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Music 452 Agawu

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Beethoven Piano Sonata

Op. 109

A Schenkerian graph, theoretically speaking, should be able to stand alone without additional commentary. I could, therefore, (theoretically speaking) accompany my graph with nothing or anything or something like a piece of rhapsodic prose whose Jewish main character's dreams and delusions are determined by the musical events of the sonata. However, after finishing the graph, standing back, and deeply breathing in a sense of my own musical powers, I felt a few salient features of this sonata still needed addressing. Those features are:

The Double-Neighbor Figure: In bars 6-8, a double neighbor figure appears in the bass part (F#-G#-E-F#). Some may question the validity of this title since the first F# is the fifth of a dominant chord while the second F# is the root of V6-4/V, but the recurrence of this theme in the development proves that it is no passing figuration. Bars 16-18 see the next appearance of the figure (E-D#-F#-E in the left hand). Beethoven, however, softens the strength of the ornament by rhythmically displacing the D# with a G#, saving the full power for later. In bars 21-22, a compression of the motive develops even further. Taking the G# (first note of each bar in the left hand) as the pivot,

that second pair of sixteenth notes in bar 21 hints at another double neighbor. Finally, in bar 33-34, Beethoven releases a regular figure. Notice how this ornament controls three out of the four parts in the right hand. In bar 35 Beethoven truncates the double neighbor to give a subtle syncopation to the hypermeter, but by bars 36-39 the motive is back, now over the dominant pedal. Other double neighbors, beginning in bar 85, are played with, but never fully realized.

**The Parallel Tenths Series:** The piece opens with a descending sequence of parallel tenths in the bass and alto parts, reflected in the Schenkerian graph. Ignoring the soprano part (beginning on B) seemed necessary for three reasons: 1) the first note of the piece was the G#; 2) using the B would encourage a five-line; and most important 3) the resulting parallel fifths between the bass and soprano desired avoiding. Anyway, these parallel tenths remain important throughout the work. The tenths in bars 4-6 are, of course, merely a recomposition of the opening phrase. As a tenuous extension to the motive, I propose a relationship between the tenths above the stemmed notes in the second theme to the opening tenths, which holds true for both the exposition and the recapitulation. More important are the parallel tenths beginning in bar 27 which lead up to V/V. A series of long-range ascending thirds supports these parallel tenths, which probably relates back to the soprano's opening descending thirds. Also, tenths, starting in bar 38, prolong the dominant pedal through a descending bass

reminiscent of the opening. The coda finishes the development of this parallel tenths motive through to bar 75.

The Sonata Form Dilemma: This first movement follows all of the principles of sonata form. Because of the piece's short length, however, it carries them out with methods unique to Op. 109. The first group is merely the opening four bar phrase, cadencing back on the tonic. The consequent four bars are already the transition to the second group in the dominant. Probably to emphasize this second group after such a short opening, Beethoven abruptly changes the tempo from vivace to adagio, a characteristic of later romantic sonatas. After the second group (bars 9 and 10) follows a five bar closing theme. The development, which uses obvious motivic play, ends up lasting over twice as long (counting measures) as the exposition, giving the piece a strong sense of organic thematic unity and relating it again to other nineteenth-century sonatas. The recapitulation is straightforward, changing the key area of the second group from the dominant back to the tonic. Finally, the coda (bar 66 to the end) shadows the function of the development section: the coda lasts just as many measures (32) if the closing tonic chord is ignored and instead of starting a fifth up from the tonic as in the development, balances the piece by starting a fifth down in the subdominant. This coda section is an obvious organic extension of the opening motive. The high level of thematic development of this piece and the easy, fluid moves between sections mark it as a later work in the history of the sonata.

The Measures 12-13/61-62 Revelation: The closing theme encompasses bars 11-15 in the exposition and bars 60-65 in the recapitulation. In both sections the closing theme includes strange/remote chords (III#/V in bar 13 and bVI in bar 62). Where do these chords come from? The bVI is a common key area in Beethoven recapitulations, but does it have any structural significance? Yes; as the Schenkerian graph shows, these extended chords are merely a recomposition of the basic closing theme progression I6-IV6-V which occurs in bars 11 and 60. Beethoven retains the same bass notes, but reharmonizes them for his chord flourishes. In the recapitulation, since the closing bass progression occurs three times instead of two, he flattens the second appearance for the variety of the characteristic bVI flavor.

Theses many novel yet subtle approaches to simple "sonata form" and simple chord progressions prove that a great master such as Beethoven can transcend the clichés handed down to him from the previous masters.