and this is known as the musician’s “inner ear.” Thus, even though his late works are complex in context and difficult to interpret and understand, we feel the beauty of the music, which transcends time and expresses the highest kinds of humanity. As Maynard Solomon described it, “Beethoven’s deafness may have been such a form of magical asceticism,

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 250.

a rite of passage, a prelude to an ecstatic and ‘holy’ state from which emerged the masterpiece of his maturity.”<sup>9</sup>

In general, Beethoven seems to abandon the traditional forms and style in his late compositions. But if we examine his works carefully and with sensitivity, we may notice that he used the existing techniques and transformed them into new contours. For example, he used variation and fugal techniques from the Baroque period in many movements lying at different angles to create music of great length. Additionally, his extended usage of trills and sudden accents or *sforzandos* in places where they are not normally expected are typical characteristics of his late compositions. Beethoven’s language of music in this period became more and more meditative, and as he goes through his final years, more concentrated and sublime.

Consequently, Beethoven’s works are difficult not only to understand and interpret; they also possess enormous technical difficulties for performance. Some modern critics say that these features were brought on by Beethoven’s deafness, which made him lose all his sense of sound, but whether this is true or not, the most important thing is that this gave Beethoven a sense of freedom that allowed him to create new dimensions of music. K. M. Knittel describes, “For Fétis, several musical traits mark the third period-such as excessive repetition, unclear melodic ideas, and

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<sup>9</sup> Solomon, *Beethoven Essays*, 95.

harshness of the harmonies-but his explanation for these is biographical: Beethoven had lost his ‘memory of sound.’”<sup>10</sup> Maynard Solomon states,

Beethoven’s deafness . . . served to protect his creativity from the assaults and seductions of the external world and from the memories of a submissive past at a moment when he was about to embark upon what he termed his “new path,” a path that would lead him to transform the parameters and procedures of the Viennese Classical tradition and to establish new boundaries and norms for the future development of music.<sup>11</sup>

If Beethoven had given up composing when deafness first came over him, he would never have achieved his greatness as a composer. However, he never gave up. Even though his life was becoming increasingly more difficult, his musical world continued to develop, and finally he opened a new door in music history that included a personal triumph over adversity.

### **Aesthetics of the last Piano Sonata**

The piano sonata Op. 111 was dedicated to Beethoven’s pupil, Archduke Rudolph, to whom Beethoven often appealed in his letters. Most of the work was done in 1821, and it was published by Schlesinger in 1823. Op. 111 was composed at the same time as another piano sonata, Op. 110, and the *Missa Solemnis*. Alexander Wheelock Thayer indicates, “. . . ideas utilized in the C minor Sonata, Op. 111 are

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<sup>10</sup> K. M. Knittel, “Imitation, Individuality, and Illness: Behind Beethoven’s ‘Three Styles’,” *Beethoven Forum* 4 (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), 31.

<sup>11</sup> Solomon, *Beethoven Essays*, 95.

found among those for Op. 110 and particularly among some for the *Agnus Dei*.”<sup>12</sup> Martin Cooper also mentioned, “....the sketches for this sonata are among those for Op. 110 and both jostle sketches for the *Agnus Dei* of the Missa Solemnis.”<sup>13</sup> This sonata consists of two highly contrasted movements. Beethoven had already composed other two-movement sonatas such as Op. 54, Op. 78 and Op. 90, but they are much shorter and carry a lighter weight compared to Op. 111. This sonata could suggest many meanings in Beethoven’s final years of life, since it is the last of his thirty-two piano sonatas.

Because this sonata has only two movements, some people have questioned why Beethoven did not compose a third movement. Beethoven is said to have answered there wasn’t time to do it, so he wrote the slow movement a little bit longer to compensate.<sup>14</sup> My belief is that a third movement was not necessary for this sonata, because this sonata is already filled with abundant musical and spiritual ideas expressed in two movements. Indeed, it is not easy for us to imagine another movement after the theme and variations, as is the case in the last movement of Op. 109.

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<sup>12</sup> Alexander Wheelock Thayer, *Thayer’s Life of Beethoven*, revised and edited by Elliot Forbes (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1967), 781.

<sup>13</sup> Martin Cooper, *Beethoven: The Last Decade 1817-1827* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), 196.

<sup>14</sup> Anton Felix Schindler, *Beethoven as I Knew Him*, edited by Donald W. MacArdle and translated by Constance S. Jolly (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 232.

This last piano sonata of Beethoven is unique in many aspects. As a sonata composer, Beethoven has been regarded as an evolutionary one due to his objective use of form. The piano sonatas from Beethoven's last period reflect his great capacity for emotional and spiritual expression. Many critics believed with conviction that Beethoven's works became strange as his deafness progressed. The early critics said that even though his last works seem very strange, they are very spiritual and passive. Other critics, such as Alexander Oulibicheff, had negative responses to this music. These listeners believed that Beethoven lost all sense of harmonic principles and the purpose of music, which is to bring pleasure to our ears, due to his total deafness.<sup>15</sup> Even though it is true that this music is not something that listeners and performers can easily understand, there is no doubt that Beethoven reached a culmination of his spiritual power and profound inner world from the suffering of severe deafness. The deafness probably brought him not only struggles but also the ability to find a way to express his unique esoteric spiritual world. Regardless of what the critics say about this piece, there is no doubt that this special work possesses tremendous beauties or even magnificence which surpass normal human experience.

To Beethoven, his deafness must have been an important element which affected his compositions, especially in his later years. Deafness first became noticeable to Beethoven in his late twenties. At that time, Beethoven was already a

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<sup>15</sup> K. M. Knittel, "Divining the Enigmas of the Sphinx: Alexander Oulibicheff as a Critic of Beethoven's Late Style," *Beethoven Journal*, Vol. 8, No. 2 (Summer, 1993), 14-15.



major musician, and the increasing deafness could not diminish his musical talent throughout the following years. However, when Beethoven started to lose his hearing, he also started to be separated naturally from the social worlds to which he belonged. In the book *The Beethoven Reader*, Philip Barford said, “With the affliction came self-imposed social withdrawal, introspection, increasing bouts of depression, and to some extent diminishing control over his own aggressive instincts, which led on many occasions to offensive behaviour against his best friends.”<sup>16</sup> This handicap caused Beethoven to turn his attention to his inner world, and finally, this culminated in the great depth found in his late compositions.

Philip Barford also asserted that Beethoven had essentially a solitary nature, a matter of inward spiritual independence rather than a social withdrawal from an ordinary life.<sup>17</sup> Many Beethoven biographies described Beethoven’s personality as untamed, over- reactive, crude, rebellious or rough. But, according to his Heiligenstadt Testament, we can assume that Beethoven was tortured by being separated from the societies he enjoyed. Beethoven lamented about his misfortunes and infirmity, therefore indicating that he was in great pain physically, mentally, and spiritually.<sup>18</sup> In this 1802 letter that he never mailed, he wrote:

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<sup>16</sup> Philip Barford, “Beethoven as Man and Artist,” *The Beethoven Reader*, edited by Denis Arnold and Nigel Fortune (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1971), 23-24.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>18</sup> Philip G. Downs, *Classical Music* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1992), 564.

Ever since my childhood my heart and soul have been imbued with the tender feeling of good will; and I have always been ready to perform even great actions . . . [but] for the last six years I have been afflicted with an incurable complaint . . . my hopes of being cured have gradually been shattered and finally I have been forced to accept the prospect of a permanent infirmity. Though endowed with a passionate and lively temperament and even fond of the distractions offered by society I was soon obliged to seclude myself and live in solitude.... though indeed when carried away now and then by my instinctive desire for human society, I have let myself be tempted to seek it. But how humiliated I have felt if somebody standing beside me heard the sound of a flute in the distance and *I heard nothing* . . . Such experience almost made me despair, and I was on the point of putting on end to my life . . . the only thing that I held me back was *my art*. For indeed it seemed to me impossible to leave this world before I had produced all the works that I feel the urge to compose . . .<sup>19</sup>

However, as this letter says, despite those unfortunate conditions, the composer's inner power leads him to look within himself rather than to despair. As the deafness increased, Beethoven's spiritual inner world grew more introspective. Maynard Solomon said that Beethoven's musical powers were scarcely impaired by his deafness.<sup>20</sup> Personally, I do not think that Beethoven is a great composer because he was able to compose great works in spite of his deafness. As I mentioned earlier, Beethoven was already a great musician before he was afflicted. The reason we can declare that Beethoven is our true hero is because he did not give up; he found how to give his own inner strength to his music in isolation from the external world. When Beethoven came into this silent world, he was already equipped to hear another sound which never exists in the outer world.

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<sup>19</sup> John Crabbe, *Beethoven's Empire of the Mind* (Newbury, Berkshire: Lovell Baines, 1982), 32.

<sup>20</sup> Solomon, *Beethoven Essays*, 96.

Beethoven's music of this final period needs our extreme intellectual attention, since it is very intimate and private. There is no absolute evidence that Beethoven kept his religious faith throughout his entire life. Through Beethoven's biographies, many scholars inferred that Beethoven did not remain an orthodox Christian. Beethoven had lived in the Enlightenment period, which is based on the discovery of truth through the observation of nature and dependency on humanity. At that time, many people accepted the existence of God, but they rejected orthodox Christian theology. Solomon explains about Beethoven's religion, "Beethoven came to manhood during the enlightened decade of Emperor Joseph II, and for him and many of his compatriots religion occupied a position subordinate to Enlightenment, especially Kantian, conceptions of morality."<sup>21</sup> Solomon also said, "The Kantians among them believed that, although man, possessing free will, required neither the idea of God nor any incentive other than law to comprehend his duty, this very freedom served to confirm his subjective belief in the existence of God."<sup>22</sup>

Although Beethoven's religion is still a controversial issue, one thing we cannot overlook is that throughout Beethoven's letters and his compositions, he never gave up thinking about some supernatural powers and God. In the Heiligenstadt Testament, Beethoven appealed directly to God about his pain and struggle: "... Almighty God, who looks down into my innermost soul, you see into my heart and

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 217.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

you know that it is filled with love for humanity and a desire to do good.’’<sup>23</sup> In Beethoven’s song Op. 48 and in WoO 129, some religious prayer and pastoral invocations are included, and the *Missa Solemnis* is certainly one of Beethoven’s religious compositions. It seems that many scholars think that connecting those religious sources to Beethoven’s faith is rather dangerous. Maybe this is true. There is always a possibility that Beethoven just used those religious sources for setting his music. However, even though Beethoven was neither a regular churchgoer nor an orthodox Christian, many of his own letters serve as evidence that he remained a Roman Catholic. We can assume that he continued to believe in God as an absolute power. Especially when Beethoven could no longer hear any sound from the outer world, he must have had to explore transcendent the other world. In this perspective, Solomon mentioned that Beethoven was probably influenced by Eastern religions which teach the need for systematic withdrawal of all attachment to the outer world as a precondition of wisdom and achievement.<sup>24</sup>

Yet throughout his late works, as Wilfrid Mellers mentioned, Beethoven viewed his art as attributable to no man, but to God.<sup>25</sup> Who can possibly know the other world Beethoven experienced while he was not able to hear the everyday world? We may obtain a glimpse of a part of it through Beethoven’s works and the

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<sup>23</sup> Downs, *Classical Music*, 564.

<sup>24</sup> Solomon, *Beethoven Essays*, 224.

<sup>25</sup> Wilfrid Mellers, *Beethoven and the Voice of God* (London: Faber and Faber, 1983), 8.

history of his life, but it is impossible for us to affirm all about him. Nevertheless, one thing we are sure is that Beethoven was a very spiritual person, and this spiritual element became one of fundamental importance in his last piano sonata.

### **Special features in Op. 111**

Before the performance, the performer must search to understand and interpret this piano sonata and its highly personal content; as Philip T. Barford asserts,

... this sonata, wrought in the fires of profound experience, can command a lifetime of devotion, can be entered into so thoroughly that every note becomes engraved on the deepest tissue of the mind, can call forth the utmost in imaginative insight . . . and yet lie forever beyond the realm of the familiar and the known.<sup>26</sup>

According to Lawrence Kramer, the two-movement sonatas of Beethoven, Op. 54, Op. 78, Op. 90 and Op. 111, form a coherent group. Their two-fold design can be understood as a means of working through some of the central preoccupations of Romantic aesthetic theory and practice.<sup>27</sup> Kramer states in his essay, “Beethoven’s commitment to the Romantic subject/object polarity forms a basic subtext to the conflict in his music between the impulse to revise, violate, or transfigure the high

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<sup>26</sup> Philip Barford, “Beethoven’s Last Sonata,” *Music and Letters*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (October, 1954), 320.

<sup>27</sup> Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800-1900* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1990), 21.

Classical style and the impulse to preserve it.”<sup>28</sup> As mentioned earlier, Beethoven is regarded as a forerunner of Romantic music in a Classical context. This last piano sonata presents the Romantic subject and object polarity formed in a high Classical style. If the first movement manifests the suffering and striving of life in expressive C minor as a turbulent drama (ex. 1), the *Arietta* seems to represent transcendence and the heaven of an eternal world in peaceful C major (ex. 2).<sup>29</sup>



Ex. 1. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 1-5

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 27.

<sup>29</sup> Stewart Gordon, *A History of Keyboard Literature* (New York: Simon & Schuster Macmillan, 1996), 193.

Arietta  
Adagio molto semplice e cantabile

Ex. 2. Op. 111, opening of the 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt.

Beethoven had exhibited this particular contrast of two emotional statements since his earlier works, especially in his two-movement sonatas, such as Op. 54 in F major, Op. 78 in F# major, and Op. 90 in E minor. The first movement of Op. 54 features a humorous character in *Minuetto* tempo with a four-bar phrase, while perpetual motion constitutes the final movement in *Allegretto* (ex. 3a, 3b).

In tempo d'un Menuetto.

22.

Ex. 3a. Op. 54, opening of the 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt.

Allegretto.

Ex. 3b. Op. 54, opening of the 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt.



Op. 78 has another contrast of two emotional statements. The first movement is in a lyric mood and is melodious, while the second movement shows wit and a vivid feeling (ex. 4a, 4b).



Ex. 4a. Op. 78, opening of the 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt.



Ex. 4b. Op. 78, opening of the 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt.

Op. 90, which has a key shift from E minor of the first movement to E major of the second movement, stands on the bridge to Beethoven's last-period music. If the first movement is heroic and in static motion in the minor key, the second movement is in continuous soft lyricism in the bright major key (ex. 5a, 5b).

Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck.\*

27.

The musical score for the opening of the first movement of Op. 90 is presented in three systems. The first system (measures 1-8) begins with a forte (f) dynamic and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The second system (measures 9-18) includes a piano (p) dynamic and a key signature change to E major (two sharps). The third system (measures 19-25) features a piano-piano (pp) dynamic and a key signature change to E major (two sharps). The score includes various dynamics (f, p, pp, ff) and articulations (dim., ritard., in tempo, a tempo). Fingerings and breathings are indicated throughout the piece.

Ex. 5a. Op. 90, opening of the 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt.



Ex. 5b. Op. 90, opening of the 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt.

But the last piano sonata, Op. 111, seems as powerful and spiritual as Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. We might have to agree that like the Fifth Symphony, Op. 111 is not just music, but also a personal drama unfolding before us.

In the first movement, diminished seventh chords in C minor appear throughout the movement (ex. 6a, 6b, 6c, 6d, see the brackets and arrows); they are also common in other C minor sonatas like the *Sonate Pathétique*.



Ex. 6a. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm.1-2.



Ex. 6b. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 55-56.



Ex. 6c. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 85-90.



Ex. 6d. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 132-133.

Charles Rosen said about this in his book *The Classical Style*,

Most of Beethoven's works in C minor from the *Sonate Pathétique* on rely heavily upon diminished sevenths at climactic movements. Yet none before the sonata op. 111 fixes an order for these chords so firmly throughout a movement, derives the principal melodic material so directly from their sonority, and makes such a consistent attempt to integrate the whole movement by their means. It is this concentration upon the simplest and most fundamental relationships of tonality that characterizes Beethoven's late style most profoundly. His art, with all its dramatic force and its conception in terms of dramatic action, became more and more an essentially meditative one.<sup>30</sup>

Michael C. Tusa wrote about Beethoven's "C-minor mood." In his article, Tusa explains, "Beethoven had strong ideas about the expressive characteristics of keys."<sup>31</sup> And he also asserts, "Many commentators have sensed that these C-minor works share a common bond of expression."<sup>32</sup> Actually, a C-minor key for such expression was not chosen exclusively by Beethoven. Mozart also used this key for his most expressive works, especially in his late years, such as the C-minor Concerto, K. 491, C-minor Fantasy, K. 475, and C-minor Sonata, K. 457, while Beethoven was also exploring this key in his early compositions.

Along with these features, there are other elements that make the first movement of Op. 111 dramatic. The first movement is a sonata-allegro form with a slow introduction, short development section, and a coda. From the introductory beginning to the ending, this movement is packed with unexpected dynamics and

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<sup>30</sup> Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven* (New York and London: W. W. Norton & Company, 1972), 444.

<sup>31</sup> Michael C. Tusa, "Beethoven's C-Minor Mood: Some Thoughts on the Structural Implications of Key Choice," *Beethoven Forum* 2 (1993), 3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

moods. When the movement starts, no one can know the true key until the *Allegro con brio* exposition comes after the introductory opening (ex. 7a, 7b).



Ex. 7a. Op. 111, opening of the 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt.



Ex. 7b. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 14-19.



In addition to this last piano sonata, Beethoven wrote three other sonatas, Op. 13, Op. 78, and Op. 81a, which open with a slow introduction. But the key areas of those introductions are clear compared to Op. 111, which does not have a clear key until the *Allegro*. Among them, Op. 13, the *Sonate Pathétique*, has a similar character to Op. 111. Both of the sonatas are in a dark C-minor mood in their first movements. But where Op. 13 starts with *Grave*, on the tonic chord, Op. 111 opens with the mood *Maestoso* on a more mysterious diminished seventh (ex. 8a, 8b).



Ex. 8a. Op. 13, opening of the 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt.



Ex. 8b. Op. 111, opening of the 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt.



The introductions of both sonatas progress in majestic dotted rhythms, but in Op. 111, they are more intensive French-style double-dotted rhythms. Martin Cooper said, “The opening five bars of Op. 111 are a cry of agony rather than a shout of defiance, and they are followed by a wonderful five bars in which Beethoven seems to be looking with tender amazement at his own human wretchedness, turning it in his hands as though to discover its meaning.” (ex. 9, see the bracket)<sup>33</sup>



Ex. 9. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 6-10.

This movement employs pervasive sudden texture changes in the maximized range of the keyboard. The complex use of texture, one of Beethoven’s favorite techniques in

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<sup>33</sup> Martin Cooper, *Beethoven: The Last Decade 1817-1827*, 197.

his late years, also increases the drama in this movement. Sometimes it seems quite furious, wild, and stormy, but at other times it is very peaceful, sad or lonely (ex. 10).



Ex. 10. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 24-32.

Beethoven combined these experiences and emotional states of life in his music with his own powerful language.

The second movement, *Arietta*, is a very contrasting movement from the previous one, even though the ending of the first movement already serves as a bridge to the next movement in C major (ex. 11a, 11b).

The image shows a musical score for the ending of the first movement of Op. 111, measures 150 through 156. The score is written for piano in C major. Measures 150-152 show a piano introduction with a bass line of eighth notes and a treble line of chords. Measure 153 features a treble line with a triplet of eighth notes. Measures 154-156 show a final section with a treble line of chords and a bass line of eighth notes, ending with a double bar line and a repeat sign.

Ex. 11a. Op. 111, the ending of the 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt.



Ex. 11b. Op. 111, the opening of the 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt.

When Beethoven was working on this sonata around 1821, he was suffering from jaundice and rheumatism along with deafness.<sup>34</sup> If the first movement reflects tumultuous suffering, the second is transformed transcendently into an unspeakably beautiful C major. This movement remained unperformed by many pianists because of the musical demands rather than the technical demands.<sup>35</sup> Many artists agree that every note in this piece has so much meaning to express.

The *Arietta* consists of a theme with four variations, a return of the theme, and a coda. In this movement, Beethoven chose variation technique, which is one of the significant features in his late music, and transformed it into the new scheme to express his profound emotion.<sup>36</sup> Ernest Marmorek wrote, “In the course of the

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<sup>34</sup> Ernest Marmorek, “On Listening to Beethoven’s Last Piano Sonata,” *Beethoven Journal* 3/1 (Spring, 1988), 15.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

variations that follow the theme, the mood gradually lifts in a heroic effort out of the atmosphere of loneliness, in spite of the constant through seemingly remote references to the theme.”<sup>37</sup> As the music proceeds, the variations lead us to follow the composer’s inner world in various ways. When the music reaches constant pulse-like syncopations in a wide range, we feel the great intensity of emotion (ex. 12).

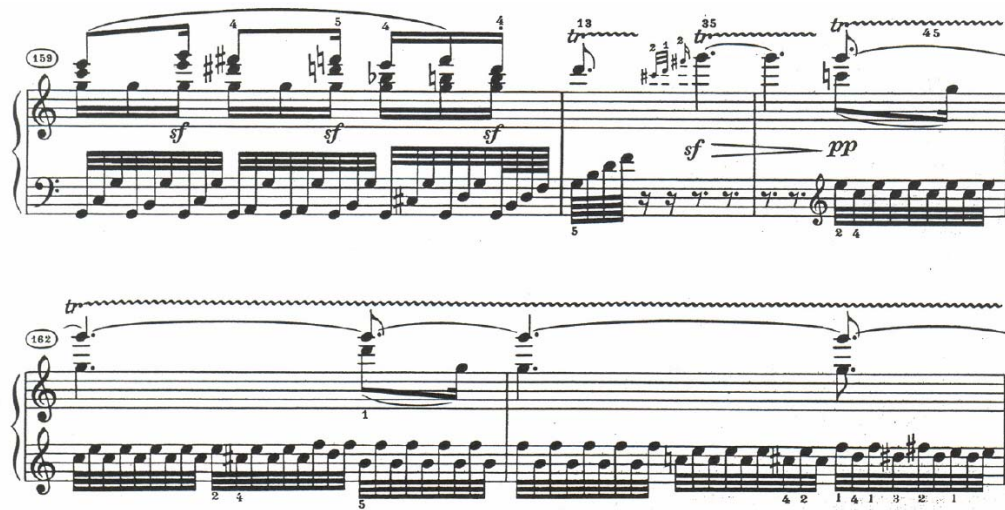


Ex. 12. Op. 111, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt., mm. 53-55.

<sup>36</sup>William Kinderman, “Beethoven’s Diabelli Variations, Opus 120, and His Late Compositional Style,” *The Beethoven Newsletter* Vol. 2 No. 3 (Winter, 1987), 53.

<sup>37</sup> Marmorek, “On Listening to Beethoven’s Last Piano Sonata,” 15.

Conversely, when the music has long trills in high register, we feel something transcendent and sublime (ex. 13).



Ex. 13. Op. 111, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt., mm. 159-163.

It seems that Beethoven was not always satisfied with the piano, because he thought the instrument had limitations for expressing his music.<sup>38</sup> The pianist Carol Rosenberger wrote in her program notes, “Beethoven continuously pushed the piano

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<sup>38</sup> Donald Francis Tovey, *A Companion to Beethoven's Pianoforte Sonatas* (London: The Associated Board of The R. A. M. and The R. C. M., 1931), 297.

makers towards new developments in the piano's dynamic range, strength of tone and resonance, and brought his innovative genius and catalytic energy to exploit each of these new developments to the fullest."<sup>39</sup> Beethoven knew that he was writing something more than just music, and thus it could be true that the piano was a somewhat limited instrument for Beethoven's vast music drama. According to Kenneth Drake, the Beethoven-period piano had a lack of sonority in the *forte* and *fortissimo* levels, so Beethoven frequently exploited the instrument's weakness by grasping its limitation.<sup>40</sup> The wide range, heroic rhetorical elements, extended dynamic levels, excessive technical demands and spiritual, transcendental contents in Op. 111 are a culmination of his great achievements in writing piano sonatas.

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<sup>39</sup> Carol Rosenberger, notes to her CD recording of Beethoven Piano Sonatas Op. 57 and Op. 111, Delos CD 3009, 1981.

<sup>40</sup> Kenneth Drake, *The Sonatas of Beethoven* (Cincinnati: Music Teachers National Association, 1972), 8.

# Part II

The Final Gem of the 32 Piano

Sonatas



## **A Personal Interpretation of Op. 111 from a Spiritual Viewpoint**

### *Maestoso*

If Beethoven tried in his music to manifest his torment between life and death, the *Maestoso* introduction part in the first movement would be the place in which we most see and feel this torment. From the intensive double-dotted rhythms, like a French Overture, only more wrenching, with the darkness of constant diminished chords and the extreme dynamic contrast between *sforzando* and *pianissimo* in a short period of time in slow tempo, we can imagine that we are hearing the beginning a tragic drama (ex. 14).

Ex. 14. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 1-13.

Paul Bekker cited Beethoven's words to Carl Hirsch, a grandson of Albrechtsberger, about the diminished chords. Beethoven said to Carl: "My dear boy, the startling effects, which many ascribe solely to the natural genius of the composer, are quite frequently easily achieved by the right use and resolution of the chord of the

‘diminished seventh.’”<sup>41</sup> Related to this passage, Bekker also said, “Chords and intervals of the ‘diminished seventh’ were for him, as for his contemporaries, the most powerful means of expressing pain and sorrow.”<sup>42</sup> From the opening, we may experience something of his great pain and agony through the heavy diminished chord with intensive double-dotted rhythm. It is very majestic, powerful, and also sufficiently violent to express Beethoven’s struggle in the last stage of his life (ex. 15, see the brackets).



Ex. 15. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., m. 1, m. 3, m. 5.

<sup>41</sup> Paul Bekker, *Beethoven*, translated and adapted from the German by M. M. Bozman (London and New York: AMS Press Inc., 1971), 139.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

Sullivan asserts that the primary function of music is to communicate valuable spiritual states, and that these states testify to the depth of the artist's nature and to the quality of his experience of life.<sup>43</sup> If we accept this idea, we can sense Beethoven's overwhelming agony and pain are perceptible through the whole gesture of the introduction. Especially when we are startled by the *sforzandos* in unexpected places followed by an immediate dynamic change to *piano*, we may feel the composer's personal struggles (ex. 16, see the bracket parts).



Ex. 16. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., m. 11, m. 13

A popular music dictionary defines the word *sforzando* as, “Forcing, forced; accented at least with respect to the prevailing dynamic, but often simply loud.”<sup>44</sup> In my opinion, the meaning of the word as “forcing, forced” can be closer than the latter

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<sup>43</sup> Sullivan, *Beethoven – His Spiritual Development*, 55.

explanation of the dictionary for approaching what Beethoven tried to express. From the strange use of *sforzandos*, we might see the stormy, violent, furious emotional statement, but also a deep wound from the painful life and frustrations of the composer.

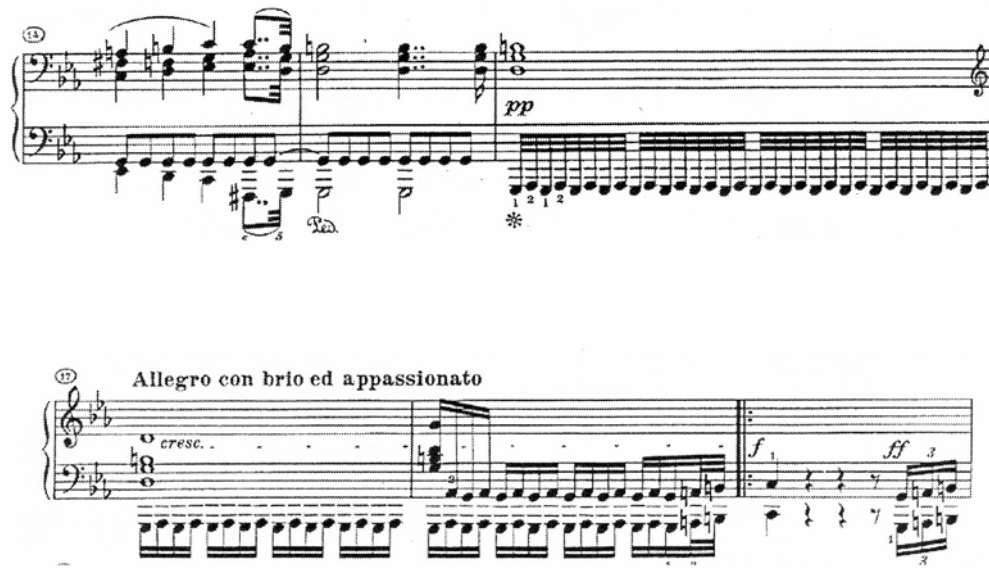
The whole of the introduction seems to me as if one is trying to strive towards the last breath before death. But the dominant preparation of the C minor key, which is the true key of the *Allegro*, suspends the previous gestures and creates tension in a tranquil passage (ex. 17). As Dyneley Hussey wrote about this introduction in his program note for Vladimir Ashkenazy's recording, the true key is unclear until the *Allegro* comes in m. 19 (see also ex. 17).

Its contribution to the drama lies both in its grand rhetorical gestures and its initial ambiguities about the key which, after hints at C minor and excursions elsewhere, settles on the dominant of C minor for a more tranquil passage and so leads to the firm establishment of the tonic and the entry of the first subject of the *Allegro*.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> *The New Harvard Dictionary of Music*, edited by Don Michael Randel (Cambridge, MA, and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986), 746.

<sup>45</sup> It is from the recording of Vladimir Ashkenazy's Beethoven Piano Sonatas, Nos. 31 & 32 in 1974.



Ex. 17. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 14-19.

This very unstable and ambiguous passage may be the overture for the true tragic drama which comes immediately in the most forceful C minor, *Allegro*.

The complete first movement of the *Allegro* is filled with great human experience and emotion. Carol Rosenberger wrote, “The entire movement is jagged, emphatic, turbulent, tempestuous, fist-shaking, furious, lonely, grand and heroic.”<sup>46</sup> In the exposition, the ceaseless changes of tempo and dynamics in perpetual diminished-seventh chords seem to depict furious, tempestuous, and turbulent human experiences and emotions (ex.18, a continuation of the first theme).

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<sup>46</sup> Rosenberger, Program notes of Beethoven Piano Sonatas Op. 57, and Op. 111, 12.

24

27

28

31

35

*poco ritenente*

*a tempo*

*cresc.*

*poco ritenente espressivo*

*tr.*

*a tempo*

*rinforz.*

*p*

*f*

Ex. 18. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 24-35.

Paul Bekker mentioned that this “diminished seventh chord” was the most powerful means of expressing pain and sorrow.<sup>47</sup> Life is filled with unexpected events. Of course, the basic mood of this movement is tragic, and it comes from the person who is struggling with different kinds of difficulties and sufferings. The sweeping passage with *sforzandos* in every beat from measures 23 to 28 seems to depict Beethoven’s anger at the fate he has to carry. But he again starts to fight his fate in an energetic contrapuntal texture (ex. 19, see from the bracket).

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<sup>47</sup> Paul Bekker, *Beethoven*, 139.



The musical score consists of four systems of piano accompaniment. The first system (measures 35-43) includes a trill in the right hand and a melodic line in the left hand. The second system (measures 36-42) features a complex, rhythmic pattern in the right hand and a more melodic line in the left hand. The third system (measures 37-43) continues the complex, rhythmic pattern in the right hand and the melodic line in the left hand. The fourth system (measures 38-44) concludes the passage with a final melodic line in the right hand and a steady eighth-note accompaniment in the left hand. The score is marked with 'rinforz.', 'poco ritenente espressivo', and 'a tempo'.

Ex. 19. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 35.3-43.

For this transitional section from the first theme to the second, Beethoven used a kind of contrapuntal style that is not fully fugal. This whole passage accompanies a tonal

triad with the three-note motive of the initial theme of the *Allegro*. This section leads to a more lyrical second subject, which has shifted to A flat-Major from C minor, but it lasts only 8 measures (ex. 20, see until the arrow).

Ex. 20. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 50-57.

Even though this section is short, it presents the climatic moment in exposition. The key shifting to flat submediant area for second subject is one of the Beethoven's pervasive features after the Hammetklavier sonata.<sup>48</sup> Here, the short, peaceful, and

<sup>48</sup> Mellers, *Beethoven and the Voice of God*, 247.

expressive moment in A flat-Major meets the closing theme with crashing diminished sevenths in m. 58. Through the restless sixteenth notes in the closing section, we may feel Beethoven's ceaseless struggling from his unhappy life. It could also be considered a continuous question and doubt to God about his tragic life's difficulties which never get answered, and this gesture runs until the end of this section (ex. 21).

Ex. 21. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 57-68.

Until the development section begins in measure 72, these struggles come and go multiple times in different configurations.

The three-note initial subject appears throughout the movement in various guises, and the gesture of rising a minor third and a falling diminished fourth creates great tension. I personally feel Beethoven's strong will for survival through this gesture (ex. 22, see the bracketed part).

The image shows a musical score for Beethoven's Op. 111, 1st movement, measures 17-20. The title "Allegro con brio ed appassionato" is written above the first staff. The score is in G major (one sharp) and 3/4 time. Measures 17-19 are marked with a crescendo and fortissimo (f). Measure 20 is marked mezzo piano (p) and poco ritenente. The score features a three-note initial subject (G4-A4-B4) in measure 17, which is bracketed. The bass line consists of a continuous eighth-note pattern. The treble line has a melodic line with various ornaments and dynamics. The score ends with a bracketed section in measure 20, marked mezzo piano (p) and poco ritenente, followed by a section marked a tempo and crescendo.

Ex. 22. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., m. 20

Wilfrid Mellers asserts that this opening gesture of the *Allegro* harks back some time in Beethoven's life-history to 1802. Beethoven first sketched it at that time, and it was

the time of his spiritual crisis contemporary with the so-called Heiligenstadt Testament.<sup>49</sup> It is assumed that this gesture came from the extreme distress of Beethoven's situation. The Heiligenstadt Testament shows that Beethoven was tortured by his hearing problem and struggled with isolation and despair. As a result, Beethoven's emotional health was also unstable.<sup>50</sup>

Beethoven's use of fugal technique in the brief development section, one of his significant compositional methods in his last period, increases the drama of this movement. Even though the argument about Beethoven's religion is unresolved, we should recall that he composed this sonata in the same period that he was working on the *Missa Solemnis*. If Beethoven kept some kind of faith in God until his death-bed, and if we recall that this sonata is the last one of his thirty-two sonatas, this development section could be viewed as possibly expressing appeals to God about his sufferings through using the fugal technique. This intensive fugal technique manifests great tension even in low dynamics (ex. 23, see from the arrow).

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<sup>49</sup> Mellers, *Beethoven and the Voice of God*, 245.

<sup>50</sup> Solomon, *Beethoven Essays*, 97.



Ex. 23. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 76.3-81.

Beethoven never lost his great respect for Johann Sebastian Bach, even though Beethoven's fugal technique did not directly come from Bach's. Rather, it came from Albrechtsberger, who taught counterpoint to Beethoven. Beethoven mastered the fugal technique and used it to express something in the Classical structure of sonata form in various ways. In his late years, Beethoven tried to find some methods which could integrate and substantiate his profound music feelings. Beethoven was able to synthesize the fugal technique from old inheritance and create something new in a well-controlled sonata form.<sup>51</sup> This leads the action of the drama more and more with

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<sup>51</sup> Joseph Kerman and Alan Tyson, "Beethoven" in *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, edited by Stanley Sadie, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Grove's Dictionaries Inc.): Vol. 3, 104.

the sequence of diminished-seventh groups on the main theme expand into outpouring (ex. 24, see from the arrow).



Ex. 24. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 86-90.

And then, the sweeping passages culminate the drama at the moment where the initial three-note motive comes back in double-octave motion in both high and low registers. This is the very intensive but well-controlled beginning of the recapitulation in measure 92 (ex. 25).





Ex. 25. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 91-92.

But this majestic moment fades away immediately with a *ritardando* that suggests despair and exhaustion (ex. 26, see from the arrow).



Ex. 26. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 92-95.



Instead, the high G in C major of the returning second subject is the most spiritual and climactic moment in this movement (ex. 27).



Ex. 27. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., m. 116.

Here every difficulty represented by diminished chords is released with a big sigh in C- major, and the moment holds all the previous tragic gestures. Every life experience seems to be culminated and compressed in the high G, suggesting a heaven where sufferings and pains are changed into something transcendent. It is a great and successful transfiguration leading to redemption from all the previous struggles, hinting also at what is to come in the second movement. The resolution of diminished seventh chords to the peaceful C-major region can symbolize a certain resolution from life's problems. However, it is temporary and not the end. It leads to a sigh of

relief, and then, the last great effort comes with another sweeping passage without any preparation for the short coda, which is strangely beautiful and serves as a bridge in C major for the transcendental second movement (ex. 28, see from the arrow).

The musical score for Ex. 28, Op. 111, 1st movement, measures 143-150, is presented in three systems. The first system (measures 143-145) shows a treble clef with a dotted eighth note and a bass clef with a dotted eighth note. A downward arrow points to the first measure of the second system. The second system (measures 146-149) continues the melodic line in the treble and the accompaniment in the bass. The third system (measures 150-150) concludes the passage with a final chord in the treble and a continuation of the bass line. The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *sf*, *ff*, and *p*.

Ex. 28. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 143.3-150.

The new melody in measure 150, which is not connected to the previous material, creates heavenly beauty, and this whole calm coda opens a new dimension of eternal life, through its transfiguration from C minor to major in the last measures of the coda. We may feel heavenly comfort and a spiritual context like the embrace of God (ex. 29).



Ex. 29. Op. 111, 1<sup>st</sup> mvmt., mm. 150-158.

Wilfrid Mellers mentioned about this last moment of the first movement,

This coda gives an affirmative answers to Hopkins' questions: 'Is the shipwreck then a harvest? Does tempest carry the grain?' The Shakespearian Tempest is translated into Music, a 'deep and dreadful organpipe' that may purge us of guilt, and right old wrong. This is what begins to happen as the coda's final widely spaced, softly reverberating C major triad embraces within itself the opening major triad of the second and last movement: which is not only a self-contained song but also a Whole which is a microcosm of Beethoven's lifelong experience.<sup>52</sup>

Looking at this music in a more concrete way, Philip T. Barford said, "This *Allegro* is nothing less than reality itself because all we know of reality is the present moment, and, in music, the present moment is formed by musical thinking and tonal experience which are one in essence."<sup>53</sup> As Barford asserted, this first movement allows us to feel the music and the drama in the course of listening. Through each note, each dynamic, each phrase, and even each mark, we can envision the composer's message crafted through musical material. There will be no listener who can deny that this music does not only sound notes, but it also speaks.

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<sup>52</sup> Mellers, *Beethoven and the Voice of God* , 254.

<sup>53</sup> Philip T. Barford, "Beethoven's Last Sonata," *Music and Letters* 35 (1954), 326.

### *Arietta*

Even though Beethoven named the second movement “Arietta,” and there are no variation numbers, this movement is formed as a theme and four variations with a return of the theme and a coda. Variation technique is also one of Beethoven’s favorite methods in his late years. As he used fugal technique in the first movement in his own way, variation technique is also used in a unique way in this movement. The most special feature of this movement is that all variations of the theme move as one long continuous line until the end. During the course of the music, listeners are absorbed into the infinite realm of the unearthly world. The whole movement is expanded immensely from the simple three-note motive in well-controlled organic form.

As the designation “Adagio, very simple and singable” indicates, we can hear the very beautiful and simple little three-note motive that begins the theme and comprises so much of the music (ex. 30). It initiates a 16-measures theme with repetition of each half.



Ex. 30. Op. 11, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt., mm. 1-4.

Even though the theme itself is simple, it is also spacious and vast. We sense that the struggles of the world are already past and are transformed into peace and grace in heaven. Wilfrid Mellers mentioned that this threefoldness could imply the Trinity,<sup>54</sup> even though he wrote, “Beethoven’s trinity is Hegelian rather than Christian; but the infinitely slow triple rhythm of the *Ariette* becomes the unbroken circle that contains all things within itself, active and passive powers, spirit and matter, and their ultimate synthesis.”<sup>55</sup> Mellers also commented about the meter, 9/16, “the Nine is a trinitized

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<sup>54</sup> Mellers, *Beethoven and the Voice of God*, 255.

trinity, and it presents ‘perfect balancing of all produced and atomized matter’, the alchemical final stage of ‘preparation or creation, wherein all things are formed for the change that leads to completion’ (quotations from Thomas Taylor).”<sup>56</sup> Even though there is no evidence that Beethoven chose the meter from religious inspiration, I believe that Beethoven could not have composed this movement without some spiritual dimension. David Tame comments that musicians themselves have often stated that they had been inspired from beyond their own consciousness.<sup>57</sup> For Beethoven, this assertion seems to fit this movement. The simple three-note motive hovers everywhere throughout the piece in varying imagination, and the atmosphere which starts from quiet monologue makes us feel total peace.

The first variation, also 16 measures with repeats, is connected to the previous theme. In this variation, the left hand hovers mysteriously and the right hand elaborates the original theme while the main beat of the three-note motive is divided into the three sixteenth-notes within the same meter (ex. 31, see from the arrow).

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>57</sup> Tame, *Beethoven and the Spiritual Path*, 15.



Ex. 31. Op. 111, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt., mm. 16-22.

The left hand flows without changing basic harmony, and this makes the atmosphere mysterious, almost as if someone is walking on water.<sup>58</sup> Recalling the account in Scripture of Jesus walking on the water, Wilfrid Mellers comments about the water image in this sonata: “. . . in typically Beethovenian fashion it is simultaneously negative and positive: a dissolution into the inchoate, and at the same time an

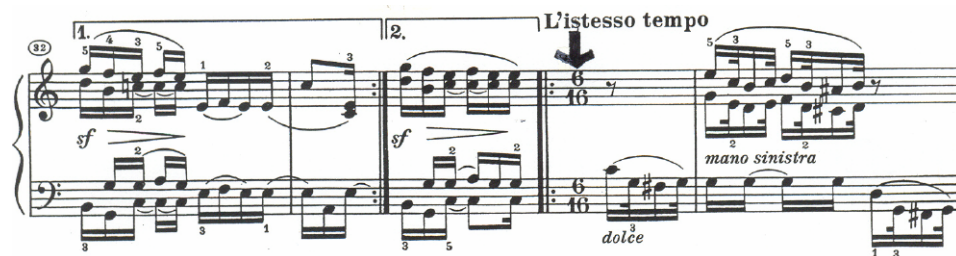
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<sup>58</sup> Mellers, *Beethoven and the Voice of God*, 268.



instrument of purification and rebirth.”<sup>59</sup> As this movement is the last of the whole thirty-two sonatas, these images give us a strong feeling that Beethoven was thinking about the peace of the eternal world. This water image comes back in the fourth variation with more profound meaning.

In the second variation, even though the listeners feel a faster movement through his changing the meter to 6/16 and changing the rhythm, Beethoven kept the tempo exactly the same (ex. 32, see from the arrow).



Ex. 32. Op. 111, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt., mm. 32-33.

Beethoven expanded the music in incessant trochaic rhythms with constant use of syncopations within a long melodic, harmonic line and unchanged basic pulse. In this variation, the main beat of the three-note motive is divided into two duple sixteenth

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 258.

notes, and these are subdivided into three thirty-second notes again. With different meter and rhythm, Beethoven still keeps the image that he presented in the previous variation. The warm and deep, but still spacious harmonies lead us to a new scope, and the endless long line suggests a timeless eternity.

From here to the third variation, performers may feel awkward and uncomfortable handling the syncopated trochaic rhythms on such a long line. If they only look at the surface and cannot see the inner essence of the music, they would find it to be full of strangeness. In the third variation, Beethoven changed the meter to 12/32 once more within the basic pulse, and here, the original main beat of the three-note motive is divided into trochaic thirty-second and sixty-fourth notes (ex. 33, see from the arrow).



Ex. 33. Op. 111, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt., mm. 48-50.

This conveys a burst of joy and energy. The strong doubling of rhythmic motion is spread throughout this variation, but still in very controlled fashion. There are *sforzandos* on weak beats and sudden dynamic changes, which remind us of the first movement of this sonata. However, those elements are used differently in this section. If in the first movement the sudden *sforzandos* in unexpected places express sudden unexpected happenings and sufferings, Beethoven in this variation might have had in mind a more climactic joy and jubilation through a melodic line strengthened and energized by *sforzandos* (ex. 34a, 34b).



Ex. 34a. Op. 111, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt., mm. 53-56.



Ex. 34b. Op. 111, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt., mm. 60-63.

Wilfred Mellers said that we might indeed experience that in this variation, in the words of T.S. Eliot,

The dove descending breaks the air  
 With flame of incandescent terror  
 Of which the tongues declare  
 The one discharge from sin and error.  
 The only hope, or else despair  
 Lies in the choice of pyre or pyre---  
 To be redeemed from fire by fire.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 261; the lines are from the last of Eliot's *Four Quartets*.

Mellers also said, “Though on paper the figuration looks like surging and crashing waves, at this speed it sounds more like tongues of fire, which is not surprising if we recall the analogy between the swell of the unconscious waters and the crackle of purgatorial fire in the last variation of opus 109.”<sup>61</sup> (ex. 35)



Ex. 35. Op. 109, 3<sup>rd</sup> mvmt., mm. 9-12.

The fourth variation in 9/16 seems to be the most transcendental one in many aspects. The tremolo-like left hand firmly rooted in a warm C major tonality with triplets reminds us of the Trinity again (ex. 36).

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 260.



Ex. 36. Op. 111, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt., mm. 65-70.

The quiet murmurings seem to prepare the presence of God, and the atmosphere is deeply mystical and spiritual in this transcendental contour of music. The colors, harmonies spinning and encircling the melodic line suspended over such a long time frame lead us to transcend our own being and sense of time on this earth. We may wonder whether if complete deafness had not come to Beethoven, he could have created this kind of extraordinary sonority. The Creator has taken away Beethoven's



hearing, but instead blessed him with the ability to hear another sound, from not in this world.

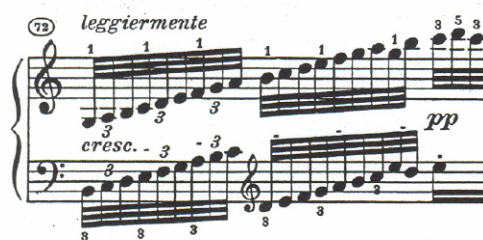
The theme is expressed through every register all the way from the lowest to the highest territory, suggesting movement from the earth to the world beyond (ex. 37a, 37b).

Ex. 37a. Op. 111, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt., mm. 84-87



Ex. 37b. Op. 111, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt., mm. 76-79

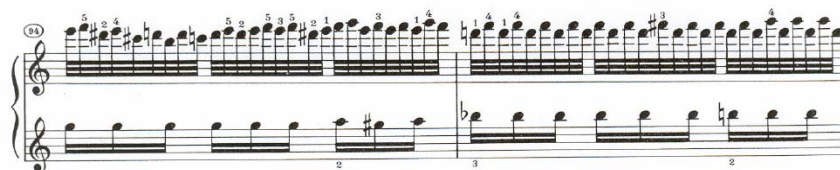
The endless thirty-second-note flourishes throughout this variation suggest the unbroken and unchanged divine nature of God and His grace. The dynamic stays *pianissimo* throughout, except for the little crescendo where the down-world is transformed into the high region by a rising scale (ex. 38).



Ex. 38. Op. 111, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt., m. 72



Wilfrid Mellers describes this extraordinary sound as “not of this world” and also asserts that no one before ever created a sonority like this from the piano, nor has it happened again.<sup>62</sup> As Mellers asserted, the sonority of this variation without changing dynamics, always *pianissimo*, creates the atmosphere of eternal life. There is no fear, and no tension, even though everything is moving freely within an unchanged sphere (ex. 39).



Ex. 39. Op. 111, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt., mm. 94-96.

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<sup>62</sup> Mellers, *Beethoven and the Voice of God*, 262.

Charles Rosen said, “Beethoven was the greatest master of musical time. In no other composer is the relation between intensity and duration so keenly observed; no one else understood so well, not even Handel or Stravinsky, the effect of simple reiteration, the power that can be drawn from repetition, the tension that can arise from delay.”<sup>63</sup> The long trills that extend the fourth variation are perhaps not expected right after the long crescendo line, because this seems to be the place for a climactic moment (ex. 40, see until the arrow).

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<sup>63</sup> Rosen, *The Classical Style: Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven*, 445.



Ex. 40. Op. 111, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt., mm. 104-130.2.

Frequent trills are also one characteristics of Beethoven's late style. In his Piano Sonata Op. 109, the last part of the third movement, which is also in variation form, has a long trill over the melody (ex. 41, see from the arrow).

The image displays four systems of musical notation for piano, representing the final section of the last movement of Op. 109, measures 12-19. Each system consists of a treble staff and a bass staff. The notation is highly complex, featuring numerous sixteenth and thirty-second notes, often beamed together in rapid passages. Fingerings are indicated by numbers 1-5 above or below notes. Dynamic markings include 'f' (forte) and 'tr' (trills). The key signature is three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The systems show a progression of increasingly dense and technically demanding passages, culminating in a final, powerful chord in the last system.

Ex. 41. Op. 109, the final section of the last mvmt., mm. 12-19.

Through these extraordinary long trills over melodic lines, Beethoven controlled and suspended the climactic moment and created maximized tension and intensity within the time duration.<sup>64</sup>

In Op. 111, a higher static motion from these trills leads us to the world between earth and heaven, as if we were suspended by something right before we entered eternity. It also makes us imagine the moment that the body is separated from the soul. But following the 12 measures of the trills that begin in m. 106, a modulatory section of instability makes us wonder if the everyday world has intruded again. After this retransition, the heavenly theme returns again at m. 130.3 (see Ex. 40 again). We sense that this most glorious moment coming back in C major with the initial theme after the hovering sequences to be ‘arrival’ (ex. 42, see from the arrow).

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 446.



Ex. 42. Op. 111, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt., mm. 128-132.

Here the original theme returns in the most grandiose figuration near the final stage of this piece. The triplet shape of thirty-second notes comes back from the previous variations in wide range and the melody flows also in tripartite motion. The incredibly long line goes to the end expressing an unbroken unity. The waves from each thirty-second note and the magnificent melodic lines are united as one. Mellers felt that the beautiful freed melody represents God, the Creator, and the waves of thirty-second notes groups are the water. The water is interpreted by Mellers as the most important element in this universe, because water is the essence for eternal life

according to Scripture; “no one can enter the Kingdom of God unless he is born of water and the Spirit.”<sup>65</sup>

This most spiritual statement of the theme merges into the coda without a break in another long trill section with the first strain of the original theme at the end of this movement (ex. 43). Here, the so-called formlessness of Beethoven’s late music comes from another aspect of his spiritual world. Philip Barford said Beethoven *is* music.<sup>66</sup> As Barford mentioned, even though Beethoven was already a great musician before his deafness started, and even though it is true that his music became profound along with his deafness, I strongly believe that Beethoven’s music cannot be classified or categorized as a certain form or style of music because of its infinity.

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<sup>65</sup> John 3: 5 from the New Testament, New International Version.

<sup>66</sup> Philip Barford, “Beethoven as Man and Artist,” 22.



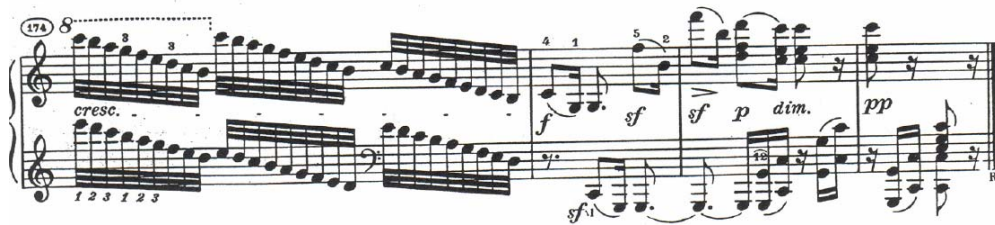


Ex. 43. Op. 111, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt., mm. 159-163.

This movement grows organically to the end as a whole, as if expressing the eternal world which does not have any ending place. Through the long trill, which hovers on high G and is different from the previous trills, we may see the real paradise. There is no place to go back. The ending C major chord tells us everything about this music. Beethoven did not need to finish the ending bombastically, nor gloriously, because this is not an ending at all. With its quiet close, it suggests the beginning of another life in the heavenly world. This whole movement started and ended with a simple C major chord (ex. 44a, 44b). The beginning notes move from C down to G; at the end, the movement is from G up to C.



Ex. 44a. Op. 111, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt., m. 1.



Ex. 44b. Op. 111, 2<sup>nd</sup> mvmt., the ending

The simple C-major theme progresses and grows into the most expanded scheme, but at the end, everything is compressed again to the simple C-major chord. I believe that in his last sonata, Beethoven found the means to express his internal world and vision, unseen by others. Throughout this final movement, listeners can have an extraordinary journey and will be absorbed into the composer's infinite internal world.

Philip Barford said that if we want to make contact with the visionary tone-poet, play through the *Ariette* of Op. 111.<sup>67</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Barford, "Beethoven as Man and Artist," 23.

## **Conclusion**

As was stated in the introduction, discussion about Beethoven's late music might be considered dangerous, because there are many controversial issues regarding interpretation. Over the centuries, music has been always connected to cultures, politics, literatures, philosophies, arts, and many other features of life. It may be impossible for us to recapture and understand all the contexts of music as it was originally created. Especially, Beethoven's late music is some of the most complex creative work to interpret because we do not have enough insight into his internal world.

However, many scholars do agree that Beethoven's late music is spiritual and manifests transcendence. In this paper, Op. 111 has been explored spiritually and metaphysically rather than merely analytically. While I cannot assert that this interpretation is valid for everyone, it seems clear that Beethoven must have been a deeply spiritual as well as a religious person. Otherwise, he could not compose such a highly spiritual piece as Op. 111.

Every musician interprets music differently through his or her own experiences. There is no single answer in interpretation. However, without knowing about the composer's heart and spirit, without any solid knowledge of the music, we cannot convey its special meaning. Especially for the last sonata of Beethoven, we have to remind ourselves that he tried to express his spiritual insight through music, and

therefore we must at least try to grasp the spiritual world Beethoven wanted to share. As he once said, “I have never thought of writing for fame and honour. What I have in my heart must come out, and therefore I write.”<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Philip Kruseman, *Beethoven's Own World*, translated by Herbert Antcliffe (London: Hinrichsen Edition Limited, 1947), 37. The sentence is excerpted from a conversation with Karl Czerny, told by the latter in his autobiography.

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