

Trevor de Clercq
Music 252
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Beethoven Piano Sonata no. 16

In his Sonata no. 16, Beethoven cleverly plays with the ambiguities between major and minor. This piece begins innocently enough: the first group extends from bars 1-11 and is set solidly in G major, ending with a cadence on V. This first group has two distinct motives which Beethoven uses later: motive 1A (the sixteenth note figure in bar 2) and motive 1B (the rhythmically disjunct figure which appears in bars 3-9). Beethoven, however, immediately destroys tonal certainty by transposing the opening group down a whole step into F major (an unusually distinct key from G major). This transposition, by implying g minor through mixture, sets up the tonal ambiguities in the piece to come. Also, the exact transposition cadences on IV in G major, allowing Beethoven to easily cadence back to I in bars 23-29. Bars 30-38 see an alternation between I and V through an extended use of motive 1A. Bars 39-45 are merely an extended dominant chord based on the running sixteenth notes of motive 1A. At this point, theoretically Beethoven could have introduced his second theme in the dominant because of the long prolongation of the dominant. But Beethoven is a better composer than that; he knows he has not prepared a new key very well. So in bar 46 he starts his first group again. Of course, we know Beethoven is going to make some changes to lead him where he wants to go. And in bar 53, as expected, the vi chord pivots as a iv/iii chord, followed by a V/iii. Bars 55-65 extend this preparation for a cadence in b min, the relative minor of the dominant. The second group appears in bar 66-73 as we expect; but wait, it is set in B major instead of b minor. The second group's melody returns in the left hand of bar 74, set in b min as it should have been. But in bar 78, Beethoven moves again, ascending through i-III-v with the second group's theme. He descends (iv-III-ii^o) in bars 83-87 to land on V. He then replays the chords from bars 78-87 in bars 88-97, but pops the melody back into the right hand where it originally was. This chordal repetition prepares for Beethoven's closing material which appears in bars 98-111. This closing material is simply an alternation between i and V, using a variation of the second group's theme. Bar 100 shows an interesting reference back to B major in which the second group was introduced. Bar 104 is an example of compression which Beethoven uses to heighten the sense of closure.

The development begins simply enough with a false recapitulation. But Beethoven needs to move. Bar 119 shows the beginnings of a tonicization of Bb major (bIII of our tonic G major). Beethoven moves through ii and V with many applied diminished chords to finally cadence on Bb in bar 134. Motive 1B is Beethoven's vehicle during this move. In bar 134 Beethoven switches to motive 1A, alternating between tonic and dominant of Bb. By bar 142, a diminished seventh chord has moved us to c minor, and by bar 150, another has moved us to d minor. So far, Beethoven has outlined III-iv-v in g minor (parallel minor of G major). Finally in bar 156 we reach our goal of g minor. But Beethoven needs a dominant pedal to bring him back to G major for the recapitulation. Bars 158-161 circle around the dominant using a German 4-2 chord. Bars 162-192 are merely Beethoven's dominant pedal, similar to bars 39-43, eventually using material from motive 1B to extend the pedal. The dominant flat 9 chords (bars 182, 184, 186, 190) imply a move back to g minor, but this implication is merely a subtle game Beethoven is playing with the listener.

Bar 194 shows the true recapitulation of the first group. Beethoven skips the redundant transposition in F major and goes directly to bars 23-26 in bars 205-208. Beethoven needs to now rewrite his transition material so that it will lead him to the relative minor of the tonic (e minor) instead of the relative minor of the dominant as it did before. Bars 209-217 are that rewrite. Bar 218 shows the expected return of the second group but in the parallel major as it appeared before. Beethoven has a slight problem, however. The original closing material closed in the relative minor of the dominant, but Beethoven does not want to close his piece in the relative minor of the tonic as would happen with a simple transposition of the second group. He therefore restates the second group in the tonic, G major, at bar 234. When the change back to minor is supposed to occur at bar 241, Beethoven leaves it in major, allowing him now to simply tack on the closing material in the parallel major. So bars 246-279 are this transposition of the closing material, originally in b minor, to G major; many of the chords are flipped from major to minor and vice versa. Bars 266-269 are a good example of this: originally i-V-I-V in b minor, it is now written I-V-i-V in G major. Clever. Unfortunately, Beethoven's closing material circles back to the beginning with the head of the first group (motive 1A). Theoretically, Beethoven could have merely dropped this head and substituted a few tonic chords to close the piece. But Beethoven opts for a coda and keeps the head. He leads this motive, however, not to a full recapitulation, but to an extension of tonic-dominant alternation first seen in bars 30-44. He closes the piece with more tonic-dominant flip-flopping through bars 296-end, using motive 1B as a rhythmic basis.

The End