

MUSICMAP NOTES

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Beethoven's Violin Sonata No. 4 in A Minor, Op. 23 – 1801

Beethoven intended this to be published with the Spring Sonata as a pair, but they were accidentally separated by a printer's error. "In no other Beethoven sonata will the duo find a greater challenge to its sense of drama, of timing, of musical repartee, than in this...work of the 30-year-old composer. It is one of the most exciting pieces that amateur or professional can play." (Abram Loft)

Movement I – Sonata form, Presto, 6/8, A minor

This intense, terse, mercurial movement is a vivid contrast to its Spring Sonata companion. Far from the typical mood of music in 6/8 – urgent, turbulent & austere.

Exposition:

Main theme: Starts with great impetuosity. Strange, hectic, irregular theme is more gestural than continuously melodic – 12 bars (sort of 4+4+4), lead incrementally switches from piano to violin. Busy, arpeggiated accompaniment adds to excitement. Balance of main theme largely generated from motive 'X', that is: short, short, short, long rhythm and falling or rising (inversion) motion. At its first appearance and other key moments, 'X' is given extra kick by initial upward ornament. Violin starts the inversion of 'X.' Intervals of 'X' often augment from stepwise motion to form arpeggios. The basic DNA of 'X' will permeate much of the movement.

Bridge: Following a rest that gives the briefest pause to catch our breath, there is an abrupt mode switch with a staccato descent in the relative major, tutti unison *f*, evolved from 'X.' This is softly answered by a dotted rhythm gesture (that anticipates sub-theme to come). The pattern then repeats, sequenced up a 3rd. Just the first part is sequenced up again, but gives way to more typical bridge passagework. Cadence and breath marks the end of the bridge.

Subordinate theme: Statement, 8 bars (4+4), violin lead – parallel period with consistent dotted rhythm. More lyrical feel, and first regular theme of the exposition...though NOT in the expected C-major and quite chromatic. The piano imitates the start in the second 2 bars, then antecedent's rising motion is matched by consequent's descent.

Counter-statement has piano lead up an octave, with both hands high on the keyboard to give a brighter feel to theme. Violin now has imitation.

Closing material: Part I is closely interwoven, gestural passage with all voices present. Evokes the minor mode and character of the main theme.

Part II is another gestural web. Starts soft, but soon builds to *ff* peak (loudest dynamic so far). Part III is a strong dynamic contrast with wispy, pathetic final gestures until sudden loud chord propels us into the repeat of the exposition. For second ending, same loud intervention now launches us into...

Development:

Part I: Energetic, contrapuntal development of 'X' – stormy, fretful mood.

Part II: Contrasting mildness with more lyrical material, but 'X' still grumbles in piano bass.

Part III: Grows seamlessly from Part II as 'X' more and more powerfully reasserts itself. Builds to exciting climax.

Part IV: Transition – milder material leads us to a pregnant pause with fermata.

Part V: Nice surprise as new lyrical theme presented by violin (but crafted from 'X'). Starts with dynamic octave leap. Statement 8 bars (4+4), parallel period, tonic A minor in development...odd. Piano has lead for counter-statement, modulating up a 5th – note sustained double-stop harmony from violin.

Part VI: Retransition now extends and develops this new theme through further modulations that lead us back with growing excitement to A-minor and...

Recapitulation:

New triple-stop starts original theme, intensified by *ff* dynamic and presentation of first part by violin and R.H. in octave unison (the piano takes the higher octave). New ending, slightly extended.

Bridge: Completely recast, greatly shortened...minimalistic transition to sub-theme.

Sub-theme: Scoring and phrasing of statement as before, but shape of melody somewhat recomposed. Counter-statement has L.H. down low this time.

Closing material:

Part I – New key has this in noticeably lower register.

Part II – Jumps to higher register than before.

Part III – Still high. Unusually for Beethoven, he calls for a repeat of the second half (development & recap.) before proceeding to the coda. Old-fashioned procedure makes sense here, given extreme brevity of material.

Coda:

Briefest of intros echoes the start of the development with 'X' figure, this time in unison. Sudden drop in intensity then ushers in a return of the new theme from development. Hearing this theme return at the close is a welcome surprise that integrates it more fully into the movement. 8-bar theme is now presented in split form with violin yielding to piano after antecedent...compresses effect of original statement/counter-statement. Following passage is

similar to extension/transition in development, but shortened – as there, it will lead us back to final, bold statement of all-important ‘X’ motive, presented in imitation. Odd, tentative final chords are of a piece with the eccentricity of the movement. Appropriately brief coda is a highly effective wrap-up.

Movement II – Sonata form, Andante scherzoso, più Allegretto, 2/4, A major (parallel major)

Playful, humorous movement seems to combine functions of slow movement and scherzo in one.

Exposition:

Main theme: Very regular binary form theme presented with almost clownish humor. Part I presents extremely simple, tiptoeing melody in piano solo – 8 bars (4+4). Decorated repeat has violin with theme an octave higher, the piano following right behind, almost tripping on its heels. Part II, also 8 bars, has lead back in piano and down in the original octave, but this time idea of stealthy pursuit is continued with violin imitations. Violin again takes the lead in the upper octave for the repeat of Part II, with piano back to following. End of theme given definitive emphasis.

Bridge: Comic mood continues with almost officious-sounding, mock-serious fugato...sort of a parody of sober rectitude after the playfulness of the main theme. Fugal subject follows octave leaps with trilling figures, then busy staccato 16th-notes. Following a series of fugal entries is a freer web of counterpoint, terminating in a clear arrival at new key with cadence and pause.

Subordinate theme: Two-part trilling theme in dominant E-major. Part I regular but compressed to 4+4. Playful mood links closely with main theme. Similar presentation with piano start and stealthy imitations. Decorated repeat after only 4 bars, with violin down an octave. Part II more of a free extension – dialoguing of dotted rhythm figure from Part I forms basis for more irregular, unpredictable continuation. “The sauciest turn in the movement...where both instruments are made to bow and scrape to each other with the most outrageous combination of demureness, sudden heroics, and mock piety.” (Loft)

Closing material:

Part I – 8 bars (4+4) – playful mood continues with tiptoeing staccato rhythm. Now violin and piano present material in perfect synch.

Part II – 8 bars (4+4), with an extra 4 bars of closing cadences. Brief, teasing hint of actual lyricism with violin singing short phrase, then repeating up an octave. The piano enters into the spirit with more vocal-style accompaniment. However, flippant grace notes at end remind us of playful ambiance. Beethoven directs that the exposition then be repeated.

Development:

Part I: Brief intro based on main theme. Now sounds bleak and tentative...first time both instruments are in rhythmic synch for this material.

Part II: Brief, severe-sounding stretto on fugato subject from bridge. After pause, stretto repeated in new key and extended into more elaborate development of subject, maintaining contrapuntal character of this material. Much emphasis on trill derived from subject.

Part III: Retransition. Back to main theme material – still sounds rather dispirited, but stealthy imitations restored. Extremely lean texture. As we move closer and closer to the tonic, effect of tease heightens anticipation for...

Recapitulation:

Main theme is given in full, with repeats of binary form preserved, but fresh presentation exploits new strategy for comedy. This time, while lead voice conscientiously sings original melody, other voice playfully dances around theme with all kinds of distracting “monkey business.” At the repeats, the roles are reversed. Also, for the Part I repeat, Beethoven exploits different qualities of the instruments by substituting piano trill for violin’s sustained octave double-stops.

Bridge: Fugato starts this time with subject up high and presented by violin, in seamless segue from theme ornamentation. Exposition abbreviated to fewer entries, shortening bridge.

Sub-theme: Faithfully preserves original in tonic key, but using upper octave gives brighter effect.

The ending is surprisingly clean and concise, relying on no more than a faithful presentation of the original closing material. This is a rare Beethoven sonata-form where he resists the impulse to dilate in a coda that sums up, while casting in a new light, the thematic material already presented.

Movement III – Rondo: A-B-A-C-A-D-A-Coda, Allegro molto, Cut-time, A minor

This quirky movement in Rondo form takes us back to minor and maintains the eccentric spirit of the entire sonata.

Rondo theme (A):

Piano presents intense, driven, yet still lyrical 8-bar theme. Minimalistic repeated notes in violin become syncopated near end. L.H. mostly in synch with R.H., but nice contrary motion effects. Violin counter-statement uses deceptive cadence to extend theme an extra 4 bars, while faster piano notes add sense of excitement, culmination. Extension brings theme to *f* dynamic peak.

Episode I (B):

Improvisatory and gestural in style. No clear theme emerges. Faster passagework punctuated by significant bell-like held tones in piano octaves (dominant, sub-dominant, tonic). Becomes increasingly imitative with contrary motion before change to slow tempo (Adagio) and violin cadenza...which is then copied by piano. Evokes earlier classical practice of fermata for brief improvisation before rondo return (i.e. young Mozart’s violin concerto finales).

Rondo return:

Faithful copy of original theme.

Episode II (C):

Parallel major (A-major) material of this episode seems to have wandered over from the slow movement (and even shares the same key), with tiptoeing motion and comically close imitation.

Fermatas punctuate, however, and seem to dampen the fun. Material progressively shortens in length before...

Rondo return:

Original theme, again unchanged.

Episode III (D):

After two mostly gestural episodes, Beethoven now rewards us with a beautifully lyrical and regularly-phrased theme in F major – binary form with varied repeats. Violin sings 8-bar Part I soft and up high, while piano gently harmonizes. R.H. repeats Part I faithfully while violin contributes subtle new decoration. Part II returns violin lead, also 8 bars, which then repeats, decorated in the same style as Part I. The entire binary theme is now repeated, including the repeats of each part, but with more elaborate triplet accompaniment. The lead instruments remain faithful to the original melodies. A transition/tease follows, freely modulating back to the tonic via a spare, gentle, imitative back-and-forth for the soloists. This grows softer and softer toward the end, with a final fermata (as with prior episodes).

Rondo return:

Again unchanged – the lack of decoration/elaboration by this point is unusual for Beethoven. However, this time there is an extension in the form of a bold, heroic new pendant to the theme that adds weight and importance. This starts with an 8-bar phrase in which pounding L.H. chords alternate with violin triple-stops, while the R.H. maintains a virtuoso 8th-note pattern. Quasi-counterstatement is freely extended...excitement builds with jump to *ff* and staccato notation. "...anticipates the virtuosic fierceness of the Kreutzer Sonata." (William Drabkin) Effect of modulations enhanced by off-kilter chromatic trills. Ends with pregnant pause and fermata before...

Coda:

Altered excerpts from all three episodes now pass in review, in their original order:

Part I: Material from B-episode. 1-bar pause leads to...

Part II: C-episode material, ending in expected fermata.

Part III: D-episode material, with Part I original melody in very distant key of B-flat major. Theme is then freely developed/extended into transition...melody starts again low in L.H., but soon meanders off. This sets up...

Part IV: Final rondo return. Back to tonic, original phrase structure preserved, but now Beethoven finally takes the opportunity to decorate this theme, lending effect of exciting culmination. In the statement, a new violin counter-melody has prominence while the original melody is down low in the L.H. The counter-statement then brings the original melody back to the fore in ringing R.H. octaves, set against virtuoso violin broken chords. This powerful climax is dissipated in a final codetta that ends oddly in a soft, low unison A. No last-minute change to major, as is common in the classical era. Strange, dying ending is again of a piece with the eccentricity of entire sonata.