

MUSICMAP NOTES

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Violin Sonata No. 1 in D Major, Op. 12, No. 1 – 1799

Beethoven dedicated the set of three Opus 12 violin sonatas to Antonio Salieri, his former teacher. It's one of the rare instances of such a formal acknowledgment to a fellow composer. This sonata in D major is the very first of Beethoven's noble cycle of ten duo sonatas for violin & piano.

Movement I – Sonata form, Allegro con brio (fast with spirit), Common-time, D major

This movement is characterized by a peculiar formality, a somewhat impersonal stateliness that rises at times to magnificence. Beethoven's grand gestures seem to evoke an older, more regal style.

Exposition:

Main theme: Intro – 5 bars. After a densely-scored *f* D-major chord (with violin triple-stops) both players present vigorous and impressive ascent and descent in 3-octave unison, spelling out the tonic arpeggio with 16th-note embellishments. Rather old-fashioned sounding beginning, immediately followed by...

Statement – 8 bars (4+4), mildly contrasting period. Violin sings lyrical melody, but with impressive leaps. Proud, processional mood enhanced by steady 8th-note piano accompaniment, which almost has character of counter-melody until R.H. doubles end of consequent up an octave.

Counter-statement – R.H. leads with melody very conspicuously ornamented with triplets, a turn and a trill. Violin has its own version of flowing 8th notes, this time from above. L.H. chordal accompaniment now more lightly scored. Consequent quite changed with new harmonies to set up extension with busy and attractive passagework for both instruments. Both hands of piano and violin trade short phrases before *ff* finish sweeps us into...

Bridge theme: Long passage maintains regal mood of main theme. After one bar of introductory piano accompaniment, violin sings what sounds like conventional 4-bar antecedent. Triple-stop at beginning gives effect of another impressive leap. Contrasting consequent sounds orthodox at first, but grandly continues to extend and extend itself into modulating material with new R.H. imitations. Steady 8th-note accompaniment throughout is another clear link to main theme.

Entire bridge crescendos from *p* beginning and by start of modulating part reaches *ff* dynamic.

Subordinate theme group:

Sub-theme I: A major (dominant). Statement 8 bars (4+4), parallel period. After the preceding grand manner, Beethoven achieves maximum contrast with this delicate theme, introduced in antecedent by piano solo, tinkling up high in music-box scoring. Violin consequent maintains delicate mood.

Counter-statement – A substantially decorated and rescored version of the previous material, with both instruments more active throughout. New triplet rhythm adds much to freshness of effect.

Sub-theme II: Attractive low piano accompaniment, continuing triplet motion, sets up gently lyrical violin melody. Octave leap near start reminiscent of first theme group. Melody has clear 4-bar antecedent. What sounds like parallel consequent sequences opening idea, but soon breaks down into imitative extensions of increasing intensity.

Sub-theme III: Starts with playful new melody. Piano lead at first with catchy rhythmic idea provides 4-bar antecedent. However, violin's consequent soon drifts harmonically and becomes free transitional passage, with increasing sense of build-up and animation.

Closing material: Rich conclusion returns us to the bold mood of the main theme introduction. This effectively brackets the exposition after the delicacy of the sub-theme group. Starts with series of *ff* chords, violin and piano together, then in alternation. Instruments then trade brief flourishes that grow into impressive descending 16th-note runs. All of this rushes us towards another series of chords, now a climactic and unequivocal closing cadence in A major. Beethoven directs that the exposition then be repeated.

Development:

This development section in three parts is relatively brief given the scale of the exposition.

Part I offers us a short reminiscence of the beginning of the closing material, but now starting softly and transposed into a distant key.

Part II is a comparatively extensive exploration of main theme material. The violin and R.H. dialogue the basic motive of the theme, with very regular exchanges back and forth (note the affecting double-stops in the violin). All the while, the theme's 8th-note counter-melody flows on below in the L.H. We travel from key to key as the motive is subtly manipulated. This passage reaches a dynamic climax on *f*, signaling the start of...

Part III: Retransition. Beethoven gradually effects the modulation back to the tonic through delicate play with the 16th-note flourishes from the rapidly-approaching main theme introduction. These are presented atmospherically, staggered between the two hands of the piano. All the while, the previous 8th-note motion persists, now transferred to the violin.

Recapitulation:

Main theme introduction & statement are unchanged from exposition.

The counter-statement then starts as before, but after only three bars harmony begins to drift. Beethoven now gives us a fresh extension, which soon jumps into the substantially-rewritten

modulatory bridge passage, ripe with striking new harmonies. Discarding much previous material, including the bridge theme itself, this is a radical abbreviation.

From here on, however, recapitulation is most regular, with all three sub-themes presented very much as before, except for transposition to the tonic key. More surprisingly, the closing material is also virtually unchanged, and takes the place of any additional coda. Its grandeur of expression is evidently all that Beethoven felt he needed to bring this movement to a convincing conclusion, and the lack of a coda or any playful concluding gestures only reinforces the lofty air of the piece.

Movement II – Theme & variations, Andante con moto (walking tempo with movement), 2/4, A major (dominant)

Theme:

Sort of rounded binary form, with decorated rather than literal repeats.

Part I: Piano solo first time, 8 bars (4+4). Lyrical melody that rises and falls gracefully, sung by right hand over spare and subdued L.H. accompaniment. Initial rise is arpeggio outlining the tonic chord, which briefly doubles back in its ascent before reaching its peak on a dominant 7th chord. This opening motive will prove of particular importance. The consequent has a longer rise in stepwise motion, presented with a distinctive rhythm. For the repeat, violin is given the melody in the same octave, while the piano accompaniment adds new flowing animation with R.H. 16th notes.

Part II: Also 8 bars (4+4). The first 4 bars start with a new tiptoeing staccato feel, which makes this seem like a contrasting *b*-phrase. However, the following 4 bars don't really come across as the *a'* of rounded binary form, because of their distinctly new melodic profile (perhaps more of a disguised *a'*?). This consequent starts with another arpeggio in the same rhythm as Part I, but now a minor harmony and a more dramatically soaring feeling make this the climactic point of the entire theme. As before, Part II is first presented as a piano solo, and the repetition with violin lead follows the established pattern.

The first two variations exhibit the typical strategy of progressing to faster and faster note values:

Variation I:

Faithfully follows the phrase structure of theme, but now the repeats are literal. This variation gives the R.H. the lead throughout, with a playful and heavily-ornamented (including dotted rhythms, grace notes, turns & trills) reinterpretation of the theme. Meanwhile, the violin has a very prominent obbligato-style accompaniment role. In Part I, this starts with sustained double-stops, which give way to sighs, and then more dancing animation.

By Part II, the violin is very active throughout...almost in competition with the R.H.'s lead. Over the course of this variation the melody accelerates rhythmically, so that most of Part II is in 32nd notes. In this way, Beethoven has one variation do the work that would typically be done by at least two in incrementally building animation. With all the focus in the treble voices, the L.H. accompaniment retains its understated quality from the initial theme.

Variation 2:

Now provides the violin with a wonderful opportunity to shine as it recasts the theme mostly in elegantly-flowing 32nd notes throughout. The stepwise rise of the Part I consequent introduces a new rhythm, enhanced by a series of turns. The piano accompaniment, while discreet, adds much new charm to this variation with a buoyant rising figure, regularly repeated low on the keyboard. This variation is the last one to have literal repeats of the parts.

Variation 3:

A minor (parallel minor). Along with the change of mode, this variation provides a wonderfully exciting and dramatic change of mood. Here the repeats will not be literal, but instead afford the soloists a chance to trade material. In addition, each 8-bar phrase now exhibits a strong 2+2+4 pattern. The theme's opening motive, recast in minor, is heard extensively throughout Parts I & II. Variation starts *p*, but soon crescendos to a *ff* eruption. In the original scoring, the violin's plaintive melody (the first appearance of the theme motive) rises over repeated triplet 16ths in the R.H. When the explosion comes, a continuous line of R.H. 16th-note triplets descends over repeated figures of straight-ahead 32nd notes low in the L.H....all with a powerful effect of contrary motion. Against this, the violin sustains a long triple-stop. This whole process is then immediately repeated. The following stepwise rise of the consequent maintains a *ff* dynamic throughout, while short, ferocious violin triple-stops lash out on the off-beats. By rescoring the repeat, Beethoven is able to renew the vigor and interest of this material as elements are traded around. We particularly notice the violin's participation in the triplets now, and the feeling of R.H. lead.

While Part II has effective new details, it mostly follows the patterns established in Part I, including the scoring changes to the repeat. The most noticeable change, however, is now the 4-bar consequent is a long and ominous crescendo (built from the pervasive opening motive).

Variation 4:

The fourth and final variation returns us to major, and to a clearly recognizable version of the original theme, thus providing a nice feeling of rounding off and culmination. While the piano sings the melody of Part I, immersed in a gently throbbing off-beat chordal accompaniment, the violin provides an elaborate, but lyrical counterpoint. The repeat of Part I is an intensification of the same material, with even more activity in the violin descant and new flourishes provided by the L.H. bass (Abram Loft refers to "...tranquil conversations...").

In Part II, the theme is still given by the piano, but the off-beat throbbing has been suspended. The violin's decorative contributions provide continuity from Part I. Here the contrasting antecedent passage is given a distinctive character by high music box-type scoring, with a nice switch to L.H. lead for the climactic rising consequent. The repeat of Part II is truncated and transitions into an ensuing coda. We hear the 4-bar antecedent, this time given violin lead, but then a fermata signals the end of the faithful variation process.

Coda: Almost before we understand what is happening, we are embarked upon a free and poetic rumination on the essence of the theme. The basic material here combines repetitions of the opening motive with brief triplet figures in a gentle interchange.

"...perhaps the most notable achievement in the Op. 12 set is the middle movement of the D major sonata, with the brute force of its third variation and, above all, the dreamlike coda. It is particularly in these last bars of the movement, where a characteristic figure of the theme is expanded by simple repetition and embellishment, that Beethoven most clearly anticipates his highest art of variation, and of writing for the violin and piano." (William Drabkin)

Movement III – Rondo (ABACABA design), Allegro, 6/8, D major

After the aristocratic poise of the first movement, Beethoven now relaxes as the last movement gives way to joyful high spirits.

Rondo theme:

Statement piano solo, 8 bars (4+4), mildly contrasting period. The R.H. offers us a catchy, leaping, dance-like melody over a regular oom-pah-pah accompaniment. The theme is spiced up via some off-beat *sf*.

Counter-statement – The violin faithfully repeats the theme in the same octave (though omitting a couple of turns), while both hands of the piano now strengthen the infectious dance-style accompaniment. This is an unusually straightforward and regular rondo finale theme, but Beethoven has plenty of surprises up his sleeve.

Episode I (B):

Starts brusquely and without ceremony, with two gestural ideas that almost have the regularity of themes. The first (8 bars – 4+4) contrasts fully scored *sf* chords for both instruments with flowing 16th-note runs. The second "themelet" has the two treble voices exchanging piquant pizzicato material over twinkling L.H. 16th notes. This is also 8 bars (4+4), but then seamlessly extended into a transition or bridge passage which leads us in a freer manner to...

B-theme (Sub-theme): Warm lyrical theme is effective contrast to dance character of Rondo theme. Starts with regular 8-bar parallel period (4+4). The piano sings the antecedent, while for the consequent the violin takes over with a lively variation. The effect of this theme is much enriched by ornamental accompaniment that becomes more animated throughout. However, this is not the end of the theme...Beethoven springs his first big surprise on us now with two additional phrases, dramatically sighing and brought to a standstill by fermatas. Before we have fully absorbed this new mood...

Rondo return:

Arrives without any ceremony. Statement piano solo, literal repeat. Instead of a normal violin counter-statement, however, we are given...

Central 'C' Episode (Quasi-development):

The violin launches into the expected Rondo theme, but in the parallel minor, and after 6 bars starts freely developing and extending the material. Then this becomes a transition passage, less based on the actual theme, but leading us to...

C-theme: Another lyrical theme, starting in F major (relative major of D minor). This dolce theme is hushed and unusually long (16 bars – 8+8). The violin sings the statement, with vocal

accompaniment-style rising triplet figures in the R.H. The consequent then enriches the melody by sequencing it up a step and shifting it into minor.

Quasi-counter-statement with R.H. lead restores major, but sequenced up into yet another key. The regular presentation of the melody soon shifts to freer modulatory treatment and begins a long transition/tease (retransition). This particularly playful passage ends with the expected and most satisfying...

Rondo return (Recapitulation):

Statement – This time the violin is allowed to go first, and hence this is actually a literal repeat of the original counter-statement scoring.

Counter-statement – Now the piano gives us its usual version of the theme, but enriched with a busy new staccato 8th-note violin part. We don't know it yet, but this is in fact the final real statement of the Rondo theme, which justifies its bolder presentation.

Episode III (B return):

All of the material that leads to the lyrical B-theme is presented very much as before, except for the key.

B-theme: This lyrical theme is here in the tonic, as we would expect now for a sub-theme. This too is very regular, except that the last of the sighing phrases is elaborated for even more extreme effect, including a pungent new dissonance at the end. Our memories would lead us to expect an abrupt return of the Rondo theme at this point, but instead a free new transitional passage launches us into a most unusual...

Coda:

Part I: Animated and at times lyrical material modulates and keeps us in suspense, waiting for that Rondo theme.

Part II: Seems like it will finally provide us our climactic Rondo return, but instead we get a very odd presentation of the theme where it seems to deconstruct, then disintegrate.

Part III: We have been left hanging, but now, as some compensation, comes an unexpected and endearing reminiscence of the dolce theme (C-theme) from the Central Episode. This material is freely treated in the home key, singing higher and brighter than before, and animated by new scurrying 16th notes. After a *ff* climax, we abruptly enter...

Part IV: Beethoven's final joke at our expense. Soft and minimalistic gestures, with pregnant pauses and a drop to *pp*, surely must anticipate something important...no doubt the long-delayed final helping of the Rondo theme? But no, Beethoven will have none of it. Instead, the movement suddenly rushes to an abrupt and uncompromising conclusion with brusque *ff* cadence chords.