

Perspectives: Season 3
Fueling the Romantic Imagination
Recital 2

No composer fueled the Romantic imagination more than Beethoven, so much so that the myth of the artist as hero—the “Beethoven myth”—continues in popular thought despite twentieth-century studies showing him as a flesh and blood human being. Musically there can be no denying his impact on composers who followed. In fact, there may be no more profound influence on successive generations in the whole of Western art music. Every Romantic composer had to come to terms with that influence before finding a distinct and original voice. Brahms, who reached his “first maturity” more than three decades after Beethoven died, said to his friend Hermann Levi in 1854, “I shall never write a symphony. You have no idea how the likes of us feel when we hear the tramp of a giant like *him* behind us.”

It must have been even harder for Schubert who was maturing as a composer *while* the celebrated Beethoven was still producing masterpieces. The teenage Schubert is famously reported to have said to his friend Joseph von Spaun: “Secretly, in my heart of hearts, I still hope to be able to make something of myself, but who can do anything after Beethoven.” Several years later Schubert felt it necessary to declare his independence from Beethoven, but the fact remains that he adored the older composer—as attested to by myriad witnesses—and persistently used his works as models, both consciously and unconsciously. The present Perspectives recital offers a wonderful opportunity to focus on a great Schubert Sonata that despite its originality also shows its indebtedness to Beethoven, and on two Beethoven works with features that resonated with Schubert.

Beethoven’s D major Sonata, op. 28, makes an intriguing opening selection when we consider that it would have been his last sonata had he lived only the thirty-one years of Schubert’s short life. After this Beethoven wrote no more sonatas in the four-movement mold, but opted for three- and two-movement groupings. Commentators often remark on the calmness of this Sonata—especially after the tempestuousness of the *Moonlight* Sonata’s final movement—and of its return to Classical forms after the “quasi una fantasia” shape of the *Moonlight* and its Opus 27 pair (E-flat major). Nevertheless, prophetic qualities surface, such as the remarkable thematic fragmentation in the first movement’s development section, which must have had a profound influence on Brahms. Here Beethoven conducts a thorough examination of the first theme, first in large chunks and then whittled down to a single measure.

It also bears mentioning that the movement’s rather leisurely unfolding must not have been lost on Schubert—consider, for instance, the younger composer’s B-flat Sonata. Indeed, the “iron-fisted control” that we often associate with Beethoven could don a relaxed demeanor on occasion.

According to his student Carl Czerny, Beethoven particularly liked the D minor slow movement of his Opus 28 Sonata and performed it often. Its steadily ticking staccato bass line supports a plaintive melody in two sections, each repeated. In this regard, the slow movement of Schubert’s late C minor Piano Sonata, D. 958, comes to mind—the final return of the main theme presents

just such a ticking bass accompaniment. Folklike drones in the first and last movements and possibly the rustic humor in the Scherzo led an English publisher to dub Beethoven's D major Sonata "Pastoral," which no doubt appealed to the "back to nature" orientation of the Romantics.

Beethoven opened up a completely different world in his *Appassionata*, one that had a much more profound effect on the Romantic imagination. Again its nickname was a publisher's designation, one that Czerny thought was too limiting for this magnificent work. Its dark and tempestuous outer movements have led countless commentators and pedagogues to cite it as a work that defines Romanticism. The composer himself became totally engrossed in writing it, and along with his Opus 78 it remained his favorite sonata until the *Hammerklavier*. According to a famous anecdote told by Ferdinand Ries, Beethoven was "humming and howling" for hours without singing any definite notes during a walk in the summer of 1804, and when his student asked what it was he said: "A theme for the last movement of the Sonata [F minor] has occurred to me." Ries continued:

When we entered the room he ran to the pianoforte without taking off his hat. I took a seat in the corner and he soon forgot all about me. Now he stormed for at least an hour with the beautiful finale of the Sonata. Finally he got up, was surprised still to see me and said: "I cannot give you a lesson today, I must do some more work."

The opening movement of the *Appassionata* is remarkable in its forward-looking unveiling—a dramatic narration that progresses to the point that Beethoven cannot possibly prescribe the traditional repeat of the exposition because he has traversed too much ground to go back. What immediately seizes the Romantic imagination, however, is the shadowy, ominous descent, the agitated trill, and the gesture of "fate knocking," reminiscent of the Fifth Symphony's main theme. In order to plumb the dark depths to the fullest, Beethoven chose the key of F minor, since F was the lowest note available to him on his piano. He reaches this nadir by the third note of the piece and returns to it often.

Beethoven's stormy first movement made a profound impression on Schubert, who drew on its features in a number of his works. His song "Die junge Nonne," for example—about a nun who had weathered inner raging storms before finding peace—takes its key, unusual 12/8 meter, ominous opening, and certain figuration all from the *Appassionata*'s opening movement.

The shattering effect of the last movement comes as a result of the dreamy contrast provided by the serene variations of the slow movement. In a master stroke Beethoven connects the two movements by a jarring harmony just when the ear expects closure of the *Andante con moto*. He then hammers thirteen times on an unstable harmony, launching the finale's perpetual motion. There is no consoling second theme as in the first movement or a "hard-won victory" as in a number of his heroic minor-key works—the entire movement retains its tragic mood to the end. In an amazing and unique stroke Beethoven calls for a repeat, not of the exposition, but of the second section of the sonata form—that is, the development and the recapitulation. This unheard-of device creates a massive reshaping of the traditional proportions and maximizes the stunning effect of the coda.

As a youth of sixteen Schubert was so affected by the *Appassionata* as to borrow scale passages,

inner left-hand movement, and tonal direction from the last movement for the middle Allegro of his *Fantasie* for four-hand piano, D. 48. It seems clear, in fact, that Beethoven's model is the only reason Schubert ended this movement, begun in another home key, in F minor!

Like Beethoven, Schubert turned to writing piano sonatas throughout his life, and similarly this body of work shows his absorption of Classical models and breaking out into new Romantic expressiveness. To the end of his all-too-short career, he shows his indebtedness to Beethoven, filtered through his own individual voice. Schubert composed his final Sonata, in B-flat major, along with two others in September of 1828, the last year of his life. These are spacious, Romantic sonatas, in which he shows no hurry to say what he had to say.

The first movement of the B-flat Sonata is one of Schubert's longest, which allows him time to present and react to some very individual ideas—the trill deep in the bass near the outset, for instance, which returns at important junctures throughout the movement, and his characteristic “three-key exposition,” which takes him to some unorthodox keys. A number of commentators have noted a resemblance between the opening theme and that of Beethoven's noble *Archduke* Trio, though Schubert naturally was too sophisticated to imitate directly. Another feature of Schubert's movement that has prompted voluminous commentary is his masterful approach to the recapitulation, which includes a notable return to the home key *before* the actual moment of recapitulation. The always perceptive Donald Francis Tovey wrote:

An ordinary artist would use this as the real return and think himself clever. But Schubert's distant thunder rolls yet again, and the harmony relapses into D minor. The tonic will have no real weight at such a juncture until it has been adequately prepared by its dominant.

The “distant thunder”—the left hand trill—is a remarkable device that may have its roots in another Beethoven source: the first movement of his Fourth Symphony, in which the timpani rolls foreshadow the home key before the recapitulation.

After the sublime, contemplative “quasi-stasis” of Schubert's slow movement (outer sections) and his light and airy Scherzo with its hint of menace in the trio, Schubert launches his finale with another Beethovenian device: he begins by “finding” the home key before taking off in that key. The older composer did this in the finale of his *Eroica* Symphony, but Schubert may have been thinking of Beethoven's second finale for the B-flat String Quartet, op. 130 (the replacement for the *Grosse Fuge*), which had been published just the previous year. Of course Schubert generates his own textures and moods in his crowning sonata-rondo, which is filled with one great tune after another and capped by an exhilarating presto coda.

The teenage Schubert despaired of emulating Beethoven's career, of “making something” out of himself. By the end of his short life, however, he had clearly “done something after Beethoven,” having ingeniously invoked the master on many occasions to become uniquely Schubertian.

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