

# Ludwig van Beethoven (December 17, 1770 – March 26, 1827)

## In Celebration of the 250<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of his Birth

A musical titan and one of the most revered composers, Beethoven was revolutionary in his experimentation in form, harmonic development, and breaking the boundaries of artistic expression. After 250 years after his birth he remains a paramount catalyst for professional musicians and listeners alike, continuing to inspire and affect creation of music in our time.

While getting recognition as a composer, Beethoven was known as one of the first free-lance performers and a keyboard virtuoso, whose mastery of the instrument is reflected in his piano works. Together with nine symphonies and sixteen string quartets, Beethoven's thirty two piano sonatas belong to the most valuable collections of compositions in the music history. There was a constant expansion in his concept of the abilities of the pianofortes of his time. Therefore, his pieces for the piano imposed technical and artistic demands on performers on a much greater scale than those by his predecessors and contemporaries.

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*Fantasia in G minor/B Major, Op. 77* is a rare masterpiece, although not widely known. Composed in 1809, it imitates Beethoven's legendary improvisations, and its structure reminds of fantasies by Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach. There are constant changes of key, tempo and style. Written in an unusual form as a departure from tradition, it employs original harmonies, various motivic and thematic ideas, which express melancholy, deep despair, stormy passion and exalted joy.

"The talk is often about new works by Beethoven, but almost anyone who is only partially acquainted with Herr B-s compositions will see this new work under two aspects; 1) as being wholly original in its harmonies, form and modulations 2) as being very difficult to perform," wrote the critic in the Viennese newspaper 'Wiener allgemeine musikalische Zeitung' in 1813. Starting with furious descending scales followed by a stirring melody, alternating contrasting moods, *Fantasia* continues through seemingly sporadically constructed episodes that transform into heavenly and simple melody with variations on the main theme, ending in radiant B Major.

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**Sonata No. 8 in C minor, Op. 13 'Pathetique'** was written by Beethoven in 1798, published in 1799 and dedicated to his patron, Prince Karl von Lichnowsky. Some sources attribute the title to Beethoven himself, while others to the publisher, who was impressed by its tragic atmosphere. '*Pathetique*' still remains one of Beethoven's most popular works, which helped his rising reputation as a composer, and not only a virtuoso pianist. It is a leap forward from sonatas of that time period, in which Beethoven discovered his uniquely expressive language.

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'*Pathetique*' consists from three movements. The first one begins with a slow dramatic introduction, *Grave*, that has the main motif which is also found in the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> movements. The following section, *Allegro di molto e con brio*, employs unorthodox modulations, mode mixture, unexpected key changes and sudden mood shifts. *Grave* reappears in the development section, like in some Haydn sonatas, as well as in fiery coda, which ends first movement with a dramatic cadence.

Second movement, *Adagio cantabile*, is in a ternary or simple rondo form. The main theme is warmly lyrical and beautifully shaped against polyphonic accompaniment. It is played three times in A-flat Major, separated by two modulating sections of a nostalgic and poignant nature. The last repeat of the theme has an accompaniment in triplets and becomes richer in sound, followed by a brief *cantabile* coda.

The finale--*Rondo: Allegro*—is in sonata rondo form with a vehement coda. It connects all three movements via its main theme, which in the first four notes resembles the melodic pattern and in the first eight notes a rhythmic pattern of the second theme of the *Allegro di molto con brio*. There is also a reminiscence of the melody from the *Adagio cantabile*. Using material from previous movements is one of the marks of Beethoven's style. Polyphonic sections and extensive use of *sforzando* add to intensity of mood contrasts.

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*Sonata No. 14 in C# minor 'Quasi una fantasia', Op. 27, No. 2 'Moonlight'* is one of the most well-known piano sonatas by Beethoven and popular pieces for piano music in general. It is suggestive of an improvised three-part fantasia, as stated in its title, and is mainly admired for its gently mysterious, free-flowing first movement. It was written in 1801, published the following year, and premiered by Beethoven himself. Since 1830s, it acquired the nickname *Moonlight Sonata* ('*Mondscheinsonate*') after German Romantic poet Ludwig Rellstab published a review comparing the atmosphere of its first movement to a boat floating in the moonlight on Lake Lucerne in Switzerland, although some critics considered it to be rather a solemn funeral hymn.

Beethoven himself subtitled it '*Sonata quasi una fantasia*', rebelling against traditional Classical period sonata movement flow 'fast (sonata-allegro form) – slow – [fast] – fast'. He wrote it in innovated style and structure: quasi-improvisatory poetic first movement, livelier charming second movement, and virtuosic third movement, loaded with such stormy emotions that some strings have been torn by Beethoven while premiering it. He dedicated this sonata to Countess Giulietta Guicciardi, who was his student for a short time and, according to his associate and first biographer, Anton Schindler, was his Immortal Beloved, *Unsterbliche Geliebte*,

*I. Adagio sostenuto* is written in modified sonata-allegro form. Beethoven indicated in the score "Si deve suonare tutto pezzo delicatissimamente e senza sordino" - play the part with great delicacy and without dampers. A mesmerizingly stirring continuous melody is flowing over accompaniment of melancholy ostinato triplets. Hector Berlioz had said that it is "one of those poems that human language does not know how to qualify" and labeled the melody a 'lamentation'. Carl Czerny, called it "a nocturnal scene, in which a mournful ghostly voice sounds from the distance." Interestingly, Beethoven remarked to Czerny, "On my word, I have written better ones."

*II. Allegretto* is a calm and charming scherzo with a trio marked with cheerful *sforzandos* of a bucolic dance. It serves rather as a connection between the first and third movements. Franz Liszt described it as "a flower between two chasms".

*III. Presto agitato*, the tumultuous final movement, is in the sonata allegro form. The first theme is saturated with strongly accented notes, *alberti bass* sequences and furious progressions of broken chords. In contrast, a second theme is poetic, pleading with a tinge of desperation. Both themes are magnificently interwoven and create the impetuous storm of feelings. Charles Rosen had written about this movement, "It is the most unbridled in its representation of emotion. Even today, two hundred years later, its ferocity is astonishing."

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*Piano Sonata No. 17 in D minor, Op. 31 No. 2, 'The Tempest'*, was composed by Beethoven in 1801–02, while he was tormenting about his progressing deafness. Its name '*The Tempest*' ('*Der Sturm*') was not given by Beethoven himself, nor was the sonata associated with this name during his lifetime. Actually, it was referred to as such by Schindler, who stated that in private conversation about the significance of this sonata and '*Appassionata*', Beethoven said: "*Read attentively Shakespeare's Tempest!*" Some scholars don't trust a lot of Schindler's information, but this is the only first-hand account. This sonata is also known as '*Sonata with Recital*', as in the first movement in the beginning of the recapitulation, there are two musical phrases without accompaniment in a recitative form. There are numerous improvisational sections, innovative dramatic and motivic advancement. Beethoven had transformed the sonata form into a multi-stage drama. "Beethoven was

the first who fully merged the tempestuous, conflict-ridden heroic style with the sonata principles," wrote Maynard Solomon. Each of the movements of *'The Tempest'* is in modified sonata form.

The first one, *Largo – Allegro*, is unconventional in employing double sequence of Largo and Allegro in the beginning, and *recitativo* sections later, which sets an emotional and melodic foundation for the whole piece. It has some elements of C.P.E. Bach's *'Sturm und Drang'* sonatas. Tranquil and meditative moments alternate with sweeping turbulence, violence and uproar of profound drama, which require from a performer a virtuosic technique, masterly tone production and emotional intensity. When Czerny asked Beethoven how to play the first movement, the reply was, "Break the piano."

The second movement, *Adagio*, is written in a shortened sonata form, a *cavatina*, and is in B-flat Major. It is soulful, introspective, meditative, and rich in expressive sonority. The opening six measures are evocative of the recitative from the first movement. Other episodes from *Adagio* also depict musical ideas from the same movement.

The third movement, *Allegretto*, is in sonata-rondo form, and is back in the key of D minor. It is a restlessly flowing *perpetuum mobile*, saturated with lyricism and tragedy in constantly changing chromatic harmony, reaching a dramatic climax, followed by a development section, which transforms the opening motif of this movement with striking emotional contrasts. A cadenza-like passage transitions into recapitulation, building tension towards a breathtaking falling chromatic scale followed by the echo of the main melodic figure. The falling downward D minor arpeggio in fading away sound halts on a single note 'D', simple and touching, dissolving into eternal silence.

~Sophia Agranovich

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