

THE MOONLIGHT SONATA, UNVEILED

WHAT MAKES BEETHOVEN'S
MASTERPIECE SPECIAL

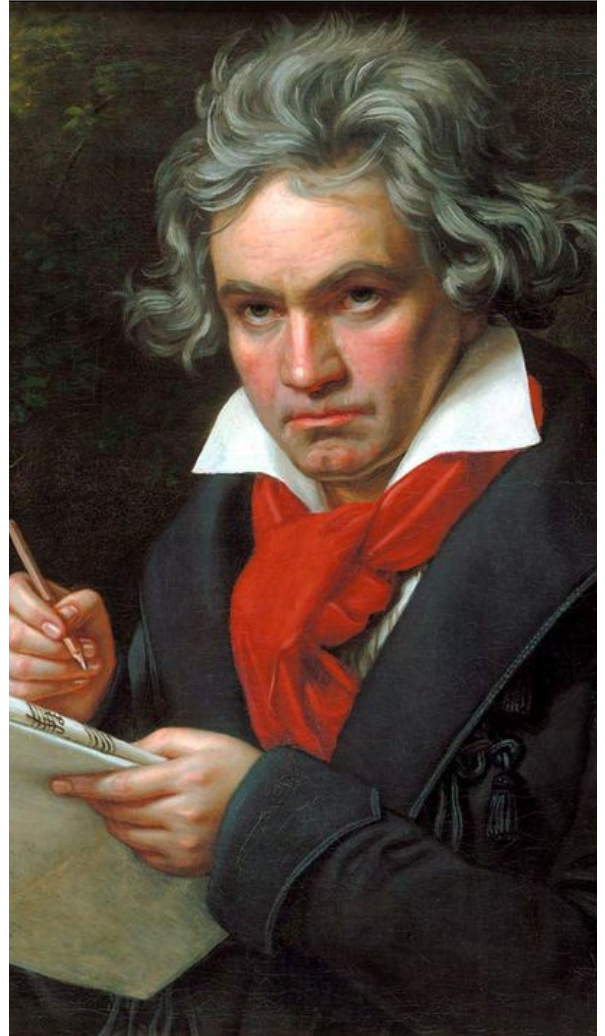
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INTRO

The Moonlight Sonata is one of the most beloved works of classical music.

Written by Ludwig van Beethoven when he was around the age of 30, the work took off and became wildly popular not long after it was published. After Beethoven's death, its popularity only continued, going on to influence many composers throughout the Romantic era and beyond.

While the work's legacy endures to this day, it holds many surprises. Even many students of piano, lulled into a false sense of security by the “simple” sounding, famous 1st movement of the Sonata, often can't grasp why the work as a whole is considered difficult.



Read on to uncover some of the Sonata's secrets, and pick up some valuable tips for playing it well.



INTERESTING FACTS

1. **Most people think of the dreamy, pensive 1st movement when the Moonlight Sonata is mentioned. But there's much more to it.** There are 2 other movements to the work... the 2nd having a light, airy character, and the 3rd being a torrential storm of emotion.
2. **Beethoven himself never titled the work “Moonlight Sonata.”** It was simply his Piano Sonata No. 14 in C-sharp minor (Op. 27, No. 2). It attained the moniker of Moonlight Sonata thanks to a quip from the poet and music critic Ludwig Rellstab a few years after Beethoven's death. Rellstab mused about the first movement being like “moonlight shining on Lake Lucerne.” From then on, the name stuck.
3. **Beethoven meant for each movement of the Sonata to be played in immediate succession, without a break.** Beethoven marked the cover page “Sonata quasi una fantasia,” which roughly means “sonata in the style of a fantasy.” That suggests it should feel like one continuous stream of musical imagination, with all movements played back-to-back.
4. **There are strong musical hints about how seamlessly a performance of the entire work should flow.** The 1st movement, Adagio sostenuto, begins and ends in the key of C-sharp minor. The 2nd movement starts in the closely-related key of D-flat major. The tumultuous 3rd movement then goes back to C-sharp minor. Because of this, when all 3 movements are played together — as Beethoven intended — it feels like one big musical “statement” with dramatic shifts in emotion and character.





FIRST MOVEMENT: ADAGIO SOSTENUTO

In this 1st and most famous movement, the main challenge is to bring out the primary melody, which sits on top of the continual triplets that sustain the rhythm of the piece, all while maintaining the pianissimo (*pp*) volume.

This melody starts at measure 5:

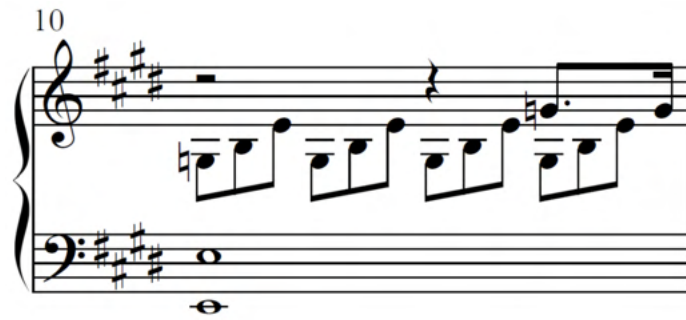
In his tonebase lesson, renowned Beethoven interpreter John O’Conor suggests the pianist should practice playing the G# note in measure 5 with the 5th finger (pinky) multiple times, starting with a very light touch and slowly adding more weight through the wrist and forearm — to discover various ways to play it more “beautifully.”

The key: to listen to each note and ensure that the melody rings out clearly.

You might also look for changes in key, and subtly vary your approach with dynamics when they happen. Beethoven introduces a key change from E major in measure 9, to E minor in measure 10:



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O'Connor notes that he plays this measure more softly, because there's a change in the "atmosphere" of the piece.

Atmospheric shifts also happen where the melody rises into the upper registers, or when the brooding octaves in the bass clef start to come in more strongly — these are great places to subtly change the volume while retaining the character of Beethoven's *pianissimo* instructions, which rarely actually change throughout the piece.

Use this secret to enhance your performance of the piece and authentically portray the emotions it evokes!



SECOND MOVEMENT: ALLEGRETTO

The second movement is a light, airy, and elegant piece that Beethoven intended to follow immediately from the last chord of the melancholy first movement.

To execute the first few measures, you might employ very judicious use of the sustain pedal, gently “leaping off” of the chord where the first staccato marks in the piece are used:

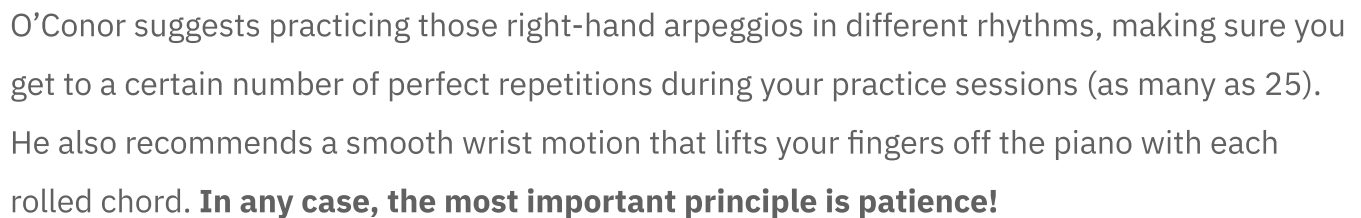


Then comes the *Trio* section, which has a livelier and bolder character than the first part of the piece. O’Conor teaches to carefully observe the special moments marked by *subito forte* (sf).





To accurately capture the fury of the opening passages, it's important to have a solid technical foundation and build up speed. Especially in the right hand, the fingers must get accustomed to the “shapes” required to play the arpeggios in rapid succession:



For the section starting in measure 7 and ending in measure 14, the wrist motion O’Conor suggests is like rotating a door handle:



There are many other sections of the piece that demand specific practice. For example...

The trill attached to the octave in measure 32 (O’Conor recommends playing the high note of the F-sharp octave with the 4th finger on top, so that the 5th finger — the pinky — can help execute the trill freely)...



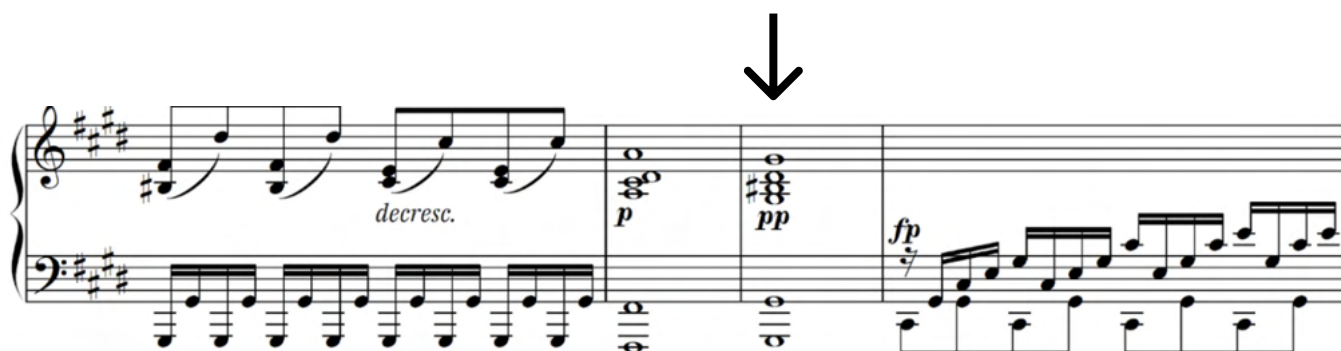
The series of chords starting in measure 43, which can feel unnatural at first, given the constant staccato and movement of internal voices...



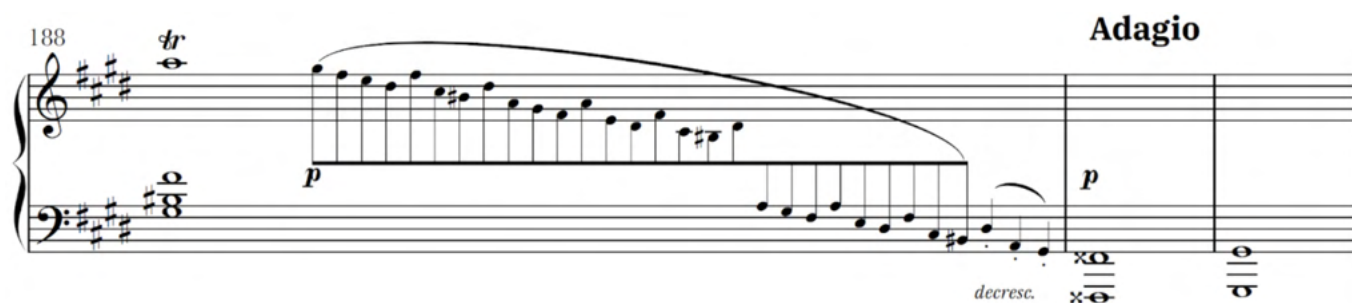
And the melodic figures starting in measure 76, which require a very light touch and could be practiced almost, but not quite, in a staccato manner...



The 102nd measure features a special pianissimo whole-note chord, which is the first time Beethoven uses that marking in the entire piece. That chord should be given extra emphasis before we're taken into the main theme again in measure 103:



In measures 189-190, with the muted bass octaves, we can imagine the “story” of the music speaking of something tragic that has happened:



Which leads up to a tumultuous final few chords that imagines the composer raging against the event:



Thus, the work ends with passion and fury unleashed — as far away from the image of “moonlight” as anyone might imagine!

All in all, this most technically-difficult 3rd movement is accessible to the pianist who carefully practices each challenging section with precision.



WANT TO LEARN MORE?

To learn more about the Moonlight Sonata and dive deeper into every aspect of interpreting and performing each movement of this masterpiece, check out:



[John O'Connor's series on all three movements of the Sonata](#)



[Recorded Livestream: Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata
\(Tips/Advice/Analysis!\) with Dr. Lisa Yui](#)



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Beethoven's Moonlight Sonata, 3rd Movement

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