

Passion and Fantasy

Ludwig van Beethoven (December 16, 1770, Bonn, Germany – March 26, 1827, Vienna, Austria) took Europe by storm at the turn of the 19th century with his revolutionary genius and artistic originality, bridging a transition from Classical to Romantic period. He was a figure of Promethean importance in the development of the Romantic style.

Beethoven transformed every major instrumental genre of his day, including the symphony, the concerto, string quartet, and sonata. He approached composition of large-scale forms breaking conventions with unsurpassed freedom, and expanded harmonic realm with extended modulations of multiple themes and motifs. He enhanced musical vocabulary by writing in a highly personal musical language.

Beethoven's multi-movement compositions create a sense of unfolding drama, like in a literary novel, which echoes his personal life, marked by sorrow, misfortune, unrequited love, and loss of hearing beginning at age 31. At the same time, they evoke feelings and thoughts about man's struggle with fate, tensions between the subjective and objective, and the joyful triumph of man's mind and spirit with love of life. This is a reflection of a historical development of the fundamental philosophical ideals of our era: freedom of expression and equality of people. Beethoven's music is saturated with immense depth, dramatic power, and humanism, which is universally appealing.

Sonata in F minor, Op. 57, titled very appropriately "*Appassionata*" by the publisher, is considered to be one of the most tempestuous of Beethoven's sonatas and a peak of piano sonatas from his middle, mature creation period, when he developed his distinctive style, characterized as "heroic". It was composed in 1804, and recorded in 1806. The sonata was dedicated to Count Franz von Brunswick, Theresa's brother. (Theresa is one of the candidates to be the mysterious 'Immortal beloved' of Beethoven.) In *Appassionata*, Beethoven depicted the struggle between man, his fate, and forces of nature and the immense power of man who manages to overcome it.

Allegro assai, full of dramatic contrasts in mood and dynamics, is structurally intriguing and demanding. It starts with a theme based on two motifs. The first one, dark and malicious, with marked rhythm displaying revolt, reminds of the theme from the Symphony No. 5, like a 'fate knocking on a door'. The second motif is in the major key, flowing and warm. An unusual aspect of this movement is the absence of delineated sections. By avoiding a grand, climactic ending of the first movement, Beethoven leaves the tension unresolved.

Andante con moto is a theme with variations. It projects philosophical reflection, kindness and warm intimacy. Chord progressions are simple, sonorous, and choral-like. However, the ending has a dissonant chord which connects to a finale without a break between movements.

Allegro ma non troppo - Presto is in a sonata allegro form in which only the second part is repeated. The movement is like a perpetuum mobile, with rapid-sixteenth notes that are interrupted only in the development and in the coda. This movement is complex, tragic, and passionate, culminating with tempestuous finale.

Frédéric-François Chopin, born as **Fryderyk Franciszek** (February 22 or March 1, 1810, Zelazowa-Wola, Poland – October 17, 1849, Paris, France) is one of the most significant composers of the Romantic age. Interestingly, Chopin regarded the Romantic movement with indifference, although his music is considered to be the apotheosis of the Romantic style. His works contain elements of Polish folk music and classical tradition. Chopin's innovations in style, musical form and harmony were very influential throughout the late Romantic period and beyond.

Chopin is called the ‘poet of the piano’. Although he wrote two piano concertos, a few chamber pieces, and some songs to Polish lyrics, most of his compositions are for solo piano and all of his works involve the piano, whether solo or accompaniment. Chopin invented the concept of instrumental ballade; his major piano works also include sonatas, mazurkas, waltzes, nocturnes, polonaises, etudes, impromptus, scherzos, and preludes. An English amateur wrote about Chopin's style of pianoforte-playing: "His technical characteristics may be broadly indicated as negation of bravura, absolute perfection of finger play, and of the legatissimo touch... His delicate pianissimo, the ever-changing modifications of tone and time (tempo rubato) were of indescribable effect." Chopin's unique style is subtly nuanced, poetically expressive, intense, and virtuosic. Chopin's longing for love, nostalgia for native Poland, struggle with respiratory disease and later tuberculosis, from which he died being only 39, is reflected in melancholy melodies and restless harmonies that stir the innermost soul fibers of listeners. There is strongly pronounced Polish nationalism and patriotism in his compositions, but his music always expresses individual feelings and sufferings to a highest degree. Robert Schumann described Chopin's music as “cannons buried in flowers”.

Chopin composed his last sonata for solo piano, *Sonata No. 3 in B minor, Op. 58*, in 1844. It is dedicated to Countess Emilie de Perthuis and is considered to be one of Chopin's most difficult compositions musically and technically. It represents the essence of Romantic music, but inherited structure from the Classical four-movement form.

Allegro maestoso starts with a bold theme that is followed by the resolute chords, intricate modulations and a flow of opposing expressions: courage, strife, terror, and heavenly lyrical melodies. It has a character of ballade.

Scherzo: Molto vivace is fleeting, light and airy. The trio has a prayer-like, nostalgic, surreal quality.

Largo has the contemplative character of a nocturne with a flavor of barcarolle, and beautiful melody, interrupted by recitative-like ‘question’. The middle section evokes calming sea waves.

Finale: Presto non tanto is in a rondo form, but has a spirit of a ballade, like the first movement. The opening soaring octaves and chords strike like thunder and lightning, followed by electrifying, intense and ferocious sounds. Graceful waltz-like interludes and bravura chords and scales are interjected in the non-stop rhythmic beat, ending with brilliant breath-taking coda.

‘Today I finished the Fantasy – and the sky is beautiful, there’s sadness in my heart – but that’s alright. If it were otherwise, perhaps my existence would be worth nothing to anyone.’ (Letter to J. Fontana, October 1841).

Fantasy in F minor, Op. 49 has been described as ‘one of the most magnificent works in the piano literature’ (L. Bronarski) ‘, one of the highest expressions of the composer’s genius’ (A. Johnson), ‘the crown of Chopin’s work’ (G. Abraham). It was composed on of the themes of very popular Polish dissident song ‘Litwinka’ by Karol Kurpiński. The first part of Fantasy, the exposition, starts with mournful, dignified, funeral march-like introduction and has five themes with passionate improvisatory segments. The second part is unexpectedly halted, giving way to an ‘otherworldly’ music that sounds like a hymn or prayer. The initial themes return in different keys, and the Fantasy ends with a reminiscence of the hymn, ascending arpeggios and the triumphant final chords.

~Sophia Agranovich