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## Beethoven's Opus 96: The Sonata for Piano and Violin Perfected

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The University of Southern Mississippi

Beethoven's Opus 96: The Sonata for Piano and Violin Perfected

by

Paul Stanton Roberts

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## **Abstract**

This thesis attempts to shed light on Beethoven's final sonata for Piano and Violin, the *Sonata for Piano and Violin op. 96 in G major*. Presented first is a survey of music for violin and piano throughout previous centuries (in itself a valuable resource for those who want to approach this ambiguous and disorganized subject) followed by a discussion of Beethoven's sonatas leading up to the composition of Opus 96. Then follows a more detailed discussion of the piece itself as seen through the eyes (more accurately, heard through the ears) of one who has prepared a performance of it and has thus spent much time becoming acquainted with the music – the author of this paper. The most notable observations include the identification of various styles of writing for the two instruments, as they relate to other compositional techniques discussed in the preceding chapters, and also the engendering of the notion that the music itself in Opus 96 is tied to the aesthetic of a duet.

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## Chapter 1: Introduction

Ludwig Van Beethoven's *Sonata for Piano and Violin op. 96 in G major* occupies a central position in the development of music for keyboard and violin. Indeed, all of Beethoven's Sonatas for Violin and Piano have been identified by Lockwood and Kroll as "turning points in the history of the genre and of chamber music itself" (2). Aside from the general move towards romanticism with which Beethoven is credited in all genres of his work, Beethoven's contributions in his ten Sonatas for Piano and Violin also include the final establishment of the Piano and Violin Duo Sonata as a legitimate compositional form in which many significant composers of the nineteenth century would try their hand. And according to Sieghard Brandenburg, it is in Opus 96, his tenth and final endeavor in this form, that "Beethoven was fully able to show how he imagined the ideal violin sonata" (Lockwood 22).

The purpose of this thesis is twofold: first, to establish the historical significance of Beethoven's *Sonata for Piano and Violin op. 96*; and second, to explore the piece itself as a performer preparing a recital. To achieve the former objective, it will be necessary first to provide a brief explanation of the history and development of music for violin and keyboard in order to identify Beethoven's position therein, and then to explain the special significance of opus 96 among the composer's output. Success in the former objective will be vital for success in the latter as this research will allow me to prepare for the recital in full awareness of the historical context of this music.

Terms such as "Sonata for Piano and Violin," "Duo Sonata," and "Accompanied Sonata" often seem to be used interchangeably in discussion of the large and mostly

informal body of music for piano and violin (or other melodic instrument); however, “Sonata for Piano and Violin” (as this thesis will reveal) is the description given by Beethoven only to Opus 96 – his last composition for these two instruments. The fact that the same term has been used by so many subsequent composers and has come to often refer to an entire genre of music strongly emphasizes the significance of this particular piece of music.



## Chapter 2: Music for Violin and Keyboard

When discussing the history of western art music, one must avoid the temptation to look for a purely evolutionary and chronological development in compositional practices, and a degree of caution is necessary in approaching the century of music for melody instrument (in most cases violin, though often flute or other) and keyboard leading up to Beethoven's oeuvre. The eighteenth century is teeming with compositions for such a pair; however, the variances of texture, performance practices (or purposes) and relative roles of the two instruments prevent the numerous manifestations of this scoring from being adequately placed under a single label. In his article, "Accompanied Keyboard Music," David Fuller presents an analogy for chamber music for melody instrument and keyboard in which he compares it to "a plant that has grown together from scattered seeds" (224). He then deepens the analogy, explaining that the roots are the most separate and distinct part, but as time passes and they grow together they become increasingly difficult to distinguish until finally a solid trunk is formed (224).

The first appearance of music for violin and keyboard as a standard compositional practice occurred in the Baroque era, in which instrumental music for small ensembles, freed from its service to lyrics and to the church, experienced rapid growth. Newman points out that the general trend of the Baroque era scoring was from many instruments to few: the height of the era was dominated by works for one or two instruments with a basso continuo accompaniment, usually in the form of figured bass realized on a keyboard instrument (*Sonata in the Baroque Era* 52). Not surprisingly, the

prevailing instrument to be featured in such compositions was the violin. The years spanning the end of the seventeenth century and the beginning of the eighteenth century included, in concurrence with the development of the baroque sonata, monumental advancements in the history of the violin, such as the instrument-making of Stradivari and the compositions of Corelli, Vivaldi and Bach. Newman goes so far as to say that the violin reached its first peak "primarily as a vehicle of the sonata" (*Sonata in the Baroque Era* 54). The role of the keyboard, by contrast, was a subservient one – its primary function being to accompany other instruments by realizing a basso continuo line. Furthermore, the keyboard was often considered unnecessary when a bass or cello would have been equally capable of playing the continuo part (Newman 56, 59). This tendency illustrates the baroque aesthetic preference of counterpoint – the melody and accompaniment very distinct in range and contour – rather than harmony.

Though the composition and performance of continuo sonatas endured throughout the classical era and into the nineteenth century, a new scoring for violin and keyboard emerged around the middle of the eighteenth century and flourished for several decades. The "accompanied sonata" describes a keyboard sonata for which the composer provided an insubstantial part for violin (or other melody instrument) so that the piece could be performed by one or two players, as it suited them. Therefore, the keyboard was the dominant instrument in these pieces, while the role of the violin was merely to accompany the keyboard by providing occasional support or decoration. The role reversal demonstrates a strong contrast to the continuo sonatas, in which the keyboard's purpose was to support the violin. Accompanied sonatas sprang up in

response to new music practices and consumers; keyboards had become the center of social life, particularly for young women (Fuller 226). Fuller's explanation for the rapid growth of accompanied sonatas remarks on the "enormous demand on the part of ladies of quality for keyboard music" – a demand that accompanied the emergence and growth of a new upper-class, the "bourgeois" social sphere, as well as the gradual replacement of the harpsichord by the more pleasing pianofortes (224). In the accompanied sonata setting, an accomplished young lady could demonstrate her refinement at the keyboard while being joined by a friend or suitor who would have much less musical training and could contribute the less involved and rarely integral violin part (Harlow 43).

In addition to the choice between violin and flute for the accompaniment itself, another flexibility of practice existed in the accompanied sonatas of the classical era: the option of adding a cellist to the little ensemble with the simple task of doubling the bass part of the keyboard (Newman, *Sonata in the Classic Era* 101). The frequent occurrence of this addition, while even more superfluous than the violin part, not only vividly illustrates the informality of this scoring, but also reveals that accompanied sonatas were not wholly different from their counterparts, the continuo sonatas. In the baroque continuo setting, mentioned above, the basso continuo could be realized by cello/bass, by keyboard or by a combination of both. Even while music of the classical era generally moved away from baroque *ad libitum* practices, the music for violin and keyboard remained notably flexible and informal.

While the keyboard parts for continuo sonatas consist of only a single bass line (often contrapuntal, as mentioned above) with numbers and symbols that guide the performer in filling out the rest of the harmonies, the keyboard and violin parts for accompanied sonatas – and most other music for keyboard and violin – are both fully written out by the composer. Such an extreme dissimilarity as exists between a *basso continuo* and an explicitly written keyboard part should serve to stress the different purposes of these two genres. The accompanied sonata was a response to a demand for keyboard music while the continuo sonata was primarily a vehicle to feature violinists. There is also the fact that the accompanied sonata was not the domain of great musicians, and for that reason, improvisation was likely out of the question for the most part. Lastly, a melody with *basso continuo* was not suitable to the newer and more homophonic classical style. A classical keyboard sonata, whether it included a secondary violin part or not, usually involved a much more harmonically stable structure. Newman articulates this point clearly when he describes "the debilitating effect that the new, more regularly phrased melody exerted on a constantly moving bass line, for this type of melody engendered a much slower harmonic rhythm with a more static kind of supporting bass" (*Sonata in the Classic Era* 96). If the changing harmony itself did not constitute its own contrapuntal bass part, as was usually the case in a continuo sonata, then it became necessary for the composer to explicitly provide arpeggiation, ornamentation or rhythmic devices to avoid stagnation in the non-melodic voices.

There are several other eighteenth century compositional settings for keyboard and violin for which the treatment of the two instruments is worth mentioning; however, at this point it becomes increasingly difficult – and decreasingly helpful – to set up completely distinct and independent categories for the classification of these pieces. Curiously, in these settings, which were less prolific and uniform than either the continuo sonata or the accompanied sonata, the two instruments were generally on more equal footing. Towards the end of the Baroque era, many pieces were written for keyboard and violin in which there were three distinct and mostly independent voices (or parts); each hand of the keyboard player would be assigned one of the voices and the violin would play the third (Newman, *Music Quarterly* 333). Bach's Six Sonatas for Violin and Harpsichord are examples of such writing, though Bach does not strictly adhere to three voices throughout (Fuller 230). Another setting appeared during the middle to end of the eighteenth century – around the same time that the accompanied sonata was enjoying its ubiquity – wherein the two instruments shared the spotlight. This style of writing was known as "concertante," and it was not intended for the social or chamber setting of accompanied sonatas, but instead featured the two instrumentalists as performers (Fuller 229). Beethoven's penultimate Sonata for Piano and Violin (the "Kreutzer Sonata" of infamy) was described by the composer as "*scritta in uno stilo molto concertante*," or, written in a very "concertante" style. It is indeed odd that Beethoven's most well-known violin sonata does not exactly belong to the genre that he was so instrumental in establishing.

Mozart's achievements in the accompanied sonata setting occupy their own place in the history of music for violin and keyboard, and here we can in fact identify an evolutionary process between approaches to composition for these two instruments. Developments in compositional style can be traced through Mozart's numerous sonatas for piano and violin, which he composed in relatively large number and in many stages of his career; and furthermore, progressing developments began to emerge between subsequent generations of composers, who sought to advance the art forms of their highly recognized predecessors. Mozart wrote his first sonatas for piano and violin during his early childhood, and they are easily classified in the accompanied sonata category, though they were of higher than average quality among most music written for that setting. It was over a decade later that, as a young adult, Mozart remade his debut in composing sonatas for piano and violin in a set of six sonatas of superior quality, k. 301-306 (Harlow 45). In these pieces, the piano and violin enjoy a far more equal partnership than in any previous music that could be classified as accompanied sonatas<sup>1</sup>. Mozart seems to intentionally emphasize the elevated status he bestows on

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<sup>1</sup> Some musicologists (to include William Newman, a researcher whose work in this field has provided much of the information for this thesis thus far) have taken to referring to these and other sonatas as "true duos," a term meant to categorize them separately from accompanied sonatas, or any previous settings for these two instruments. However, David Fuller (also a valuable reference) points out that, while this term was coined to emphasize the greater balance between violin and piano, the relationship of the two instruments in Mozart is not more equal than in other duet music written well before, e.g. the "concertante" style that I have already discussed and the three-voiced baroque sonatas like those of Bach (230). Instead of the "true duo" classification, I believe it suffices to say that Mozart's sonatas point stylistically and texturally to the chamber music for piano and violin of Beethoven and the century to follow. Furthermore, Mozart's intention in writing these sonatas was just as much to sell publications to bourgeois instrumentalists (the primary purpose for accompanied

the violin by allowing it to take the lead in the opening melody of k. 301. After a brief episode, the melody is repeated by the piano with the violin playing an accompaniment part. This pattern of melodic alternation is found often in Mozart's sonatas from this point onward; and, as we will see, Beethoven's sonatas contain frequent use of the same technique. Mozart's later sonatas include some very fine works that certainly deserve their status as standard chamber music repertoire.

Among all of Mozart's sonatas, it would be difficult (if possible at all) to determine precisely which should be classified as accompanied sonatas and which can be placed in the same field as the workings of Beethoven and his successors, and such a feat is not the province of this study. A major difference between the works of Mozart and Beethoven, with regard to their respective forms, is stated by Newman:

Haydn and Mozart had to work their way up from the structural uncertainties and textural diversities of pre-Classic styles to the lucidity and more consistent idioms of high-Classic music. By contrast, a generation later Beethoven could be born into high-Classic styles ready-made (*Sonata in the Classical Era* 542).

It can generally be asserted that all of Mozart's sonatas – with the exceptions of the ones composed in his childhood – possess attributes of both classifications. However, it is easier to say that the sonatas of Beethoven and of most nineteenth century composers are not accompanied sonatas, as they are sometimes mistakenly labeled. Classical accompanied sonatas have been characterized as having intentionally unchallenging violin parts, often involving optional instrumentation, and being intended primarily for dilettante diversion. While Mozart's sonatas contain these characteristics

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sonatas, after all) as it was to create high-quality duets to strengthen his reputation as a composer (Harlow 46).

to varying degrees, the sonatas of Beethoven and of his successors *all* include musically important and technically challenging violin parts, no allowance for different instrumentation, and are much more suitable to chamber performance than casual dilettante music-making. Even the first of Beethoven's Sonatas for Piano and Violin to be published were reviewed as probably unsuitable for purchasers of typical accompanied sonatas, with emphasis on the notion that one would not likely derive much diversion from attempting to play them (Brandenburg, Lockwood 20).

Fuller writes that "the history of accompanied keyboard music after 1770 belongs to the great composers" (244). It is probably not coincidence that 1770 is the year of Beethoven's birth as well as the decade in which Mozart would begin to revolutionize music for piano and violin. Around this time, while the fame of the great composers began to spread, the public began to gradually lose interest in forms of music where certain parts were consistently subordinated to others, if only because this was not the practice of the great composers themselves. Thus it was during a time of transition from casual music-making to more serious composition that Beethoven made his compositional debut.



### Chapter 3: Methodology

Having summarized the history of music for keyboard and violin leading up to Beethoven's works, the next stage of my project will be to consider with greater attention the ten sonatas for piano and violin of the man whom Newman unreservedly, and even casually names "the most important figure in sonata history" (*Sonata in the Classical Era* 542). My discussion of the first nine sonatas will not involve the close attention that is to be given to the final one, but instead will serve to provide the reader a familiarity with for the output to which Opus 96 belongs and from which it stands apart. I hope to uncover numerous characteristics particular to Opus 96 that recall its previously discussed ancestry, distinguish it from Beethoven's other nine sonatas for piano and violin, and identify it as perhaps the first composition of nineteenth-century romantic chamber music.

To assist in this goal, I am preparing a performance of Beethoven's opus 96, as mentioned in the introduction. In preparation for this recital, I will carefully study the music itself (by far the most important source for any substantial knowledge of a piece) and will also consult multiple sources for interpretive ideas and approaches to this piece, or to Beethoven's music in general. Abram Loft's two volume work, *Violin and Keyboard: The Duo Repertoire*, is an example of such a source. The second volume bears the additional title *From Beethoven to Present* and contains historical as well as personal perspectives on these works. Max Rostal's *Beethoven: The Sonatas for Piano and Violin* will be particularly useful. Rostal begins with general thoughts or principles

on performing these works, based on personal experience or historical grounds, and then he dedicates a separate chapter to each of the ten sonatas.

Upon completion of my performance I will write in detail about the piece itself, highlighting the aforementioned characteristics that I anticipate identifying. To do so, I will most likely present several illustrative examples in the form of excerpts from the printed score. When appropriate, I will include in this analytical section of the thesis my own thoughts on this music, insofar as words are capable of directing the listener's ear or the music-reader's eye towards an understanding of the ineffable and illusory properties that are intrinsic to the notes as written by their composer and as sounded by a performer.

#### **Chapter 4: Beethoven's Sonatas for Piano and Violin**

The first sonatas for piano and violin to be published by Beethoven were written in 1798, very early in his career as a composer. During this time, it appears that he intended to establish simultaneously a reputation for himself as a composer and as a performer through chamber music. Before the *Three Sonatas for Piano and Violin Op. 12*, Beethoven's other publications included two sonatas for piano and cello, several trios, and a handful of piano sonatas – the common factors being the use of very small ensembles and the frequent use of piano, the instrument on which Beethoven made his performance career. In this chamber music setting, new music could be heard by potential patrons at little or no cost to the composer, making this venue a logical starting place for a young musician wishing to enhance his reputation.

In the aforementioned venue, a composer would perform his own sonatas for a circle of friends, connoisseurs, aristocrats, and fellow musicians. These early sonatas were thus written with dual intentions, for Beethoven not only had to impress those around him with his skills as a composer but also with his great virtuosity at the piano. Many parts of this music call attention to the pianist's prowess (the more so because others would, after listening, attempt to play through these pieces and find themselves incapable!) while, at the same time, these virtuosic passages add spirit and life to the composition itself and often comprise an element that is inseparable from the mood of the music. While the violin part also places high demands on the performer, the violinist does not quite enjoy an equal share either of the action or of the spotlight. Abram Loft explains that this first publication "also demands a virtuoso

violinist, but his wares will be displayed more reservedly" (15). Most likely, Beethoven carefully arranged the violin part in such a way that a successful performance would not depend on the artistry or skill of the violinist, but instead rested on the reliable shoulders of the composer/pianist himself.

These early sonatas are often regarded as the somewhat inferior or "immature" workings of a budding composer; however, Sieghard Brandenburg cautions against this view, pointing out that, at the time of their creation, Beethoven was no less than 27 years old and had been deeply involved in musical composition for quite some time (Lockwood 9). Furthermore, these sonatas are among the first published works (not first written) only because Beethoven constantly concerned himself regarding his reputation as a composer and seldom published anything that he felt would not enhance the public perception of his abilities. Another fact which stands in opposition to the previously stated view is that Beethoven dedicated these sonatas to the well-respected composer, Antonio Salieri – an act which would be inconceivable if Beethoven had not believed these works to be thoroughly satisfactory (Lockwood 21).<sup>2</sup>

If these first sonatas do not enjoy masterpiece status in the eyes of music performers and academics, it can only be attributed to the massive shadow cast by the great composer's future works; for while they demonstrate mastery and originality, they do not reveal the overtly expressive and individualistic creativity for which Beethoven would come to be known. The sonatas do indeed conform to the conventions of the time, but this fact should only increase the impressiveness of the composer's early

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<sup>2</sup> Interestingly, Beethoven very rarely dedicated his works to other musicians, but usually to friends, patrons or prospective patrons (Loft 2).

achievement when one considers the genius that manages to shine through an ordinary mold (Lockwood 5).

Beethoven's second installment of sonatas for piano and violin consisted of two pieces very unlike one another except that, in each, a new facet of Beethoven's writing style is brought into the genre. In 1801, the fourth and fifth sonatas, Op. 23 and Op. 24 respectively, were published concurrently but not as one volume due to a publisher error in engraving format (Loft 21). The *Sonata for Piano and Violin Op. 23 in A minor*, has never been well-loved, and even Lockwood calls it "the wayward stepchild among Beethoven's violin sonatas" (Lockwood 26). Listeners and performers may perceive a clumsiness of style in the drastic mood swings contained in this sonata, but Max Rostal strongly argues for its significance with the following statement: "For the first time in the series of the Sonatas for piano and violin, the true dramatic power of Beethoven is here made manifest" (67). Rostal also points out that the first movement's "breathlessness and tension" foreshadows the Kreutzer sonata of two years later (68). In any case, none would deny that op. 23 presents something quite different from the sonatas which have preceded it. Beethoven had begun to wrestle with the limitations of conventional writing for violin and piano.

With Op. 24, Beethoven's compositional exploration took quite a different direction from Op. 23, and to great success: this sonata, which was long ago christened the "Spring" Sonata by its admirers, has been a favorite since shortly after its conception. Nearly devoid of drama or tension, the "Spring" Sonata is characterized by a melodic ease that is seldom found in Beethoven's music until this time. The

composer's other important works of the time, such as the Second Symphony and some piano sonatas, indicate that Op. 24 is part of a temporary trend towards (relative) grace and simplicity in Beethoven's writing (Lockwood 41). In both the "Spring" Sonata and the Second Symphony the melodies contain figures of rapid ornamentation while harmonic support remains unhurried, resulting in a sense of joyful contentment. Another significant feature of this sonata is that, for the first time in a sonata for piano and violin, a thematic relationship exists between the first, second, and fourth movements of the piece, all of which share a certain melodic figure in their subjects (Lockwood 29). As Beethoven's career progressed, interrelationship of a piece's movements became increasingly prominent in his music. These relationships nearly always signify moments of strong dramatic and musical significance.

The *Three Sonatas for Piano and Violin Opus 30*, written in 1802 and published in 1803, constitute the central part of Beethoven's sonatas for piano and violin; the explorations of the first five sonatas here find their culmination, while the two sonatas that come after will both break away from this point in new directions. In an essay on the Opus 30 sonatas, Richard Kremer presents a picture of Beethoven around this time "challenging each genre on its own terms," and in these three sonatas Beethoven was finally able to achieve all that the genre had to offer (Lockwood 47). These sonatas contain maximum levels of form, character, drama, musical expression and even personal touch while maintaining the overall outward appearance of their classical predecessors. They are a nineteenth century composer's completion of, and farewell to, an eighteenth century genre.

One of the most striking elements of Opus 30 is that each of the three sonatas demonstrates a total compositional unity of character, and that each is wholly unlike any of the others. Loft found it possible to summarize each in this way: "The first sonata of Opus 30 is serenity epitomized; the second, glowering force; the third, energy in free flight" (39). As evidence for Beethoven's commitment to unity and consistency in this opus, he decided to replace the entire finale of the A major Sonata well after it was completed, feeling that it was too large, dramatic, and unstable of a finale for an otherwise serene composition (Lockwood 48). This event also reveals Beethoven's inclination to write music outside the boundaries of the forms in which he was working, and that he was making conscious efforts to subdue his inclinations during this time. In their respective writings, Abram Loft and Max Rostal both particularly mention the "restraint" that characterizes the A major Sonata.

While the first and last sonatas of Opus 30 are relatively light-bodied works, each consisting of three movements, the Sonata in C minor Op. 30 no. 2 is a massive composition of intense and serious character that, even more than the others, pushes the genre to its limits. It is also by far the most popular of the three. Emanuel Hurwitz has expressed the common view that this sonata could be thought of as "a symphony for two players, so dramatic and large-scale is the material." The Sonata in C minor is in four movements, and Beethoven achieves the unity mentioned above with a consistency of character, key, and tempo in the outer movements, and two inner movements that provide contrast (Rostal 104).

It may be worth additional emphasis that the Opus 30 sonatas still resemble the accompanied sonatas of the classical era, in particular the last sonatas of Mozart, in many ways. For instance, in all of these sonatas the piano is responsible for establishing the tone and tempo of the piece (Lockwood 53). In most cases, the piano begins alone and the violin joins in once the performance is underway. Quite tellingly, Beethoven labeled the cover of this publication "*Trois Sonates pour le Pianoforte avec l'Accompagnement d'un Violin.*" His use of the phrase, "with the accompaniment of a violin" was in keeping with the typical labels for classical accompanied sonatas (Newman, *Sonata in the Classical Era* 538). This does not necessarily mean that he believed his sonatas to be like ordinary accompanied sonatas, in which the violin was ancillary, but it does show that either he wished for them to not be perceived as unusual, or that at the very least he made no effort to differentiate these works from those of his predecessors or contemporaries. This point may seem trivial, but let us recall (from chapter 2) that on the cover of his next sonata (the "Kreutzer" Sonata), Beethoven included a rather elaborate subtitle emphasizing that it was not like a typical accompanied Sonata. Most importantly, for the tenth and final sonata, Beethoven appropriately establishes the label of a "Sonate fur Klavier *und* Violin." With his simple use of the word "and," the violin and piano are presented together as unqualified musical partners.

Before we come to the Tenth Sonata – the sonata which serves as the subject for this thesis – there is one more sonata to discuss. The *Sonata No. 9 in A major, Op. 47*, to which this paper has already alluded several times, is by far the most extraordinary and



most frequently discussed among all of Beethoven's violin sonatas. Though it was composed in 1803 for a performance involving Beethoven and virtuoso violinist, George Bridgetower, this piece has been nicknamed the "Kreutzer" Sonata in reference to the violinist who later received its dedication but was never involved whatsoever in its composition or performance (Rostal 133). The fact that in 1889 the great Russian author, Leo Tolstoy gave the title, *The Kreutzer Sonata*, to one of his novellas highlights the impressive significance that this piece of music has held in western culture.

Due to the myriad writings on this piece, it would be redundant to include much description in this paper; however, it is most important to observe that once Beethoven allowed himself to work outside of convention, the resulting sonata was completely unlike anything that had come before. From the sonata's opening chords, played by the violin alone, Beethoven makes clear that we are no longer in the realm of classical violin and piano sonatas – and he does so without the slightest apology. As part of this rebellion, Beethoven used the rejected finale from the A major Sonata Op. 30 as his finale for Op. 47. Richard Kramer believes that the recycled finale movement played a large role in the composition of this sonata, stating that the first two movements were "conceived in full view of a maniacal *presto* finale" (Lockwood 48). Having first exhausted, then shattered, the standards of music for piano and violin, Beethoven did not compose again for these two instruments for a remarkably long time.

In August of 1812, Beethoven wrote to his patron, pupil, and good friend, Archduke Rudolph, and in this letter he mentioned a concert in which he had recently performed one of his violin sonatas. Beethoven wrote, among other complaints, "All

that I could find at the local publisher's was some of my early sonatas for violin and pianoforte. As Polledro insisted on performing one of these, I had to agree to play an old sonata" (Anderson 381-2). He appears to have been somewhat displeased with the whole concert, and particularly reluctant to perform one of his own violin sonatas. Quite possibly, this experience of dissatisfaction with performing his older sonatas is what prompted Beethoven to compose his final violin sonata. The *Sonata for Piano and Violin in G major Op. 96*, the tenth and last of Beethoven's sonatas for piano and violin, was completed by the end of the year.

## Chapter 5: *Sonata for Piano and Violin in G major, Op. 96*

The following chapter discusses Beethoven's final sonata for violin and piano in detail. Here, I will attempt to highlight most of the properties that make this piece particularly special and often unlike any that preceded it. The content will be based on features of the music that stood out to me, personally, as I prepared a performance of this piece. Thus, the majority of this chapter will be subjective in nature, and the very best evidence for any assertions can only be correlations between the musical examples presented and the implications which I will propose them to possess. I believe this to be appropriate because the entire music industry, whether commercial or academic, owes its existence to the commonly held but largely unspoken belief that a composer or performer has the ability to substantially affect listeners through a mere combination of basic musical devices such as pitches, rhythms, and timbres. Many music scholars appear somewhat uncomfortable and reluctant concerning this phenomenon; a tendency which is possibly explainable by the strictly academic nature of their work – usually for universities – which obligates them to write publications on the subject of music that somehow adhere to the scientific model of research, reducing their means of discussion to the quantitative and empirical.

From the beginning of the first movement, this sonata enters into a new realm. Firstly, Beethoven's tempo indication for the first movement, *Allegro moderato* (moderately lively), is by far more leisurely than any of his previous sonatas, which are all at least marked with an *Allegro* and usually contain a modifier such as *Allegro con brio* (lively with vigor) or *Allegro assai* (very lively). The second feature of immediate

interest is that the violin alone plays the opening motive. Except for the last two, all of Beethoven's sonatas for violin and piano begin with either piano alone or with the two instruments together. But most remarkable and most novel, the opening theme is not merely a melody played by one instrument with the other accompanying. Instead, this theme consists of a four-note motive being passed between the two instruments, always responding to one another in dialogue until meeting up in the tenth full measure and from there taking off together for the next phrase (Ex. 5.1). Unlike any accompanied sonata of the classical era, this is not simply music that has been scored for two instruments. Opus 96 is music that can *only* be performed by two; otherwise, the call-and-response nature of the primary theme would be lost. The sense of idealized partnership continues throughout the exposition, with each instrument

The musical score for Example 5.1 shows the first movement of Beethoven's Opus 96, measures 1-11. The score is in 3/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). It features a dialogue between the Violin and Piano. The Violin part starts with a trill (tr) on G4, followed by a four-note motive (A4-B4-C5-D5) which is then passed to the Piano. The Piano part starts with a trill (tr) on C4, followed by the same four-note motive (C4-D4-E4-F#4) which is then passed back to the Violin. The tempo is marked 'Allegro Moderato'. Dynamics include 'p' (piano) and 'p dolce' (piano dolce).

Example 5.1. Opus 96, first movement, mm. 1-11

receiving a share of melodic and thematic material and the other graciously supporting and complementing the leading voice.

The freely flowing, good-natured exchange between violin and piano that characterizes nearly all of the first movement comes to a curious halt of momentum at the start of the coda. After a single sounding of the opening motive (in C major), the violin steps away and leaves the piano to wander alone through a directionless and dreamlike eight measures (Ex. 5.2). In a discussion concerning the part writing in Mozart's sonatas for piano and violin, Peter Walls perceptively noted that, "Paradoxically, one of the features that signals the emancipation of the violin within the ensemble is its silence" (Peter Walls, Harlow 66). The composer's decision to use only one instrument for a particular phrase demonstrates a very specific attention to scoring. In an accompanied sonata of the classical period, the addition of a violin part was mostly a supplement from the composer and not necessarily (not usually) an artistic decision. However, if Mozart or Beethoven occasionally and intentionally leave out one of the instruments, this action counter-intuitively signals that the instrument's presence at other moments is deliberate and of aesthetic importance. Considering that the relaxed and playful nature of this movement is directly linked to the interplay of the two instruments, it is not surprising that a moment of harmonic insecurity would be brought about by one's absence. When the violin does return, it is as if to remind the piano of their initial amity and musical purpose: the movement's opening four-note motive.

The image displays a musical score for Violin and Piano, Opus 96, first movement, measures 239-253. The score is in 3/4 time and G major. It features a violin part with triplets and trills, and a piano part with complex textures, including triplets, trills, and a 'Ped.' marking. The piano part is marked 'pp' in several places. The score is divided into three systems.

Example 5.2. Opus 96, first movement, mm. 239-253

With the renewal of their opening dialogue, the violin and piano work their way back to the tonic key of G major. Once the journey is successfully completed, Beethoven provides a final, parenthetically quiet statement of the movement's primary

motive (Ex 5.3). For the first time, the four little notes are played by both instruments at once in harmony and the movement ends as dialogue turns to accord before the two soar to the final cadence.

Concerning the second movement, marked *Adagio espressivo*, Max Rostal wrote: "This movement, one of the most profound, most heartfelt and most sublime, is among the most beautiful compositions in all music" (175). Only one other movement from Beethoven's ten sonatas for piano and violin, the second movement of the A major Sonata, Op. 30 no. 1, received from Rostal anything near this level of praise. In this

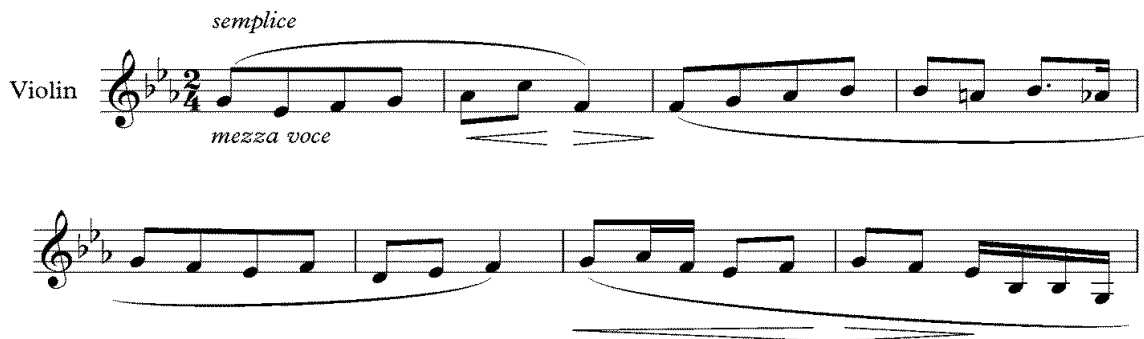
The image displays a musical score for the first movement of Opus 96, measures 274-281. The score is written for Violin and Piano. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is 3/4. The first system shows the Violin and Piano parts with dynamics 'dim.' and 'pp', and trills 'tr'. The second system shows the Violin and Piano parts with dynamics 'cresc.' and 'f'.

Example 5.3. Opus 96, first movement, mm. 274-281

*Adagio*, the simplistic vision of companionship from the first movement fades, leaving a deeply personal and introspective composition. It is in the key of Eb, which has a place

of significance in each movement of the sonata, as we will see. The profound, yet simple sincerity of this movement can be quite chilling, especially when one considers that this piece was one of the first artistic endeavors by Beethoven following his amorous letters (discovered posthumously) to an unknown woman with whom, evidently, he would never have a relationship.<sup>3</sup>

Throughout the movement, Beethoven places abnormally high demands on the violinist to execute long and even tones. The hymn-like subject (Ex. 5.4) is unlike any of the andante or adagio melodies in Beethoven's previous violin sonatas (and the other sonatas of the classical era), all of which have some degree of a lilting quality. This observation has led me to believe that when he composed this piece, Beethoven had in mind the increased sustainment capabilities of the recently perfected violin bow from French bow-maker, Francois Tourte.<sup>4</sup>



Example 5.4. Opus 96, second movement, mm. 38-45

<sup>3</sup> These letters were written in the summer of 1812. The woman to whom they were written (and the whole mysterious situation) has become known as "Immortal Beloved," a term Beethoven used to address her, though a better translation would be "Eternally Beloved." This incident is the subject of much historical debate and there is a large body of literature concerning the possible meaning and implications of these letters.

<sup>4</sup> Tourte's model of the violin bow was completed in the beginning of the nineteenth century, and has since remained unchanged as the ideal bow design.



The second subject (here presented in its return) offers a particularly clear example of one of Beethoven's innovations in part-writing. At a glance, this passage strongly resembles a scoring that one would expect to find in a typical accompanied sonata; the piano is given the melody and harmony and could very well stand on its own, while the violin is left on the side to merely add decoration (Ex 5.5). However, the repeating two-note descent in the violin part (beginning in measure 49) is in fact an integral part of this movement. Upon closer look, this pattern is not a mere decorative figure, but a continuation of the two notes that begin the new theme in the piano part (the piano's final two notes in measure 48). The violin's syncopated figure in this

The image displays a musical score for Violin and Piano, measures 48-51 of Opus 96, second movement. The score is written in 2/4 time with a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). The Violin part (top staff) features a syncopated two-note descent starting in measure 49, which is a continuation of the piano's final two notes in measure 48. The Piano part (bottom staves) shows a complex texture with chords and melodic lines, including a prominent sixteenth-note figure in the right hand in measure 51.

Example 5.5. Opus 96, second movement, mm. 48-51

passage is also present in much of the piano part and is one of the fundamental pieces in this movement's construction. The use of small musical devices as building blocks for large scale compositions (demonstrated here and also in the four-note subject of the first movement) is a compositional practice perfected by Beethoven that pervades nearly all nineteenth century European art music following his work.

After the second occurrence of the two themes, an unhurried closing section ensues, consisting of rapid (but relaxed) melodic ornamentation over an Eb pedal that

lasts for a surprisingly long time (14 measures of a movement that consists of only 67!). Here, the melodic ornamentation creates an atmosphere of contentedness, similar to that which permeates the "Spring" sonata; however, in this movement the contentedness is not so care-free, but rather seems to have been achieved at the price of resignation. The illusive nature of this contentedness is tested in the final measure when a seed of doubt is planted in the form of an instable C# in the violin part, pulling the music straight into a taunting and shadowy *Scherzo* third movement. This use of an *attaca* (Beethoven's indication that the second and third movement should be played together without a break in the sound) is the first and only in any of Beethoven's sonatas for piano and violin, demonstrating an even higher degree of inter-movement unity than the Op. 30 sonatas.

The *Scherzo* is in the much darker key of G minor and is characterized by an unsettling emphasis on the final beat of each measure. It becomes increasingly frantic until coming to a sudden halt, at which point a peaceful *trio* section emerges (Ex. 5.6), bringing back the tranquil Eb key signature of the second movement and recalling the cheerful second theme of the first movement (Ex. 5.7). After introducing the *trio* subject with the violin followed by a repetition in the piano, Beethoven then uses the melody in a remarkable way. He treats each hand of the piano as a distinct voice, transforming the pair of performers into a trio through which the subject and its accompaniment pass from one to the next in three-part counterpoint (Ex. 5.8). This scoring, however, is not completely new to the piano and violin ensemble. Rather,

**Trio**

Violin

Example 5.6. Opus 96, third movement, mm. 33-36

*a tempo*

Violin

Example 5.7. Opus 96, first movement, mm. 188-191

Beethoven is making new use of one of the baroque style settings discussed briefly in chapter two of this thesis. The peacefulness of the *trio* slowly dies away until the *scherzo* returns, commencing with its interrupting emphasis of the third beat. After a full repetition of the G minor *Scherzo* section, Beethoven once again uses the last measures to prepare the upcoming movement – this time with a subtle key signature

Violin

Piano

Example 5.8. Opus 96, third movement, mm. 65-75

change from G minor into G major, the cheerful key of the sonata's first movement.

Beethoven builds excitement in the short, G major coda section until, much like the end of the first movement, a big crescendo brings the music to a sudden stop on a G major chord. The last chord is scored with a disproportionately large number of Ds, which prevents it from sounding conclusive and instead creates an excited anticipation for the upcoming finale movement (Ex. 5.9).

The image shows a musical score for the third movement of Opus 96, measures 124-129. The score is in 3/4 time and G major. It consists of two staves: a piano part (bottom) and a violin part (top). The piano part begins with a piano (*sfp*) dynamic and features a crescendo leading to a fortissimo (*f*) chord. The violin part begins with a piano (*sfp*) dynamic and features a trill (*tr*) leading to a fortissimo (*f*) chord. The score is marked with a crescendo and a final fortissimo (*f*) dynamic.

Example 5.9. Opus 96, third movement, mm. 124-129

The fourth movement consists of a seemingly conventional theme and variations, yet at the same time it serves as a conclusion for the entire Sonata by referencing each of the preceding movements in a very subtle manner. It begins in the first movement's key of G major with a theme that surpasses that of the first movement in its simplicity and gaiety. What was in the first movement an idyllic vision is now reality, and a definite melodic relationship can be observed between the opening four notes of the first movement (Ex. 5.1) and the first five notes of the finale theme, introduced by the right hand of the piano (Ex. 5.10). The theme consists of thirty-two measures with melodic and accompaniment roles divided precisely between the piano and violin in groups of eight, and each of the variations – excluding the first variation –

adheres to this friendly pattern of taking turns. In a broad sense, the theme and variation format of this movement summarizes the entire sonata by rapidly exploring all that can be achieved by the partnership of these two instruments.

**Poco Allegretto**

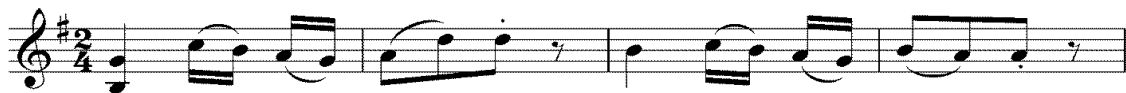
The image shows a musical score for the first nine measures of the fourth movement of Beethoven's Opus 96. It is written for Violin and Piano. The tempo is marked 'Poco Allegretto' and the time signature is 2/4. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The Violin part begins with a 'dolce' marking and features a melodic line with a long note in the second measure. The Piano part also begins with 'dolce' and features a rhythmic accompaniment of eighth notes. The score includes dynamic markings such as 'cresc.' and 'p'.

Example 5.10. Opus 96, fourth movement, mm. 1-9

Unlike the few variation movements in Beethoven's other sonatas, the variations in this movement are not clearly separated from one another but instead flow from one to the next, lending to the series of variations what Solomon describes as "a sense of continual metamorphosis" (Lockwood 121). Each of the first three variations flows forward faster than the next – beginning with constant eighth notes, then moving through triplets and finally, continuous sixteenths – until reaching the raucous and exuberant fourth variation. The next variation introduces a sudden sobriety to the previously unhindered joy of the movement, and it bears the tempo indication of

*Adagio espressivo*, identical to the second movement. This fifth variation not only resembles the second movement in tempo, but also makes extensive use of melodic ornamentation (as did the second movement), nearly freeing the music from a strict sense of tempo and setting this variation in surprising contrast to the momentum of the previous sections.

When the original tempo returns it is accompanied by a restatement of the movement's opening theme, but instead of G major, we once again find ourselves in Eb. Just like the Sonata as a whole began in G major, then passed through Eb major in the middle movements before returning to G once again, the detour into Eb in the middle of this movement is not a permanent one. After a few uncertain pauses, the two instruments plunge headlong back into G major with a variation that momentarily rivals the "Kreutzer" Sonata in its virtuosic vivacity. However, one more detour remains. The action comes to a sudden halt and, after a breath of silence, Beethoven introduces the final and most remarkable variation. Seemingly out of nowhere, the key changes into G minor and the theme of the movement (Ex. 5.11) has been transformed into the subject of a haunting three-part fugue (Ex. 5.12). This section recalls the third movement with



Example 5.11. Opus 96, fourth movement, mm. 9-12



Example 5.12. Opus 96, fourth movement, mm. 225-228

its key (G minor), and with the use of the two instruments to create a section involving three distinct voices, as in the *Trio* section of the third movement. Perhaps counter intuitively, this variation's whispering twenty-six measures, marked *sempre pianissimo* (always very quiet), serves to heighten the excitement and anticipation for the return of the original material.

Finally the music breaks free from this temporary spell, and for the first time since the opening measures of the movement, the theme returns in its original key. However, the theme has not been unaffected by the course of the movement, and its return comes in the faster tempo of the recent sections. Also, the repetition has been removed and the thirty-two measures is now condensed to sixteen. The increased momentum leads the performers into a whirr of sixteenth notes so strong as to send each performer spiraling away from the other, after which a moment of pause follows and the two collect themselves for a slow and reflective statement of the theme. In the *poco adagio*, the two instruments – our two characters in this drama – become increasingly close to one another in dialogue (Ex. 5.13). Having passed through many trials and united for the last time, the performers set off together in a final *presto* and the entire sonata reaches its unqualifiedly agreeable conclusion.

*poco adagio*  
*p*  
*poco adagio*  
*p*

8<sup>va</sup>

Example 5.13. Opus 96, fourth movement, mm. 272-287



## **Chapter 6: Further Observations and Conclusion**

Having thoroughly supported the opening premise of this thesis (that Opus 96 occupies a central place in the history of sonatas for violin and piano) through the second and fourth chapters; and having, in the fifth chapter, presented many special details and features of this sonata, I believe that it remains for me to assert the overarching ways in which this sonata is particularly significant, including restatements in more general terms of previous points, and to thus tie together the preceding sections.

While nearly all forms of composition received major developments through Beethoven's work, the sonata for piano and violin (or other melody instrument) had not, before this time, been so firmly established as other classical forms. By the time he began his career, the massive outputs of Haydn and Mozart had thoroughly explored classical scorings such as the symphony, the string quartet, and the concerto. To achieve success in these forms, Beethoven merely needed to master the techniques of his predecessors and begin to incorporate his own personal touches and innovations. For this reason, the great composer's very first workings in these forms do not reveal the same kind of wrestling with convention and creativity evidenced in his early violin sonatas. Quite unlike the sonatas for violin and piano, Beethoven's first symphonies and string quartets enjoy very high admiration and frequent performance. In the sonatas for violin and piano, by contrast, one can witness a very labored process in which it seems that Beethoven first had to finish the task of assembling the sonata's final form from its diverse and informal ancestry before making it his own with Opus 96.

Of greatest importance to Opus 96 is the epitomized partnership of the two instruments. Many factors contribute to Beethoven's achievement in this area. To begin with, he was by this time working in a duo texture inherited from the later sonatas of Mozart and further explored by his own hand. The previous discussion of Beethoven's first nine sonatas indicates that through each of these endeavors the composer sought to open and explore new possibilities for this pair of instruments. Furthermore, Opus 96 contains several instances in which Beethoven makes use of duet techniques from previous composers. It has also been stated previously that Opus 96 came about in reaction to his dissatisfaction with previous sonatas. Therefore, it can safely be said that, in the composition of his final sonata, Beethoven assembled from his broadest palette the single sonata for violin and piano with which he would finally be satisfied.

A second factor that contributed to Beethoven's reestablished duo writing for violin and piano lies in the composer's approach to writing for his own instrument, the piano. It has already been discussed that, in his early sonatas, Beethoven sought to gain popularity through his own skill at his instrument; however, by the time Opus 96 was composed, Beethoven's deafness had grown severe enough to drastically decrease his willingness to perform. Recall that Opus 96, unlike the rest of the sonatas, was not intended to be performed by the composer, but by his friend, the Archduke Rudolph. Beethoven's detachment from performance had an undeniable effect on his output. From the time Opus 96 was written until his death – a time span occupying roughly half of his career as composer – Beethoven did not compose another piano concerto, nor did

he write many more piano sonatas, which pervade his former years of composition. In Opus 96 itself, the lack of the overtly virtuosic piano writing that was present in the previous sonatas is easily noticed by all performers and listeners. Considering the monumental late quartets, his final major compositions, one might even assert that string instruments gained increasing importance in the composer's mind. These tendencies have been described by Solomon as a "gradual loosening of his reliance on the piano as the anchor of his compositional style" (Solomon 132). It is very likely that Beethoven's letting go of the piano played a large role in his reworking of the sonata for piano and violin.

Lastly, concerning the enhanced writing for these two instruments, there is the notion – which I hope to have substantiated in the previous chapter – that this sonata embodies more than a mere arrangement of music to facilitate its performance by two; it is a piece of music in which the musical content is fundamentally attached to the idea of a duet. In the earlier scorings for violin and piano, we have seen that the musical content is largely attached to only one of the two instruments, and that the other part – whether a continuo support for a violin sonata or a violin accompaniment to a piano sonata – might just as easily be written for any other instrument or combination of instruments (which often occurred). Even the high quality classical sonatas for piano and violin of Mozart and Beethoven, prior to Opus 96, might just as well have been scored for piano alone. In fact, there is evidence of Beethoven conceiving the "Spring" Sonata first as a sonata for piano (Lockwood 25). In Opus 96, on the other hand, we find the two instruments not only accompanying one another, but each meaningfully

contributing to the other's part in a relationship that involves instances of gracious support for one another, important thematic commentary from seemingly secondary voices, and even frequent completion of each other's statements.

The superficially unassuming appearance of this sonata, with its calm and subtle nature, especially in comparison to its nearest neighbor, the "Kreutzer" Sonata, coupled with a total lack of idiomatic flair or melodic ease for the violin, have bestowed upon this perfected work of art an unfortunately small place in the violinist's repertoire (and, like most duo sonatas, a virtually non-existent place in the piano repertoire). This grave offense has undoubtedly limited the number of performers and listeners who have been exposed to so delightful a piece of music. I have encountered many violinists (quite advanced in their musical studies) who had never even heard it, and there have even been some who were unaware of its existence. It is my hope that, at the very least, an increased awareness of the historical significance of this work – not to mention its superb and profound qualities – will help to mitigate this injustice.

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