

The Many Themes of Beethoven's Op. 2, No. 3, and Their Stylistic Context

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Abstract

Musicians have long disagreed about how to parse the exposition of Ludwig van Beethoven's Piano Sonata in C, Op. 2/3/1, particularly as regards determining the formal function of the G minor theme of mm. 27–46. Many of these disagreements result from viewing the form of this exposition primarily through concepts that developed during the nineteenth century and formal models that are particularly well suited for Beethoven's later works. However, especially considering the relatively early date of its composition, it might be more fruitful to consider the form of the exposition of Op. 2/3/1 in relation to layouts discussed by eighteenth-century theorists, layouts that may be witnessed in many works composed during this era. When viewed in relation to these earlier frameworks, the form of the exposition of Op. 2/3/1 may be understood to be quite conventional. Furthermore, such a historically based vantage point can significantly impact the understanding of this exposition's voice-leading structure.

Where do the standard theme sections begin and end in the exposition from Ludwig van Beethoven's Piano Sonata in C, Op. 2, No. 3? This question has long been a source of contention among music analysts. Owing to disagreements regarding its parsing, some have proposed that Op. 2/3/1's exposition evinces a type of expressive ambiguity, one that derives from a collision of formal functions.¹

Yet it may instead be that the difficulties in dealing with this exposition's layout result not so much from ambiguity in the work itself, but from its incompatibility with the formal models that are commonly used in modern analytic approaches to sonata form. These models are largely based on theoretic concepts that stem from the mid-nineteenth century and beyond. To a great extent, they have been influenced by the practices witnessed in Beethoven's compositions, including a number that were penned long after the publication of his Op. 2 sonatas. Naturally, when he composed his Op. 2 sonatas, neither Beethoven nor his audiences would have known of his later works or their conventions. As such, when compared to Beethoven's oeuvre as a whole, the procedures witnessed in these early sonatas understandably might seem somewhat unusual.

On the other hand, when matched with practices found in other compositions composed around the same time or before, as discussed in writings from the era, many of the seemingly odd formal features from Op. 2/3/1 may be seen as quite typical of their style. This helps set in relief those stylistic features of the movement that are indeed truly special. And in a larger sense, examining this movement's exposition within its eighteenth-century stylistic context helps shed light on how one might approach form in Beethoven's early practice in general.

Basic layout of exposition

As depicted in Ex. 1, the exposition of Op. 2/3/1 may be understood as governed by four, clearly articulated sections, each firmly marked by a cadential break (that is, by a cadence followed by a conspicuous, brief pause in the melody, accompaniment, or both). Each of these sections begins with a soft theme that is variously hesitant, restless, or lyrical and that eventually gives way to a passage that drives toward a cadence in a loud, active manner.²

The succession of these sections appears to convey a type of narrative, one whose tonal and cadential framework is quite clear and

¹ See, for instance, comments in Hunt 2014: 250; see also Dahlhaus 1987, Drabkin 2004, Kirillina 2009, and Caplin 2010, which are discussed below.

² A layout along these lines has been explicitly offered by Keym (2021).