

## Beethoven's "Kreutzer" Sonata No. 9 for Piano and Violin in A-Major, Op. 47

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**Abstract:** *The Sonata for Piano and Violin No.9, Opus 47, known as the "Kreutzer" by Ludwig van Beethoven is composed of three movements: the first, Presto, in a-minor, is in sonata form and is preceded by a slow introduction, Adagio Sostenuto, the second, Andante con Variazioni, is a theme and variations in the key of F-major with a coda. The last movement, Presto, is an upbeat rondo in 6/8 meter in the character of an Italian tarantella, with its development in sonata form. The "Kreutzer" Sonata is one of the most impressive and challenging works in the violin repertoire.*

Key-words: *Beethoven, Violin sonata, Kreutzer*

### 1. Introduction

In 1803, Ludwig Van Beethoven composed his Sonata for Piano and Violin No.9, Opus 47, known as the "Kreutzer" Sonata. At this time in his life, Beethoven struggled through many personal challenges, and these struggles affected the character of his compositions. Perhaps his most famous work from this time period is his Eroica Symphony, which he wrote just after completing the "Kreutzer" Sonata. The two works share many similarities, both possessing a propulsive and dynamic quality that has been characterized as Beethoven's heroic style (Szigeti, 1991). The heroic qualities of these compositions are of particular importance during this period of Beethoven's life, because they appear shortly after Beethoven wrote his "Heiligenstadt Testament" of October 6, 1802. Faced with losing his hearing, Beethoven, at the advice of his doctor, removed himself from the loud city life to spend a half a year in the small quiet village of Heiligenstadt. While enjoying the peaceful countryside and beautiful nature walks, he wrote a letter to his two brothers, Karl and Johann, describing his dark struggle with the illness. Following this last will of the young composer stricken by incurable deafness, Beethoven's "Kreutzer" Sonata and Eroica Symphony could be regarded as a celebration of his healed disposition.(Burk, 1943)

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Beethoven originally wrote the sonata for George Polgreen Bridgetower, a talented mulatto violinist whom he had not yet personally met, but whose playing impressed him in early 1803. Upon hearing that Bridgetower was going to perform a concert at Augarten in May of that year, he offered to provide a sonata and accompany him in its performance (Biancolli, 1971). The work carried the description “sonata for piano and violin in a very concertante style, like a concerto”, and due to its complexity and intricacy he had great difficulty getting it ready in time. The premiere took place on May 24, 1803 and the work was finished so last minute that Bridgetower performed it without ever rehearsing it or even seeing it at all. Most of the manuscript was handwritten and had to be sight read in the performance, with only the last movement written in full and adequate notation. Due to the lack of time, instead of writing a last movement, Beethoven ended up using the Finale he had written out earlier as part of his Violin Sonata Opus 30, No.1. Following the performance, the two got into an argument and when the sonata finally appeared in print in 1805, the dedication had gone to Rudolph Kreutzer, the prominent Parisian Violinist. Kreutzer had never appreciated Beethoven’s music and was especially repulsed by his Opus 47 sonata, finding it “outrageously unintelligible” and refusing to perform it. Kreutzer was a soloist and it is possible that “the whole concept of equal partnership may have struck him as absurd; in those days, the virtuoso expected preferential treatment even in chamber music” (Biancolli 1971, 190).

## 2. Content

The work is in three movements: the first, Presto, in a-minor, is in sonata form and is preceded by a slow introduction, Adagio Sostenuto - a dramatic technique used to build tension before the movement commences. The second, Andante con Variazioni, is a theme and variations in the key of F-major with a coda. The last movement, Presto, is an upbeat rondo in 6/8 meter in the character of an Italian tarantella, with its development in sonata form. Beethoven’s work on the “Kreutzer” followed an unusual course. The last movement was intended for an earlier Sonata (Op. 30, No. 1) but was discarded because it would have overwhelmed the work. For this reason, along with his time-constraints, he was already working towards a pre-existing Finale when he began composing the opening movements. With this in mind, he was able to integrate the new movements with it and proportion them accordingly. Beethoven tied all the movements together by using the same motives and thematic material throughout the entire work thus creating a unified whole.

There is a strong thematic and structural correspondence in the outer movements, and it is evident from many details that the first movement is the Finale’s counterpart. For example, the closing theme of the exposition in the first movement (m. 156) turns out to be a variant of the second subject of the finale (m. 62):

## I movement, m.156



## III movement, m.62



The set of four variations in the second movement begins with an emotional theme presented by solo piano before it is taken over by the violin. The inverted semitonal inflection at the beginning of the second movement echoes the rising semitone that is sprinkled throughout the entire sonata:

## Movement II, m. 9



## Movement I, m.16

Musical score for Movement I, m.16. The score consists of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef, the middle in alto clef, and the bottom in bass clef. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The music features complex rhythmic patterns with various note values and rests. Dynamic markings include *cresc.* and *decresc. pp* across the staves.

## Movement I, m.37

Musical score for Movement I, m.37. The score consists of two staves: piano (top) and bass (bottom). The piano staff has a treble clef, and the bass staff has a bass clef. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The piano part features a melodic line with dynamic markings *p*, *cresc.*, and *f*. The bass part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with dynamic markings *f* and *f*. Fingerings are indicated with numbers 1, 2, 3, 4.

This same motive emphasized in the last movement:

## Movement III, m.335

Musical score for Movement III, m.335. The score consists of three staves. The top staff is in treble clef, the middle in alto clef, and the bottom in bass clef. The key signature has one sharp (F#). The music features complex rhythmic patterns with various note values and rests. Dynamic markings include *ff*, *sf*, and *p* across the staves.

Upon detailed analysis, within the first movement, we can observe how the thematic material in the development (m.194 & m.258) is mostly the closing theme material from the exposition (m.144).

## Movement I, m.194

The image shows a musical score for Movement I, m.194. It consists of three staves: a single treble clef staff for the violin and a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) for the piano. The violin part has a melodic line with slurs and accents, while the piano part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with chords and single notes. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 2/4.

## Movement I, m.144

The image shows a musical score for Movement I, m.144. It consists of three staves: a single treble clef staff for the violin and a grand staff (treble and bass clefs) for the piano. The violin part has a melodic line with slurs and accents, while the piano part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with chords and single notes. The key signature is one sharp (F#), and the time signature is 2/4.

Subsequently, the closing theme is derived directly from the primary theme material. The mood of the first movement is very fiery and passionate, ending in relentless fury. The slow introduction is unique to the "Kreutzer" Sonata, and creates an unrestrained atmosphere with the violin's divine and other-worldly opening chords. Despite this broad introduction in a major key, the music unexpectedly proceeds to a stormy and passionate Presto in the parallel minor. It is only the first four bars, played by the solo violin, that are in A-major, creating a false expectation that A-major will be the home key of the entire movement. This expectation is thwarted with the entry of the piano, which casts a dramatic, minor cloud over the opening. Following the introduction, the work really begins.

The first movement, Presto, is in standard sonata form with an introduction and a coda. The harmonic structure is typical to sonata form and all the sections are in the expected keys: the primary theme in the tonic and the secondary theme in the dominant. The development goes through many key areas before returning back to the tonic, while the recapitulation remains in the tonic until the end. The formal and harmonic divisions are as follows: Introduction, m.1- m.18, in A-major. Exposition (Presto) begins with the primary theme in the key of a-minor (m.19 – m.36) and modulates in the transition from a-minor to e-minor (m.37 – m.90). The secondary theme presents itself in the key of E-major (m.91- m.116) before transitioning

toward the closing theme (m.117 – m.143). The closing theme of the exposition is in e-minor with a quick modulation to a-minor at the end (m.144 – m.172).

The development (m.193 – m.333) changes key area by descending thirds from g-minor through f-minor with a few other modulations, and, at measure 263, moves through key areas by ascending fifths from f-minor back to a-minor (m. 296), where the retransition to the recapitulation occurs. The recapitulation brings back the anticipated primary theme in a-minor (m.334 – m.356) and transitions to the secondary theme in A-major this time (m.412 – m.437) before returning to a-minor for the closing theme (m.465 – m.517). It is worth noting that neither one of the transitions in the recapitulation (m.357 – m.411 and m.438 – m.464) modulates. The movement ends with a coda lasting from measure 518 until the end.

Aside from the detailed harmonic and formal analysis provided on the score, there are many noteworthy areas throughout the piece that are interesting from a harmonic point of view. The Introduction briefly presents all the harmonic problems that are later worked out in the main body of the movement. As previously mentioned, it opens in A-Major and travels through a lot of quick harmonies before presenting the first clue towards the upcoming minor key. In measure 9, the passing A in the right hand of the piano could momentarily make that chord an a-minor chord, perhaps hinting that we are about to go into a-minor for the Presto. In measure 14, an f-harp-fully-diminished chord appears twice. The first time it resolves to G-Major (downbeat of m.14) but the second time it goes to g-minor. This kind of switch between Major/minor is constant throughout the movement and it is one of the elements that hold the movement together as a whole. In measure 17, a new chord appears that will come up throughout the movement: it is a Vb9/iv, but it could also be interpreted as a viio7/iv (c#-e-g-Bb). Even though it is strange to see a flat-9 chord in early Beethoven, one can argue that the nature of this chord is a combination of a diminished chord and a dominant 7th, therefore making the analysis of the chord as a Vb9 the most logical conclusion.

In the first transition of the exposition, measure 39, one would expect the e-flat minor chord in second inversion to move to a B-flat chord in root position, but surprisingly, Beethoven does the opposite! The notes that would shift down to a B-flat chord (e-flat and g-flat) actually go up in measure 40 to e-natural and g-natural:

The image shows a musical score snippet with three systems. Each system consists of a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble clef staff contains a melodic line with slurs and fingerings (2, 4, 1, 2, 4). The bass clef staff contains a harmonic line with slurs and fingerings (2, 4, 1, 2, 4). The key signature changes from one flat to two flats across the measures. The dynamics are marked with *sf* (sforzando).

Because of their passing function, it only makes sense to analyze them as passing tones going towards a *ii*o. Throughout the section starting at measure 91 there is a chord that is consistently missing its fifth throughout the movement, except at a few spots in the recapitulation. Despite the missing fifth, this chord still functions harmonically as a *ii*/o7. The purpose of the missing fifth may be to avoid the harshness of the diminished chord in this otherwise serene part.

In measure 115 Beethoven makes interesting use of the struggle between Major and minor. In the Secondary Theme area the final chord (e-minor in the exposition, a-minor in the recapitulation) acts as a *vi* chord for the dominant 7<sup>th</sup> chord in the next measure. The modulation would not be possible if the secondary theme was not stated in minor after an initial Major statement, and would have instead given us a VI-V7 progression in Major. At measure 139 of the exposition there are a few harmonies that overlap. If the movement was in a slower tempo, each beat would be analyzed individually, however, because of the fast tempo, the listener hears each measure as a whole, and the music can therefore be analyzed accordingly. Measure 150 is another example of a chord resolving to minor instead of Major. Moving on to measure 225 we have another case of two chords being combined into one. There is a clear D-flat (bVI) chord with a B-natural on the bottom. There are elements of an inverted Augmented 6<sup>th</sup> chord (i.e. a diminished 3<sup>rd</sup> chord) because of the B-natural moving to C and the D-flat moving to C. The important thing here is that this chord is a very strong predominant that has to move to V. On paper it is not entirely clear whether the passage at measure 254 is in D-flat or f-minor, but aurally it makes sense to say D-flat because it continues the sequence of key areas moving by thirds. The *allegretto* at measure 335 proceeds with a progression of notes that cannot be analyzed individually, as Beethoven is building up the chord piece by piece, delaying a full arrival of the chord until measure 337. The chord of the Adagio at measure 436 is an a-minor chord (*i*) that is also a *vi*/III, which allows for a simple modulation to C Major (the same technique as in the exposition). In the key of C-major, bars 436 – 439 would be analyzed as *vi*-V-V-I. This is a pivot modulation with the pivot on the a-minor chord in measure 436. There is a simple sequence of descending fifths at measure 469, while later in the coda (m.534 – m.546) Beethoven writes a chromatic ascent from c-minor to f-minor, without having an actual harmony at work.

### 3. Conclusion

A complete formal and harmonic analysis of this masterpiece does not only help, but is in fact imperative in order to achieve a successful performance. The complex compositional techniques used by Beethoven can be deceiving if not studied in detail. Knowing exactly where a phrase leads or which voice of a chord to emphasize can change the entire interpretation of the piece. This sonata requires

tremendous energy and control from the performers in order to achieve the bursts of emotional intensity of running notes, melodic lines and dialog between voices. “It is indeed a work in which the two instruments execute dominance, vivacity, and excitement, and in concerto proportions, yet are simultaneously heeding the delicacy of subtle chamber-collaborative sensitivities...Feared and loved, it is the Mount Olympus for all who perform it” [Midori].

The “Kreutzer” Sonata is one of the most impressive and challenging works in the violin repertoire. One of its unusual characteristics is that it features each instrument equally as they take turns showcasing their technical abilities and virtuosity. The passage work in both parts is brilliant and of the utmost difficulty, but still manages to sing warm, heroic lines. The success of this piece is timeless and goes beyond instrumental and compositional significance as it is as much of a gemstone for the performers as it is for the audience. At first glance, the sonata is in standard sonata form, with a typical harmonic key progression. However, upon a more detailed look, one finds that its structure could not be more complex - an abundance of keys and harmonies that flash by, unexpected chord resolutions and innovative techniques that replace standard modulations. Beethoven’s ability to weave such complex and intricate details into a seemingly simple, standard perimeter (form and outline) is unique and inspiring.

The result is a work that attains the most supreme lyric expression and beauty, along with a virtuosic excitement that leaves the listener in awe of this masterpiece’s unique and artistic value.

## References

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