

Berklee College of Music

## **Beethoven Sonata No. 10 Musical Analysis**

An ambiguous journey through Beethoven's subconscious

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Listening to the first movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No.10 for the first time might give the impression that the piece lacks the intensity and extreme features present in his most famous pieces. Although the piece is still characteristic of the composer's style, upon further analysis it becomes clear that Beethoven tastefully makes use of his trademark compositional devices such as foreshadowing of form through accidental notes and rhythmic displacement.

### **Thematic Implications:**

The piece starts with a six note motive played in the soprano voice with the notes D, A#, B, F#, G where the A# and F# function as approach notes to B and G (G major chord tones). The decision to start the piece with a monophonic motive that starts in the dominant and has to travel through both an accidental note and the leading tone in order to arrive at the tonic creates a sense of harmonic ambiguity. The use of a pick-up measure in the motive displaces the strong beat through measures one to four giving the first theme a rhythmic ambiguity as well. Throughout the rest of the piece, Beethoven explores and satisfies all of the rhythmic and harmonic uncertainties created in the first theme. And by repeating the unstable theme in the recapitulation, Beethoven gives the listener a pleasant experience of hearing ambiguous notes coupled with a new feeling of accomplishment in understanding the previously mysterious theme.

To unlock the potential meaning of the first accidental note it is necessary to understand the form of the piece, which meticulously follows the allegro sonata convention. This form includes a transition in the first theme (m.9 - 25) moving the piece from G major to the dominant key of D major for the second theme. Additionally, a

development section (m.64 - 80) includes: g minor and B<sup>b</sup> major, a false recapitulation (m.99 - 124) in E<sup>b</sup> major and g minor and a 14 measure coda (m.187 - 200) in the key of G major reestablished during the recapitulation (m. 124 - 186). The use of the accidental A# (B<sup>b</sup>) in the rest of the theme likely foreshadows Beethoven's choice to modulate to g minor and B<sup>b</sup> major in both the development section and false recapitulation. This device can be seen in several of Beethoven's other pieces and may also suggest the use of the diatonic leading tone F# as a reference to the modulation to D major in the second theme.

The rhythmic displacement of the theme is slowly resolved during the next eight measures. It starts with the placement of the melody, which displaces the strong beat by introducing the left hand in the second eighth note of the beat. That initial displacement is resolved in the soprano voice (m.5). However the feeling of rhythmic uncertainty is still present due to the fact that Beethoven prevents us from hearing the base note on the first beat. He does this by shortening the first note's delay to the second sixteenth note of the beat until measure eight when we get the first PAC. This measure is where both the base and soprano voices are played on beat one fully establishing both the 2/4 meter and the G major key. The rhythmic ambiguity of the piece is perhaps best explored during the development section (m.64 - 98) where the first theme motif is re-explored with the same rhythmic displacements and resolutions in the soprano voice (m. 64 - 69). Instead of resolving the left hand displacement, however, Beethoven uses a canonic imitation (m.68) which takes us to the reinterpretation of the second theme in Bb without ever playing a base note on beat one until the development's transition (m.81). However, our sense of meter is still unsatisfied because as soon as we hear the base note on beat



Another way of applying the Fibonacci sequence to Beethoven's piano sonata is to see how it relates to the measure count. At initial glance, the first 5 instances of the sequence (1, 2, 3, 5, 8) point out significant moments in theme one, such as the introduction of the motive (m.1), its reappearance with the left hand an octave above (m.2), the first change of harmony (m.3), the first melodic development and the resolution of the rhythmic displacement (m.5) where the bass note is performed in beat one, resolving the rhythmic uncertainty (m.8). These coincidences, however, are more likely related to the common structure of a four measure statement in eight measure phrases. Another way to analyze the piece against the Fibonacci sequence is to apply the golden section multiplication to the number of measures (ignoring the repeats) leading us to an interesting conclusion. By multiplying the piece's 200 measures to 0.618 we return the measure 123.6, which is 0.4 measures away from the real recapitulation. This reinforces the idea that Beethoven's subconscious decided to give emphasis to the recapitulation, as it appears proportionally with the golden section, thereby giving meaning to all of the melodic and rhythmic ambiguities relating to the Fibonacci sequence,

Whether these mathematical implications were worked into the piece intentionally or accidentally, they may still serve as a window into Beethoven's ability to keep the listener on the edge of comprehension. By developing a theme with syntactical ambiguity meticulously related to the form of the piece, he steers the listener with a constant sense of discovery and excitement.