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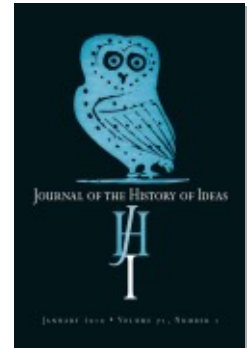
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Beethoven the Romantic: How E. T. A. Hoffmann Got It Right

Steven Cassedy

In July of 1809, E. T. A. Hoffmann received a copy of the score to Beethoven's Fifth Symphony. Earlier that year he had begun publishing in what at the time was the most respected journal for music criticism in the German-speaking world, the *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung* (AMZ): first his story *Ritter Gluck* (in January) and a review of two symphonies by a now-forgotten composer, Friedrich Witt (in May). At the end of the year, he published an additional music review. His review of the Fifth Symphony would not appear until a year after he received the score, in July 1810. It is not clear whether or not Hoffmann had ever heard Beethoven's Fifth Symphony performed. Since the fall of 1808, he had been living in the Bavarian city of Bamberg, where he was briefly music director and then composer for the theater. There is no evidence that a performance of Beethoven's work, which premiered in Vienna in December of 1808, took place in Bamberg. But Hoffmann need not have actually heard a performance; in his review, the purely musical analysis could easily have been based entirely on his reading of the score.

Anyone writing a review for AMZ, especially a newcomer such as Hoffmann, would have been expected to follow a three-part structure set by the journal's editor: introduction, analytic section, and conclusion. If Hoffmann's own earlier contributions to AMZ were any indication, then we might expect in his review of Beethoven (1) a short paragraph offering some general comments on the musical form of the composition under re-

view and on the composer; (2) a structural and harmonic analysis of the composition, usually with printed examples from the score; and (3) a brief, final assessment of the composer's accomplishment in the composition.¹

For Beethoven's Fifth Symphony, Hoffmann decided to do something a little different. To begin with, the review is long: weighing in at almost 4,500 words, it was more than twice as long as either of the reviews that Hoffmann himself had published in *AMZ*. In fact, it is said to have been, in its era, the longest piece of writing ever published on a single work by Beethoven.² In its basic structure, the review follows the pattern of the normally much shorter reviews published in *AMZ*. What is groundbreaking, however, is what Hoffmann has done with the introductory portion. By itself, it is roughly the same length as some other *AMZ* reviews in their entirety. But what is truly striking is its content. Rather than offering us a perfunctory introduction to his immediate topic, Hoffmann serves up a full-blown theory of musical romanticism.

Over the years, much has been written about this theory. Music history instructors love to surprise their students by telling them that, at the time of Beethoven's "middle" or "heroic" period, there was no such thing as "classical" music, in the narrow sense of the phrase, and that Hoffmann classified Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, the traditional "classical" composers (if we consider Beethoven through his early or even his middle period), as "romantic." How is this so?

The introductory section to Hoffmann's review is filled with the most extravagant language—language so extravagant, in fact, that to attempt to discern in it a logically compelling argument is an exercise in futility. Scholars who have tried to summarize Hoffmann's argument have either thrown up their hands in despair, conceding that his claims simply do not hang together, or attempted to account for the inconsistency of those claims by offering a list of prior poets and philosophers who inspired him and whose thoughts he indiscriminately incorporated into his own writing.

From the outset, Hoffmann establishes (1) that music is the most romantic of all the arts and (2) that, if we are speaking of music as an autonomous art form, instrumental music—not vocal music—is what truly counts: the more removed from language and from the sensible world, the better. At some point, Hoffmann had apparently absorbed some basic notions

¹ For this description, see David Charlton, *E. T. A. Hoffmann's Musical Writings: Kreisleriana, The Poet and the Composer, Music Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), 222.

² *Ibid.*, 235.

from his senior fellow townsman Immanuel Kant (Hoffmann was born in Königsberg, where Kant spent his entire life), whose language, early in the review, he appears to mimic: “Music unlocks for man an unknown realm—a world that has nothing in common with the outward world of senses [*Sinnenwelt*] that surrounds him, one in which he leaves behind all feelings determinable by means of concepts [*Begriffe*], in order to surrender himself to the unspeakable [*dem Unaussprechlichen*].”³ Hoffmann may have read a couple of paragraphs from the introduction to the *Critique of Pure Reason* (“B” edition, 1787) and established an odd grasp of their meaning.⁴ Kant is describing for us, in a preliminary way, knowledge of the sort that lies outside ordinary experience and a science of the sort that would provide access to such knowledge.

. . . certain acts of knowledge [*Erkenntnisse*] abandon the field of all possible experiences and, by means of concepts to which no corresponding object whatever can be given in experience, have the appearance of extending the range of our judgments beyond all limits of that experience.

And it is precisely in acts of knowledge [*Erkenntnisse*] of this sort, those that go beyond the world of the senses [*Sinnenwelt*], where experience can give neither any guidance nor justification, that the investigations of our reason lie, which investigations,

³ Friedrich Schnapp, ed., *E. T. A. Hoffmann, Schriften zur Musik: Aufsätze und Rezensionen* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1978), 34. All translations in this article are my own.

⁴ There are scattered, mostly ambiguous or oblique references to Kant in Hoffmann’s work. In his letters, there are references to Kant’s *Zum ewigen Frieden* (*On perpetual peace*, 1795) and *Von der Macht des Gemüts durch den bloßen Vorsatz seiner krankhaften Gefühle Meister zu werden* (*On the power of the mind to master its morbid feelings through pure intention*, 1798). There is even a jocular allusion to the *Critique of Pure Reason*, but nothing that unequivocally indicates familiarity with the contents of that work. See Hartmut Steinecke, et al., eds., *E. T. A. Hoffmann, Sämtliche Werke* (Frankfurt am Main: Deutscher Klassiker, 2003), 1:55, 300, 87. It has been suggested, too, that while he was a law student at Königsberg University, from 1792 to 1795, Hoffmann attended lectures by Kant, but there seems to be no hard evidence on the matter. See, for example, Leonard J. Kent’s Introduction to *Selected Letters of E. T. A. Hoffmann*, ed. Johanna C. Sahlén (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977), 4. The editors of the *Sämtliche Werke*, in speaking of one of Hoffmann’s legal writings from the 1790s, present the issue as whether Hoffmann, as a sixteen-year-old law student at Kant’s university, never attended any of Kant’s lectures or simply didn’t understand them (1:1353). A later piece of legal writing by Hoffmann cites Kant’s late work *Anthropologie in pragmatischer Hinsicht* (*Anthropology from a pragmatic standpoint*, 1798). See *E. T. A. Hoffmann, Sämtliche Werke*, 6:699.

owing to their importance, we consider to be far better and their ultimate object far more exalted than anything our understanding [*Verstand*] can learn in the field of experience. . . . These inevitable problems of pure reason itself are God, Freedom, and Immortality. The science, however, whose ultimate goal and all of whose preparations are concerned with the solution to these problems is called *metaphysics*. . . .⁵

The idea here is to draw a line around what Kant will be discussing in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. What he largely will not be discussing is metaphysics, the branch of philosophy whose topic is reason, where reason is understood (having been redefined here by Kant) not as the faculty that applies the logical rules of mind to experience but instead as the faculty of mind that presumes to give us knowledge of what lies beyond experience and cannot be the object of logical rules: such metaphysical ideas as God, Freedom, and Immortality. The faculty of mind that does deal with sense experience and the world of the senses (*Sinnenwelt*) is the understanding (*Verstand*), which operates by means of concepts (*Begriffe*). This is our source of ordinary, empirical knowledge. For purposes of emphasizing the distinction, Kant used the word *Sinnenwelt* more than eighty times in the *Critique of Pure Reason*.

Of course, Kant's interest in distinguishing between the two faculties was, first, to offer a thorough account of the faculty of understanding, including, above all, the limits of that faculty, and, second, to set aside a separate space that is the province of faith and freedom (in the sense of free volition, not political freedom). Hoffmann, like so many of his generation who were a bit less rigorous in their grasp of Kant's epistemology, obviously was attracted by the "nothing in common with the outward world of senses" feature of Kant's philosophy and decided to run with the idea not only that there exists an "unknown realm," one not susceptible to the force of the concepts (*Begriffe*) by which the understanding operates, but that music gives us access to that realm.

It is no doubt because of his aversion to concepts, coupled with his belief that true music conveys something that language cannot, that Hoffmann came to embrace instrumental music as the only pure music—thus not only the most romantic of all types of music, not only the most roman-

⁵ Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, B 6–7.

tic of all the arts, but the only purely romantic art. Why romantic? While Hoffmann never offers an explicit definition, he indicates clearly what he associates with romanticism. Music, apparently unlike words, has the power both to yield up extremely powerful passions and to put us in contact with the infinite. In fact, even in a hybrid work, such as an opera, where the purity of exclusively instrumental music is corrupted by language, music takes the passions verbally expressed in the work and clothes them “in the purple shimmer of romanticism,” so that “even what we do feel in life leads us out of life into the realm of the infinite.”⁶

Passions and the infinite (not to mention “purple shimmer”) get a tremendous amount of play in Hoffmann’s review, as they do in his other writings on music. The idea here is to put Beethoven forward as the ultimate musical romantic. Hoffmann sets up the idea by explaining that Beethoven’s two dominant predecessors, Haydn (who died just two months before Hoffmann received his copy of Beethoven’s score) and Mozart, are romantics, too, but not on the same plain as Beethoven. “The expression of a childish, cheerful mind reigns in Haydn’s compositions.” “Mozart leads us into the depths of the spirit realm. Fear surrounds us, and yet, in the absence of torment, it is more the presentiment of the infinite.”⁷

But Beethoven is the preeminent romantic composer, and for him Hoffmann reserves his most exuberant language.

Thus does Beethoven’s instrumental music open up for us the realm of the monstrous and the immeasurable. Glowing rays shoot through the deep night of this realm, and we become aware of giant shadows that wave up and down, close us in more and more narrowly, and annihilate everything in us except for the pain of infinite yearning, in which every pleasure . . . sinks down and founders, and only in this pain, which, consuming within itself, but not destroying, love, hope, and joy, wants to burst open our breast with a full-voiced harmony of all passions, do we live on, enchanted spirit-seers [*Geisterseher*].

We see once again a possible reference to Kant, whose early *Träume eines Geistersehers* (*Dreams of a Spirit-seer*, 1766) was designed to show that anyone who claimed direct knowledge of metaphysical ideas would essen-

⁶ Schnapp, E. T. A. Hoffmann, *Schriften zur Musik*, 35.

⁷ Ibid.

tially have to be a “spirit-seer” (or “ghost-seer”). Kant used the word ironically; Hoffmann has embraced it wholeheartedly.

Hoffmann continues with yet another comparison between Beethoven and his predecessors:

Romantic taste is rare; even rarer is romantic talent, and it is for that reason that there are so few who know how to strike up the lyre that unlocks the wondrous realm of the infinite. Haydn romantically grasps the human in human life; he is more commensurable with the majority. Mozart draws upon the superhuman, the miraculous that dwells in the inner spirit. Beethoven’s music sets in motion terror, fear, horror, pain and awakens the infinite yearning that is the essence of romanticism. Beethoven is a purely romantic (and therefore a truly musical) composer, and it may be for this reason that his vocal music, which does not allow for undetermined yearning but represents from the realm of the infinite only those emotions that are designated by means of words, is not successful and that his instrumental music rarely speaks to the multitude.⁸

The introductory section, with all its extraordinary claims about Beethoven and romanticism, then gives way to Hoffmann’s analysis of the work at hand. Hoffmann was a highly accomplished musician and composer, and musical analysis from nothing more than a score came easily to him. He writes primarily of the symphony’s structural and harmonic characteristics, and there is little to dispute in what he says. But, good romantic critic that he is, from time to time he reverts to the claims he had made in the introductory pages. The word *unendlich* (infinite) is repeatedly reintroduced throughout the essay (occurring seven times, five of them as the substantive “the Infinite”), as are references to the unknown, the mysterious, the monstrous, and a host of powerful emotions.

This, for example, is his description of the *fermata* on the dominant that comes at the end of the initial statement of the first theme in the first movement (where the first violins hold a G, while all the other instruments of the orchestra are silent; see the eighth staff line from the top in example 1): “[The first violins], ending on a *fermata* on the dominant, give the listener’s mind presentiments of the unknown, the mysterious.”⁹

⁸ Ibid., 36.

⁹ Ibid., 37.



EXAMPLE 1.

After describing a *tutti* passage early in the first movement, Hoffmann says this: “These are sounds by which our breast, oppressed and frightened by presentiments of the monstrous, forcibly vents itself. . . .”¹⁰ About the second, Andante movement, he has this to say: “It is as though the fearsome spirit that seized the mind in the Allegro and frightened it were stepping forward threateningly at every moment from the thunder-cloud in which it had disappeared and the friendly figures that comfotingly surrounded us quickly fled at the sight of the spirit.”¹¹ And again, on the end of the third movement, where the timpani play a succession of quarter notes on C for over fifty straight bars, despite changes of harmony in the other instru-

¹⁰ Ibid., 40.

¹¹ Ibid., 44.

ments: "These muffled strokes of [the timpani's] dissonance, creating the effect of a foreign, fearsome voice, arouse terror of the extraordinary, fear of ghosts."¹² But perhaps the statement that most unequivocally expresses Hoffmann's conviction that in the Fifth Symphony he has found the romantic musical composition *par excellence* is this:

Beethoven carries deep in his mind the romanticism of music, which he expresses in his works with high genius and clarity of vision [*Besonnenheit*]. The reviewer has never felt this in a livelier way than in the present symphony, which, in a climax that rises up to the very end, displays that romanticism of Beethoven more than any of his other works and irresistibly carries the listener away into the wondrous spirit realm of the infinite.¹³

What to make of all this? I think it is safe to say that if we are looking for a systematically elaborated philosophy of romantic music, or musical romanticism (if such a thing even existed), we will not find it here. Hoffmann had a highly informal education in the idealist philosophy of the previous generation of German philosophers and poets. He borrowed heavily from a familiar cast of characters: Novalis, Friedrich Schlegel, Schelling, Schiller, Jean Paul, and others. When it comes to music, he is said to have taken language and concepts from the short-lived Wilhelm Heinrich Wackenroder (1773–98).¹⁴ What we find in the "philosophical" passages in his writing about music is certainly an energetic appropriation of terms and phrases belonging to that generation, but the terms and phrases cannot be taken too seriously. Even Hoffmann himself cannot possibly have believed that he was to music what, say, Schiller and the Schlegels had been to the literary arts.

And yet it would be wrong to dismiss Hoffmann's comments in the "philosophical" passages as worthless or meaningless. The question is what we can take from them that helps us understand (a) the notion of romanticism in music and, in this case, (b) the music of Beethoven in the period when Hoffmann wrote this review. "Purple shimmer," "spirit realm of the infinite," "presentiments of the unknown," "unknown realm" that has nothing in common with the "world of the senses"—these phrases cannot be understood literally, but it does make sense to look into the music Hoffmann was reviewing and see if there is some objective correlate to these phrases, something that the phrases describe, though perhaps with a healthy level of metaphorical language.

¹² Ibid., 47.

¹³ Ibid., 37. Thanks to my colleague Todd Kontje for his help with this passage.

¹⁴ See the introduction to Charlton, *E. T. A. Hoffmann's Musical Writings*, 1–20.

What Hoffmann saw and “heard” in Beethoven’s score was certainly (1) the purity of instrumental music, (2) a sense of grandeur or simply grandness of scale, (3) the presence of powerful and powerfully contrasting feelings, and (4) the elements of mystery, suspense, and surprise. And he chose an appropriate moment to note these elements in Beethoven’s music. In the most basic sense, Beethoven’s music in the previous six or seven years had crossed a threshold. While some of his earliest compositions in the 1790s had represented a departure from a musical past associated with Mozart and Haydn, by three years into the new century he was creating music that defiantly rejected traditions and redefined conventions. And though the Fifth Symphony is certainly among the best-known musical compositions in the history of Western music, I think the Sonata in F minor, op. 57 (*Appassionata*), composed in 1804 and 1805, serves as the earliest and boldest example of Beethoven’s break with the past and his entry into the territory of what Hoffmann characterized as “romantic.”

“PURE” INSTRUMENTAL MUSIC

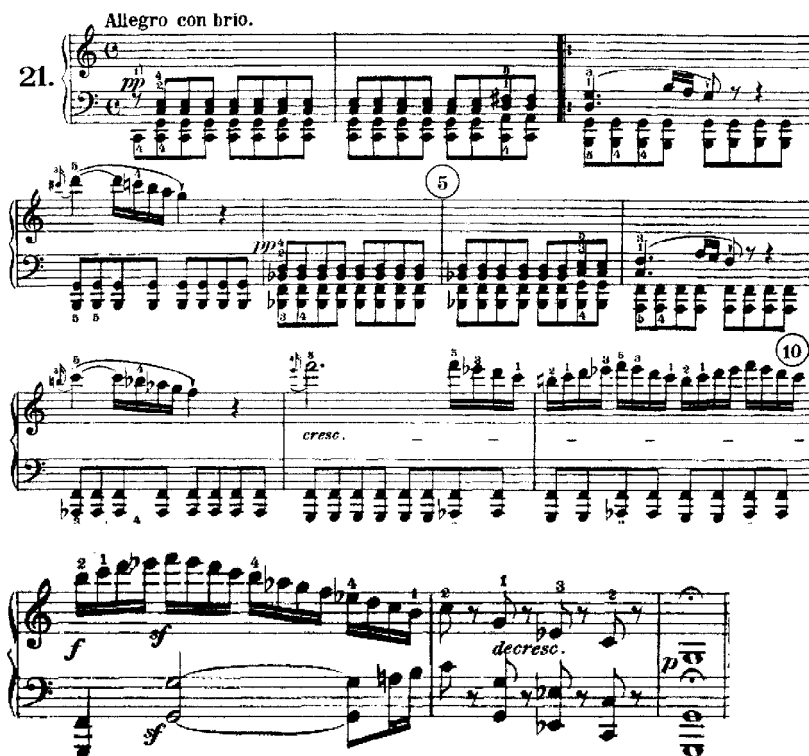
Of course, the Fifth Symphony and the *Appassionata* were written only for instruments and not for voice, so they satisfy one of Hoffmann’s requirements from the outset. But when Beethoven wrote the *Appassionata*, he was following a practice he had developed only recently in his piano sonatas. The *Appassionata* is Beethoven’s twenty-third piano sonata. If you look through the opening themes of the first movements of his first twenty, you’ll see that most of those themes are either easily or, at most, with modest difficulty singable. Here, for example, is number 18, op. 31, no. 3 (written 1801–2), to whose opening theme English-speaking piano students jokingly sing the words, “Mother dear, Mother dear, where are you now, where are you now? Here in the kitchen now!” (see example 2).





EXAMPLE 2.

It's with Sonata 21 (op. 53), the *Waldstein*, that things change. Beethoven wrote this sonata at the very end of 1803 and beginning of 1804. Here (example 3) is the opening theme:



EXAMPLE 3.

This theme is essentially unsingable. It would be technically possible, though extremely difficult, for a baritone to sing the top notes of the first three bars. But the real problem comes in bar 4, where the pitch reaches the

upper limits of the soprano voice and would require, from the baritone who opened the piece, a squeaking falsetto. And of course the sixteenth notes that follow would lie beyond the technical capacity of any singer except one with a preternatural capacity to sing lightning-fast passage work, hitting each note on pitch (Marilyn Horne comes to mind as a rare example).

Now let's examine the opening theme of the *Appassionata* (see example 4). We see immediately that Beethoven has abandoned any possible connection with the human voice. The theme is unsingable not only because of its range but because of its very character:

Allegro assai.

EXAMPLE 4.

The arpeggiated run in bars 13–15 is simply beyond the power of even a trained human voice to sing. The sonatas of Haydn and Mozart, not to mention earlier sonatas by Beethoven, contained plenty of passages that would be impossible or nearly impossible to sing. But rarely, if ever, did

such passages occur as an integral part of the opening theme of the first movement, as here in the *Appassionata*. (Beethoven, it should be noted, had given up singability in the *final* movement of a piano sonata at least as far back as the *Moonlight*, op. 27, no. 2, composed in 1801.) Beethoven would write singable opening themes for some of his remaining piano sonatas, but two notable exceptions are op. 106, the *Hammerklavier* (1817–19, see example 5) and op. 111, the last that Beethoven composed (1821–22, see example 6).



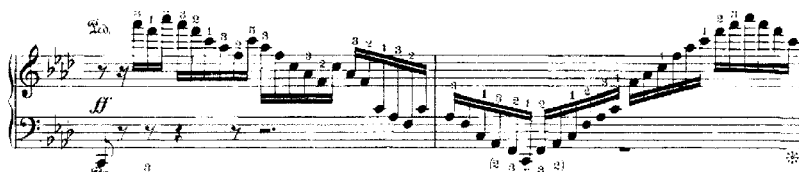
EXAMPLE 5.



EXAMPLE 6.

GRANDNESS OF SCALE

If we are speaking specifically of range as a factor in singability, and if we are speaking specifically of the piano, then we need to acknowledge that technical developments in the early years of the nineteenth century had given Beethoven possibilities that had not existed for Haydn and Mozart. In 1803, the French piano maker Sébastien Erard gave Beethoven a piano with a five-and-a-half octave range that extended from the low F at the beginning of the *Appassionata* to the C three octaves above middle C. Even before that, Viennese piano maker Johann Andreas Streicher had already been making pianos with as much as a six-octave range. In the *Appassionata*, Beethoven exploited the entire range of his Erard piano, using its lowest note in the first full bar and its top C in the coda to the first movement (once each in bars 231–32; see example 7):



EXAMPLE 7.

In sheer length, the *Appassionata* would certainly dwarf most eighteenth-century keyboard sonatas. Mozart's longest piano sonata, K. 284 in D major, clocks in at close to twenty-three minutes, but most of his others take between twelve and seventeen minutes to play (depending on the performance, of course). Within the corpus of Beethoven's piano sonatas, only his early op. 7, in E-flat major, which can take an astonishing twenty-eight minutes to perform, and the *Hammerklavier*, op. 106, which normally takes over forty, are longer. The *Waldstein*, the *Appassionata*, and op. 111 are roughly the same length, usually taking about twenty-four minutes.

But of course there is more to the scale of the *Appassionata* than the amount of time it takes most performers to play it. Here again technology played a crucial role. The repetition of the opening theme, in ascending *fortissimo* chords (example 8), could not have been played effectively on an eighteenth-century keyboard instrument (a) because that instrument might not have had the range, (b) because it would not have delivered the appropriate volume required even if it *had* had the requisite range, and (c) because, with repeated performances, it would probably not have held up under the pure physical force required to play it as notated.



EXAMPLE 8.

The new pianos built by Erard and such Viennese piano-makers as Streicher were intended to generate a bigger sound and to withstand the punishing power of the pianistic technique that Beethoven demanded (though Beethoven's own Erard eventually succumbed to the brute force of its owner's playing). So he composed loud, fast passage work, huge, crashing chords, extremely high notes in combination with extremely low notes (often with nothing in between), extended, fast, loud octave passages, and lengthy, pedaled passages that would have sounded tinny and insubstantial on the pianos for which Mozart had composed.¹⁵

If Beethoven had substantially broken new ground—as to scale—in symphonic composition with the *Eroica* Symphony in 1802–4, it was in part because he was willing simply to expand the size of the ensemble for which he was writing: more wind and percussion instruments and more

¹⁵ On Beethoven's pianos, see William S. Newman, "Beethoven's Pianos Versus His Piano Ideals," *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 34 (1970): 484–504; and Tilman Skowronek, "Beethoven's Erard piano: its influence on his compositions and on Viennese fortepiano building," *Early Music*, 30 (2002): 522–38.

musicians in each of the string sections. But the urge to expand comes through even more clearly in a keyboard composition. To be sure, there are new, larger, and more sonorous instruments available, but, to put it in the most basic terms, one cannot increase the number of fingers on a pianist's two hands. That a composer should demand so much more from those ten fingers signals an overarching drive to achieve volumes of sound never heard before from a piano.

POWERFUL AND POWERFULLY CONTRASTING FEELINGS

Any composer in Beethoven's era who wanted to express powerful and powerfully contrasting feelings through music had a form ready to hand. It was not given its current name, "sonata form," or a prescriptive theoretical definition until the time of Beethoven's death and after.¹⁶ But by the time Beethoven started composing music, the form had already been around for several generations. Composers used sonata form primarily in the first movements, less often in the final movements, of multi-movement pieces of various sorts, from sonatas so named, to concertos, to chamber music, to symphonies. To put it in the most rudimentary terms (and to use descriptive words that arose only in the mid-nineteenth century), sonata form generally looks like this:

- I. Exposition
 - (a) First theme or theme-group (melody plus additional musical material), in the tonic key
 - (b) Second theme or theme-group, in another key, usually the dominant (if the movement is in a major key)
- II. Development

A section in which elements of one or both themes are presented in relatively free form, often with frequent modulations and always leading back to the tonic key
- III. Recapitulation
 - (a) First theme or theme-group, in the tonic key

¹⁶ Sonata form was set forth in formulaic terms by French (Czech-born) composer Anton Reicha in a work published in 1926, German composer and music theorist Adolf Bernhard Marx in a work published in 1845, and Austrian composer Carl Czerny in a work published 1848. Marx is responsible for the phrase "sonata form." See Charles Rosen, *Sonata Forms* (New York: Norton, 1980), 3.

- (b) Second theme or theme-group, in the tonic key (or sometimes in the parallel major, if the movement is in a minor key)

IV. (Optional) Coda

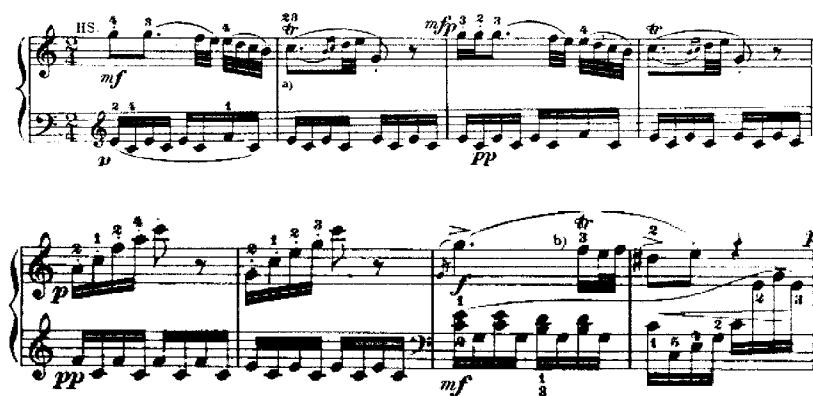
Concluding portion, often including elements of one or both principal themes

At first blush, the sonata form looks like a three-part structure (if we ignore the coda), especially given the near-symmetry of the exposition and recapitulation (which, apart from the difference in keys for the second theme are essentially identical), as they stand on either side of a “middle” section. Harmonically speaking, however, the form can look more like a slightly lop-sided two-part structure—less lopsided, actually, when we take into account that, up through Beethoven’s middle period, that is, up till the sonata that immediately precedes the *Appassionata*, the exposition was almost always repeated. If a composer called for a second repeat in the first movement, it always took in the development *plus* the recapitulation. Characteristically the exposition would end on a cadence (tonic chord preceded by a chord that “leads to it,” usually the dominant), but in the key of the second theme, not in the home key of the entire movement. There would typically be a sense of finality, with a rest after the final chord or a final chord held for a full beat or more, as if the composition could legitimately end right there and the performer could walk off stage. But it could *not* end there, because the final “tonic” was not that of the key in which the composition was written. It then took the combined development section and recapitulation to bring the movement satisfyingly back home, to a cadence on the true tonic. What’s more, it was typical for the development section, after a series of modulations through various keys, to flow continuously back into the first theme in the recapitulation, so that there was no clean break between development and recapitulation, as there was between exposition and recapitulation.

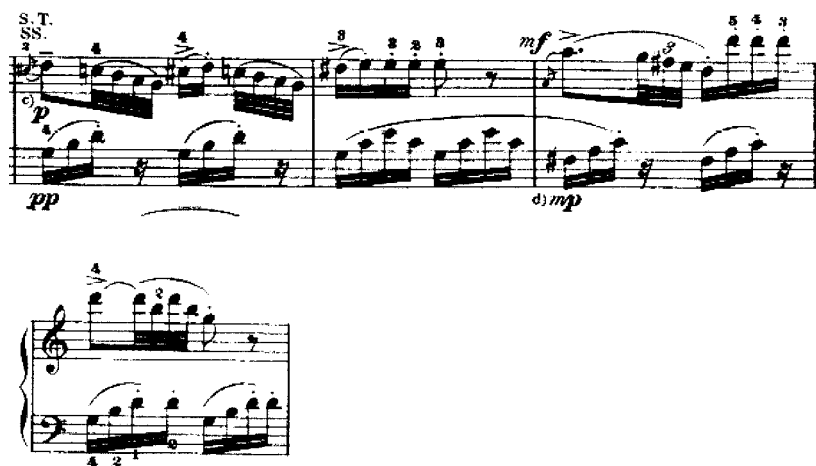
In its early history, sonata form typically included an additional structural feature. Between the section within the exposition (or recapitulation) that contained the material related to the first theme or theme-group and the section that contained the material related to the second, there was often a break of some sort: a cadence with a brief pause or some other indication that the composer was moving on to something new. An attentive listener was thus almost always aware of the advent of the second theme, and the second theme generally presented a contrast to the first. In the early days of the form, however, the contrasts were seldom of a strik-

ingly dramatic nature, and to modern ears most of them (that is, the contrasts, not necessarily the themes) sound unremarkable.

Here, for example, are the first and second themes from Mozart's Piano Sonata in C major, K. 330, written between 1781 and 1783 (examples 9 and 10). While neither theme sounds exactly like the other, they are not radically different in melodic character.



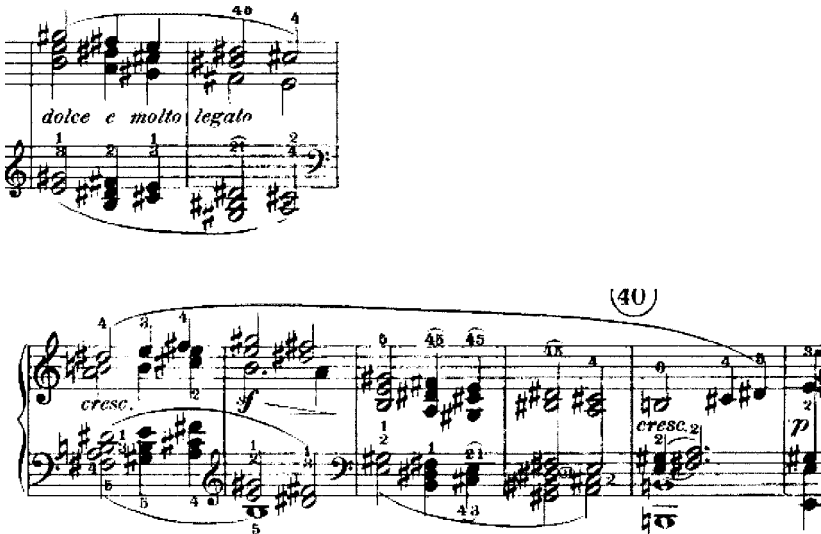
EXAMPLE 9.



EXAMPLE 10.

If there is tension in this structure, it stems largely from the relationship between the two keys, not from the contrast in melodic material. Instability is built into the first movement because of the need to move from the second key (in this case G major), as it ends the exposition, back to the first key (C major), as it ends the entire movement. But the instability is largely harmonic.

With Beethoven, the sonata form undergoes a major transformation. We can see the change already in the *Waldstein* Sonata. Compare the first theme (example 3, above) with the second theme (example 11):



EXAMPLE 11.

The opening theme (example 3) is a pulsating, unsingable passage that makes sense on almost no instrument except the piano. The second theme (example 11) is lyrical, sentimental, and eminently singable. What's more, Beethoven, instead of using the formulaic dominant (in this case, G major) for his second theme, turns to a key almost as distant from the tonic C major as possible: E major. The contrast between the two themes could hardly be more striking.

The same is true of the *Appassionata*. Compare the first theme (example 4) with the second theme (example 12):



EXAMPLE 12.

Once again, the contrast could hardly be more pronounced. The second theme (in a major key), though it is a sort of inversion of the first (ascending followed by descending, instead of descending followed by ascending, arpeggios), is as singable and sentimental as the first (in a minor key) is unsingable and ominous.

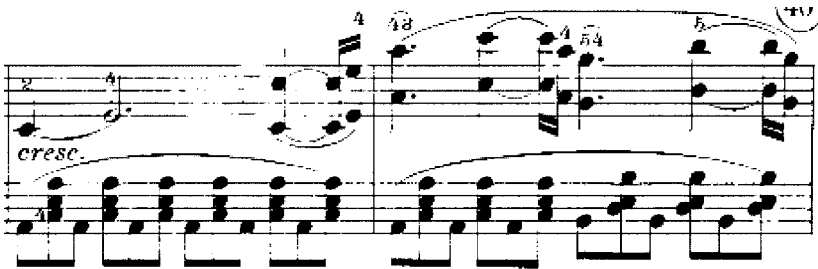
If there is an overriding message in the changes that Beethoven has introduced to the form of the sonata in the first movement of the *Appassionata*, it is that the organization has much less to do with the harmonic relations of the various sections (as in the eighteenth century) and much more to do with contrast in mood and feeling—contrast that is obvious and striking. Leonard Ratner, author of a standard work on musical romanticism, describes the change in sonata form from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century as one from a structure defined by harmony to a structure defined primarily by melody.¹⁷ If the character of a melody is thought of as

¹⁷ Leonard Ratner, *Romantic Music: Sound and Syntax* (New York: Schirmer, 1992), 271–72.

the feelings it conveys, then what Beethoven was beginning to do with sonata form in the early years of the new century is exactly what Ratner describes, but it is also what Hoffmann had in mind.

Beethoven had already begun to work with contrast at the level of the sonata form's two themes in the *Waldstein* Sonata, but now, in the *Appassionata*, he brings contrast down to the level of short, individual phrases, especially with dynamics. In fact, the young student attempting this sonata for the first time needs to be repeatedly reminded to pay attention to the composer's dynamic markings, because many of them are so surprising that they seem to fly in the face of musical common sense. And they are pervasive—so pervasive that there are far too many to mention here. But here are just a couple of especially noticeable examples. The arpeggiated run in example 4, marked *forte*, follows the first thirteen bars, marked *pianissimo*, and comes itself as a stunning surprise. One would expect the entire passage to be *forte*, including the final inverted C major chord (in the last bar of example 4), which would give a triumphant conclusion to the bold statement of this passage. But what's odd is that instead Beethoven asks the performer to become abruptly, unexpectedly soft on this chord. He then, of course, moves into a seven-bar passage that alternates *piano* and *fortissimo* almost measure-by-measure (see example 8).

Another musically counter-intuitive example occurs in the lyrical second theme. The second statement of this theme is marked *crescendo*, and the performer is expected to build to a climax. But when the climax arrives, on an A-flat major chord, Beethoven asks us, against anyone's conventional musical sensibilities, to get suddenly soft, then loud in the next measure, and soft again in the following measure (example 13):





EXAMPLE 13.

A literal reading of the score here leaves open the possibility that the *crescendo* is merely designed to take us from the *pianissimo*, marked seven bars back, to the *piano*, marked in the third bar of example 13—not to a dynamic level beyond *piano* and then back to a *subito piano*. But even if that is so (and I have never heard a single performance that followed this understanding of the markings), the *forte* and *sforzando* in the fourth bar are as jarring to the mood as a *subito piano* would be in the third. Depending on how you reckon, there are as many as nineteen surprise dynamic changes in the first movement's exposition section alone. If we are speaking purely of dynamic changes that come as surprises, I count not a single one in the first movement of the *Waldstein* Sonata.

So far, I've spoken almost exclusively of the first movement of the *Appassionata*. More than almost any other composition of the era that I can think of, this movement redefines sonata form in accordance with the principles that E. T. A. Hoffmann set forth in his review of the Fifth Symphony. And of course if we are considering feelings and, specifically, contrasting feelings, we should look briefly at the entire three-movement structure of the *Appassionata*. In presenting contrasting moods over the movements of a sonata, Beethoven was doing nothing new. Contrast had always been a hallmark of multi-movement compositions. But as in so many other areas, the way Beethoven departed from the past was in the raw amplitude of the characteristics he gave his work. In the *Appassionata*, the contrast between the first movement and the second, as well as between the second and the third, is enormous. With a few mild dynamic surprises, the second movement, written as a set of variations, is as serene, as untroubled, as harmonically simple as can be. And of course the final movement is as tumultuous, as stormy, and as harmonically defiant as can be imagined in Beethoven's era. I will return to it shortly.

MYSTERY, SUSPENSE, INSTABILITY, AND SURPRISE,
INCLUDING THE EPIC STRUGGLE BETWEEN THE
DASTARDLY DIMINISHED SEVENTH CHORD AND THE
DOUGHTY DOMINANT SEVENTH CHORD

There are innumerable examples of passages to which the terms “mystery,” “suspense,” “instability,” and “surprise” would legitimately apply. If it were possible to take a quantitative measurement of these elements, I dare say the result would show a much higher number than in any preceding piano sonata—perhaps *any* preceding composition—by Beethoven. I’ll touch on just a few.

Whatever E. T. A. Hoffmann may have thought of the opening of the Fifth Symphony, to my mind it does not come close to the opening of the *Appassionata* for expectation-defying features. In fact, from the point of view of harmony (not, say, from the point of view of rhythm), the opening of the Fifth Symphony could hardly be more conservative. When we turn to the *Appassionata*, we see that, once again, Beethoven had begun to test the limits of convention a few years earlier, in the *Waldstein*. There the opening theme started out in C major but almost immediately modulated to, and ended on, C minor. The opening to the *Appassionata* is even more radical. Before the *Waldstein*, Beethoven had never written a single piano sonata whose opening theme lacked a dominant-tonic cadence. In many but not all cases, the opening theme ended with such a cadence. The inclusion of this element gives the theme stability and the listener security; it establishes the tonality in the most fool-proof way: dominant followed by tonic. In fact, the very odd op. 54, which Beethoven wrote in between the *Waldstein* and the *Appassionata* and which is sometimes considered a kind of musical joke, starts out with a theme (see example 14) that includes three implicit or explicit cadences over a space of four measures and then *repeats* that theme, note for note—as if Beethoven were mocking the adventurousness he had just shown in the *Waldstein* and was about to show in the *Appassionata*.¹⁸

¹⁸ Donald Tovey speaks of the humor and the “Socratic irony” of this sonata. See his *A Companion to Beethoven’s Pianoforte Sonatas (Bar-to-bar Analysis)* (London: Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music, 1931), 161.



EXAMPLE 14.

Now have a look back at the beginning of the *Appassionata*, in example 4. The first statement of the theme starts on an F minor chord, the tonic, then moves to the dominant, C major, and closes with a sort of cadence to that dominant (the third and fourth full bars of example 4). The next thing that happens is a restatement of the theme but transposed to G-flat major. In musical parlance, this key, relative to F minor, is the *Neapolitan* (a half-step above the original key). Then we are back to the dominant in F minor (bars 9 and 10), followed by the VII chord (the chord built on the seventh degree of the scale, E natural in this case), a diminished seventh chord (bars 11 and 12). This chord also functions harmonically as a dominant, in that it can resolve to the tonic, but it does not do so here. Bars 12 through 15 hesitate between the dominant seventh (V chord) and the diminished seventh (VII chord), and this short section of the opening comes to rest on an inversion of the dominant C major triad, marked with a *fermata* (bar 16). The theme, on the F minor tonic, then repeats itself (starting at the end of bar 16), but because the C-major chord before it is inverted and because of the *fermata*, we don't get the sense of a cadence to the tonic. Once the theme repeats itself, with the famous crashing chords, it will quickly move into a whole new key, A-flat minor, and we won't see a return to the home key of F minor till the very end of the development section, in bar 123 of the movement, where the VII chord (that diminished seventh once again) signals the return to F minor. Even at that point, the F minor chord itself does not appear for a full thirteen bars. I will write more of the diminished seventh chord shortly. But for now it is safe to say that, at the level of

harmony, Beethoven has chosen to open the *Appassionata* Sonata in a mood of mystery, suspense, instability, and surprise. And that's not even to mention the dark, ominous quality of the opening theme and the dynamic surprises that fill the first minute's worth of music.

It's common for development sections of movements written in sonata form to be harmonically unstable. In fact, it had been a hallmark of such sections going back to Scarlatti to move through various keys, often freely switching from major to minor or minor to major. But apart from the dual-key structure owing to the presence of two themes in sonata form, exposition sections tend to move from a solid base in the home key to a solid base in the key of the second theme. In the exposition section of the *Appassionata*, by contrast, Beethoven seems to have intentionally placed the home key in the most ambiguous and unstable condition he could come up with.

All the other examples I would like to mention have to do with the diminished seventh chord, so let me now tell the story of the struggle between that chord and the dominant seventh chord—a struggle that might (with some liberty) be called the signature harmonic feature of the *Appassionata*. First, I will provide some definitions. A seventh chord is a chord composed of four notes from a given scale, with a scale note skipped between every two notes of the chord. A *dominant* seventh chord is the seventh chord built on the fifth (dominant) degree of the scale (also called a V-7, “five-seven”). In the key of C major, the dominant seventh chord would be spelled G-B-D-F. A *diminished* seventh chord is the seventh chord that occurs on the seventh degree of the *harmonic* minor scale (also called a VII-7). A harmonic minor scale is a minor scale with the seventh degree raised a half-step. If you start on an A on the piano and play an ascending scale on white keys to the A an octave above, but substitute a G-sharp for a G-natural, you have a harmonic minor scale. The VII-7 chord in the key of A minor would be spelled G-sharp-B-D-F.

The normal function of a diminished chord is to resolve cadentially to the tonic chord in a minor key, so it operates very much like the dominant or dominant seventh chord in that key. But the diminished seventh chord is implicitly unstable—more so than the dominant seventh chord. That's because the intervals between any of its adjacent notes are exactly the same (three half-steps). A diminished seventh chord can resolve to four different minor (or even major) chords. This makes it well suited to serving as a transition between two keys. It is found in compositions in minor keys, of course, but it is also found often in development sections of sonatas, sections that are tonally unstable, that is, that contain frequent key changes

and mode changes (major to minor and vice versa). Here (example 15) is the beginning of the development section of the Mozart piano sonata I mentioned earlier. There is a diminished seventh—or at least a suggestion of it—on the final eighth note of the first three measures, then again in the fifth measure, and then through the entire last two measures of the example. In these twelve measures, Mozart has changed keys (depending on how you count) as many as seven times, so the diminished seventh serves his purposes well.



EXAMPLE 15.

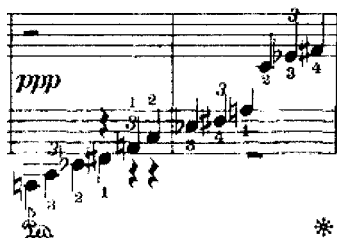
Because the traditional function of the diminished seventh was either to serve as an alternate to the dominant or to allow a composer to move from one key to another, it rarely appears more than fleetingly. It is not conventionally a chord that is meant to linger: it does its job and goes away. In his earlier work, Beethoven made use of the diminished seventh chord as any eighteenth-century composer (or earlier composer) would: frequently, in some compositions, but without prolonging its use in any given instance. Once again, a couple of exceptions arise in the *Waldstein*, both of them in the third movement. As he leads into the *prestissimo* coda, Beethoven gives us no fewer than 25 bars of preparation (see example 16), essentially built on the dominant seventh chord. But for nine of those bars (the seventh

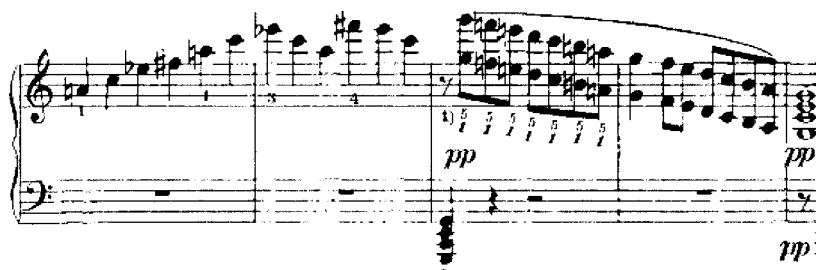
through the fifteenth bars in example 16), he builds a diminished seventh on top of the dominant and then, after a full bar's pause, gives us a different diminished seventh and, after yet another pause, a third one.



EXAMPLE 16.

Then, in the coda itself, he sets up the famous octave glissando passage (modern performers, playing on instruments with much deeper key-beds than Beethoven's piano, lubricate their pinky fingers by spitting on them just before playing this passage) with a four-bar diminished seventh arpeggio (example 17):





EXAMPLE 17.

But this is nothing compared with the use that Beethoven makes of this unstable chord in the *Appassionata*. There the diminished seventh chord makes its appearance almost immediately. Once again, look back at example 4. The end of each statement of the opening phrases consists of two inverted dominant chords (C major triads, not seventh chords) with a diminished seventh in between, serving as a dominant to (forming a cadence with) *them* (third and seventh full bars). The diminished seventh reappears in bars 9 and 11. Bars 11 and 13 introduce a motif that Beethoven will use throughout the movement. One German commentator called it the *Klopfmotiv* (“knocking motif,” presumably like the ominous knocking of Fate at the door): three eighth notes followed by a quarter note.¹⁹ We hear it in the bass, and then it is answered in the higher register. Since the bass notes are played separately from the treble notes, they form no true harmony. But if these bass notes (D-flat and C) were paired with the diminished triad formed by the treble notes, they would present a sequence of three diminished seventh chords followed by a dominant seventh. Beethoven, in fact, will explicitly use this sequence again and again in the first movement.

But the most dramatic presentation of the diminished seventh in these early bars of the first movement comes in the *forte* arpeggiated run—dramatic because it comes as a surprise (end of bar 13 through bar 15). Up till the fourth note from the end of that run (in bar 15), the only notes Beethoven has written (in different registers, of course) are E, G, and B-flat, which constitute a diminished triad (three-note chord), not a diminished seventh. The fourth note from the end of the run is the lone D-flat in the entire figure, but it’s the note that definitely establishes that the harmony is

¹⁹ The term *Klopfmotiv* appears in Hans Heinrich Eggebrecht, “Klaversonate f-Moll, Appassionata, op. 57,” in *Beethoven: Interpretationen seiner Werke*, ed. Albrecht Reithmüller et al. (Laaber: Laaber Verlag, 1994), 1:410–14.

a diminished seventh (E, G, B-flat, D-flat). And then, instead of resolving the diminished seventh in any of the customary ways—to a dominant or a tonic—Beethoven follows the run with an inversion of the VI chord (D-flat major) from the key of F minor (bar 15) before moving to the dominant triad in inversion (bar 16). No wonder that this arpeggiated run is the bane of every classical pianist's existence. It must be lightning-fast, loud, and note-perfect. If you flub the passage, you (a) ruin the harmonic effect of the diminished seventh chord and, because the passage occurs so early, (b) shatter your nerves for the remainder of the performance. The overall effect, from the first note of the movement, through the dominant triad in bar 16, to the crashing chords in the second statement of the theme, is of the most complete instability. The music moves by fits and starts, bursts and pauses, menacing forebodings and thunderous sallies—and never firmly settles into a key in any conventional way.

Again and again in the first movement, Beethoven takes the diminished seventh and, instead of using it fleetingly and transitionally, presents it locked in a struggle with the dominant seventh. We see it in the middle of the development section (example 18), in an arpeggiated passage where the left hand descends on a diminished seventh chord, and then, by alternating between A-flat and A natural, changes the harmony back and forth between the dominant and the diminished, ending triumphantly on the dominant.



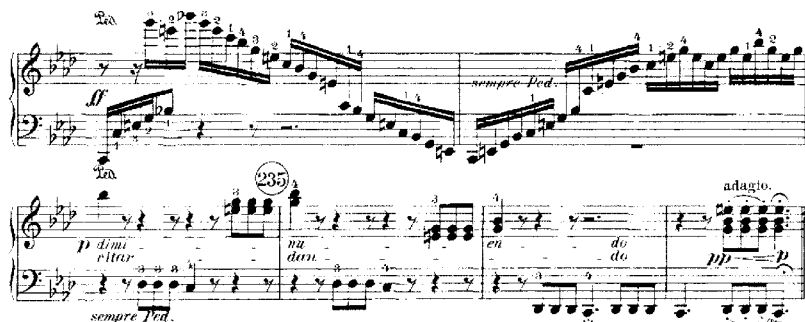
EXAMPLE 18.

The next passage in which Beethoven does this comes at the end of the development section and leads into the recapitulation (example 19). But this passage is noteworthy less for the alternating diminished-dominant than for something Beethoven does that, to the best of my knowledge, is unprecedented—at least in his own work. He delivers up nine straight measures (and remember that in the *Appassionata*, written in 12/8 time, each measure is long) of diminished seventh (E, G, B-flat, D-flat), leading to the *Klopfmotiv* on D-flats, before the left hand finally plays a thundering C in the bass (tenth measure of example 19), to establish the dominant (C, E, G, B-flat). We then hear two bars' worth of alternating diminished-dominant, leading into the repeated pedal-point Cs, which in turn lead into the recapitulation. The extended diminished seventh passage, played *fortissimo*, pedaled throughout (up to the C in the bass), and encompassing over five octaves of the piano's range, is so long, so loud, so staggeringly audacious as to leave no doubt that the composer has intentionally taken this unstable chord, traditionally reserved for a purely transitional function, and pugnaciously thrust it into our world as an assault on our senses. And, as we'll see, it's not the last time he does this in the *Appassionata*.



EXAMPLE 19.

The coda is split into two parts, with a final section marked *più allegro*. Leading up to that final section is a long series of arpeggios, the final one on the dominant seventh. Beethoven repeats the *Klopfmotiv* in bass and treble and then puts the bass and treble together for one final iteration of the diminished-dominant alternation, ending on the dominant (see example 20).



EXAMPLE 20.

The final section of the coda represents the triumph of dominant over diminished. It begins with a crashing cadence, consisting of three dominant seventh chords followed by the tonic F minor (see example 21).



EXAMPLE 21.

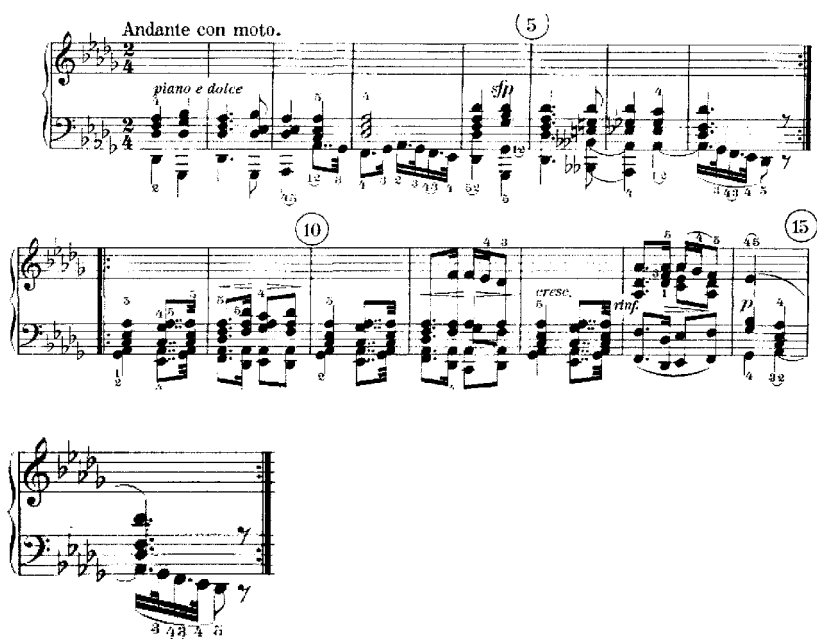
Though the diminished comes back fleetingly in this final section, it serves its purely conventional function as transitional between other harmonies. The last fifteen bars of the movement consist of simply dominant and tonic (including the II chord of F minor, a G half-diminished chord, which functions as a dominant). As if to reinforce the priority of the tonic harmony, Beethoven closes with six straight bars that are nothing but an F minor chord, played in arpeggio, echoing the opening of the movement (example 22).

Example 22 is a longer musical excerpt in G minor, 4/4 time. It features a piano (p) section in the right hand with a triplet of eighth notes (B-flat, D, E-flat) and a forte (ff) section in the left hand with a triplet of eighth notes (F, G, A-flat). The tempo marking 'più allegro.' is written above the right hand. A small asterisk (*) is placed below the first measure of the left hand. The score includes a measure marked '260' and a final measure with a repeat sign.

EXAMPLE 22.

The second movement of the *Appassionata*, in D flat major, is an oasis; there is not a single diminished seventh harmony to be found in it, except

in the transition to the third movement. In fact, apart from a Neapolitan harmony (the second chord in the sixth bar of example 23) that serves as a link to the dominant (approaching it from a half-step above), the only harmonies are tonic, dominant, and the IV and II chords (for example, the second chord in the first bar and the second chord in the second bar, respectively), which are equivalent in function. The movement is constructed as theme and variations, and the harmonies of the theme are fully retained in all variations. Many harmonies appear in inversion, but there is nothing unconventional about that. Harmonically, the movement is simplicity itself.



EXAMPLE 23.

Then, at the end, comes the transition to the third movement. Here is classic mystery and suspense for E. T. A. Hoffmann. As the music moves toward a traditional dominant-to-tonic cadence, Beethoven surprises his audience (the rare listeners today who do not know what is coming) with a rolled diminished seventh chord, *pianissimo* (example 24). The young pianist studying the *Appassionata* for the first time is cautioned not to spoil the surprise visually by letting on that something yet more dramatic is about to happen in the next measure: you pretend that you are going to play another *pianissimo* chord, moving very slowly and calmly to your next hand posi-

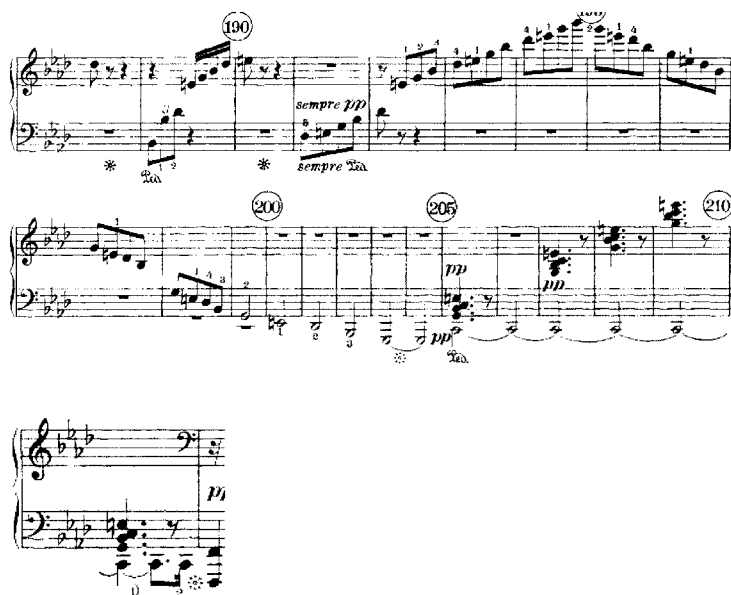
tion, and then you suddenly unleash the second rolled diminished seventh, an octave higher, *fortissimo*. What follows is even more audacious than anything we heard in the first movement: thirteen identical diminished seventh chords, in dotted rhythm, pounded out as if to reduce Beethoven's Erard piano to matchwood.



EXAMPLE 24.

The movement thus initiated loosely follows sonata form, something fairly uncommon in final movements. In its central themes, it contains relatively little in the way of diminished seventh harmonies—except at the end of the development section, just as in the first movement. But here Beethoven outdoes himself and writes twenty-two straight bars of arpeggiated diminished seventh, followed by six bars of dominant seventh that lead into the recapitulation (example 25).





EXAMPLE 25.

Once this passage is finished and we return to the first theme in the recapitulation, the diminished seventh chord has had its day in the three-movement work. The famous coda to the third movement, played *presto* and *fortissimo*, is introduced by a frenetic, urgent assertion of the conventional dominant-tonic sequence. Look at the left-hand part in example 26, and you'll see that it consists entirely of dense, loud dominant seventh chords and tonic triads.





EXAMPLE 26.

The coda itself, beginning with the Hungarian-style dance that seems to come out of nowhere, is an orgy of dominant-tonic harmony. This section (example 27) gives us its theme first in minor, then in major and, apart from a couple of transitional harmonies (the seventh, sixteenth, and seventeenth bars of example 27), consists entirely of tonic and dominant chords.



EXAMPLE 27.

The remainder of the coda is a *perpetuum mobile* that contains three harmonies only: the dominant, the tonic, and the Neapolitan G-flat major

chord with which Beethoven had surprised us in the second statement of the opening theme back in the first movement. For the last twenty-one increasingly frantic bars, we hear only dominant and tonic, and the last nine contain only the tonic, pedaled and hammered out with deafening intensity.

If we are talking about mystery, suspense, instability, and surprise as correlates to the much more vaguely defined qualities that E. T. A. Hoffmann named in his review of the Fifth Symphony, we can see that these qualities are pervasive in the *Appassionata* Sonata. If we take these qualities as corresponding to feelings, and if we're looking for both powerful and contrasting feelings, we can see that the *Appassionata* almost perfectly embodies Hoffmann's notion of what romanticism in music should be. In fact, strange as it might sound, the story of the struggle between the diminished seventh chord and the dominant seventh chord musically enacts the form of yet another romantic phenomenon from a slightly earlier era, this time a literary one: the Gothic novel. A formula that developed for this genre, though not every example followed it, called for the bulk of a story to be filled with events both ghastly and apparently supernatural. In the end, justice would (generally) prevail: evil would be punished and goodness would triumph. But as to the events that had defied the known laws of nature, in the end they were given a perfectly rational explanation fully consistent with then-known principles of science. Think, for example, of a much later descendant of the Gothic novel, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's *Hound of the Baskervilles* (1902), at the end of which we learn that the mouth and eyelids of the apparently fire-breathing hell-hound had been painted with a phosphorescent substance that glows in the dark.

But of course, we read Gothic novels not for the satisfying resolution at the end, where we learn that everything is right in the world and that nothing violates its rational order; we read them for the interim, where we have every reason to believe that evil will prevail and that nature's laws are being violated right and left. Something similar is going on in the *Appassionata*. While a stable and simple harmonic system emerges triumphant at the end of the first and third movements, Beethoven has forced us in both cases to live in the darkness of harmonic instability, marked especially (but not exclusively) by the prominence of the diminished seventh chord, all the way till the coda in the final movement and the middle of the coda in the first. What do we remember about the *Hound of the Baskervilles*, the scientific explanation at the end? No, we remember our terror at the spectacle of a calf-sized dog whose mouth was on fire and whose eyes glowed in the dark.

What do we remember about the *Appassionata*? The return to a secure harmonic system at the end of the first and third movements? No, we remember the musical turmoil that constituted bulk of each of those movements.

E. T. A. Hoffmann would have approved.

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