

# **FINAL THOUGHTS? INTERPRETATION OF THE FIRST MOVEMENTS OF BEETHOVEN'S AND SCHUBERT'S LAST THREE PIANO SONATAS**

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## **1. Introduction**

Ludwig van Beethoven's and Franz Schubert's last three piano sonatas are the pinnacle of what both composers wrote in this genre. This lecture-recital is a small insight into my doctoral thesis (Focroulle 2017), which looks at the interpretation of the first movements of these sonatas.

While I was working on the thesis and searching for reasons why these six piano sonatas are so special and still so popular among performers, I realized that some techniques appearing in the first movements that are very particular to each composer have a direct impact on their interpretation. This lecture-recital focuses on techniques happening in the exposition of the first movement of Beethoven's piano sonata in E major, Op. 109, and in the exposition of the first movement of Schubert's piano sonata in A major, Dw. 959, and gives an overview of how and why Beethoven's movements are concise and always moving forward as well as how Schubert expands his music and why this is a necessary tool in the general development of the piece. It also shows how both composers create coherence and what impacts these particularities of composition have on their interpretation.

## **2. The first movement of Beethoven's piano sonata in E major, Op. 109**

In the exposition of the first movement of the piano sonata Op. 109, there are three techniques that either create concision or coherence: the overlap of formal functions, deferred realization, and the process of variation.

### **2.1. Overlap of formal functions**

The transition in the exposition of a sonata-form movement, normally found between the first and second theme's groups is at first sight non-existent in this exposition. However, the tonality of B major, the tonality of the second theme, is not reached at the start of the second theme, bar 9, but instead, is heard for the first time at the end of bar 10 and in bar 11 (see Example 1). Bars 9 and the beginning of bar 10 are used by Beethoven as transitional bars to reach B major. The expected transition is therefore absorbed and included into the second theme's group. This overlap of formal functions creates an impressive concision, and pianists should be well aware of the *cresc.* at bar 10, followed by the *p* on the first beat of bar 11, as these two dynamics emphasize the delayed arrival of the B major tonality.

## 2.2. The deferred realization

The interval G#-B that starts the sonata plays a major role in the whole piece and therefore in the first movement as well. For Schenker, the use of this interval as a unifying motif is for Beethoven the “Schlüssel zu einer Welt von Einheit und Zusammenhang [key to a world of unity and coherence]” (Schenker 1974: 51, quoted in Marston 1995: 6). At the end of the first theme, bar 8 (see Example 1), this unifying interval is left incomplete as the top-motion of the melody is suddenly interrupted by the diminished seventh starting the second theme and the expected B note is not only missing but replaced by the note A. Idiosyncratic of the technique of deferred realization, this incomplete G#-B interval is only resolved at the end of the exposition through the presence of the B note, at bars 15–16, first in the right hand on the first beat, second in the left hand and underlined by the *cresc.* and *sf*, and third in the right hand again at bar 16, the beginning of the development. Both appearances of the B in the right hand are in the same register as the missing B of bar 9. Not only does the delayed realization of the unifying interval give great coherence to this exposition, but it also explains the feeling of arrival and relief felt by the performer at the end of this section.

## 2.3. The process of variation

The variation happening in the second theme’s group helps the music to move forward and has a structural impact on the section. Bars 9 to 11 are varied at bars 12 to 14 (see Example 1). However, in order to return to B major and clearly confirm the tonality before the beginning of the exposition, Beethoven transforms the passing note F double sharp of bar 10 into a full D# major chord at bar 13. The dynamics of bar 9 are repeated in bar 12, with the exception of the *p* at the end of bar 12, which does not appear in bar 9. This *p* has a crucial impact on the performance as it is the only possibility to underline the fact that the passing note F double sharp has now become a chord: by reducing the sound just before the *forte* of bar 13, it is then possible to make this *forte* even more obvious and impressive.

The image shows a musical score for a piano piece. It is in B major (two sharps) and 2/4 time. The tempo is marked "Vivace ma non troppo" and the articulation is "sempre legato". The score is written in grand staff notation (treble and bass clefs). The first six bars are shown. Bar 9 begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and a "dolce" marking. Bar 10 contains a passing note F double sharp. Bar 12 repeats the dynamics of bar 9 but has a piano (*p*) dynamic at the end. Bar 13 features a full D# major chord. Bar 14 includes a "cresc." marking. The score ends with a fermata over the final note of bar 14.

6 *Adagio espressivo*  
*f p cresc. f p cresc.*

11 *p cresc. 5 6 f p cresc. p*  
 Ped. \*

13 *f 3 3 dim. p*  
 Ped. \*

14 *espressivo cresc. 3 3 3 3 3 3*

15 *6 6 ri. tar. dan. do.*  
*dim. sf*

Example 1. Sonata Op. 109, first movement, bars 1–15. Exposition

### 3. First movement of Schubert's piano sonata in A major, D. 959

The length of Schubert's music has been abundantly criticized in the past. Fortunately, scholars have recently reassessed its role and have started to describe length not only as a brilliant quality of Schubert's music but also as a necessary tool in his compositions. In the

exposition of the first movement of the piano sonata D. 959, two techniques used by Schubert, the process of variation and the ABA' form (called the ABA' sub-process in the thesis and lecture-recital) lengthen the music at first sight, but they most importantly create coherence and are essential for the following general development of the movement.

### 3.1. The process of variation

The variation of bars 1 to 6, found at bars 16 to 21, creates an expansion in the music but plays a crucial role in the logic of the musical discourse. First, the musical idea that starts the sonata and the musical idea starting at bar 7 could not be more different from each other (see Example 2). Schubert, by writing a variation of the first idea but in the carefree character of the second idea fuses these two opposite ideas in one. Second, two important rhythmical motifs (the motif of two crotchets at bar 1 in the left hand and the motif on the second and third beats of bar 8) are fused to another in the variation and build a new rhythmical motif (the motif of bar 16, in the right hand) that has impacts on the rest of the movement as it appears, even though varied, in each section of the movement, and creates an impressive coherence throughout the piece.

**Allegro**

The image displays three systems of musical notation for the first movement of Schubert's Piano Sonata D. 959. The first system (bars 1-6) features a treble clef with a key signature of two sharps (F# and C#) and a common time signature (C). The bass clef part starts with a forte (*f*) dynamic. The second system (bars 7-11) begins with a piano (*p*) dynamic and includes triplet markings (*3*) in both hands. The third system (bars 12-15) starts at bar 12 and features a forte (*f*) dynamic in the bass clef part. The notation includes various musical symbols such as slurs, accents, and dynamic markings.



Example 2. Sonata D. 959, first movement, bars 1–21. First theme's group of the exposition

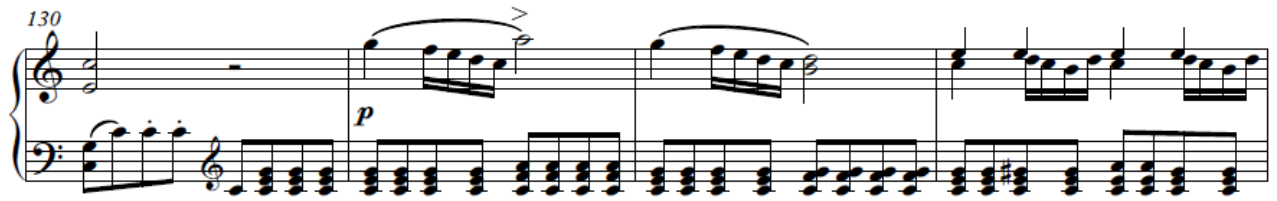
### 3.2. The ABA' sub-process

Particularly cherished by Schubert, the use of the ABA' sub-process was long criticized by musicologists for expanding the music without reason or for acting against the forward motion expected in a sonata-form movement. However, the presence of this form in Schubert's movements has very often had an impact on the compositional discourse of the music. For example, the second theme's group of this first movement, written in an ABA' sub-process, is, as mentioned earlier, all the way through unified by different variations of the rhythmical motif of bar 16. These, in return, create coherence in the section, unify the whole second theme's group and give the music a great consistency. Moreover, in the A' part of the sub-process, all the different versions of the rhythmical motif, found in the A and B parts, are summarized, and a new variation of the motif is introduced at bars 121-122 (see Musical Example 3), where Schubert, for the first time since the beginning of the movement, makes use of semiquavers and a *ppp*. This new version of the rhythmical motif has an enormous impact on the development section that follows as for the first two thirds of the development, it is the only motif used (see Musical Example 4).

Musical Example 3: Sonata D. 959, first movement, bars 118-124



Musical Example 4: Sonata D. 959, first movement, bars 130-137 – Beginning of the development



#### 4. Conclusion

These characteristics seen in the first movement of op. 109 and D. 959 are just some of the examples found in the thesis. Still, they show how Beethoven's techniques of composition are concise and how they help the music to move forward. They reveal why Beethoven's movements demand a sharp and high sense of presence on the part of the performer. Because each action, each specificity, leads to the next one. They also show why exactly Schubert lengthens the music, why length is a vital aspect of his music, and how it helps the movement to properly unfold. In Schubert's movements, performers are given the chance to re-experience a musical idea in a new context and to discover different facets of the same idea. Length also creates benchmarks or points of reference for the pianist. Because, by repeating an idea, a section, a melody, or a rhythmical motif, Schubert generates an impression of déjà-vu, thereby building a comforting feeling of familiarity. However, pianists must be aware of the reasons behind the length because only then is it possible to underline their purposes for the listener and at the same time give length its proper signification and expressiveness.

#### References

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