

# Beethoven: 'Waldstein' Sonata

JIM'S PRESENTATION – 2ND JANUARY 2021

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No. 21 in Boris Giltburg's [Beethoven 32\\*](https://beethoven32.com/) Project. Released on 27th December 2020 on Apple Music & YouTube.

Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 21 in C major op. 53, known as the *Waldstein*, is one of the three most notable sonatas of his middle period (the other two being the *Appassionata*, op. 57, and *Les Adieux*, op. 81a). Completed in summer 1804 and surpassing Beethoven's previous piano sonatas in its scope, the *Waldstein* is a key early work of Beethoven's "Heroic" decade (1803–1812) and set a standard for piano composition in the grand manner.

The sonata's name derives from Beethoven's dedication to his close friend and patron Count Ferdinand Ernst Gabriel von Waldstein of Vienna. Like the Archduke Trio (one of many pieces dedicated to Archduke Rudolph), it is named for Waldstein even though other works are also dedicated to him.

— From Wikipedia

It is very tempting to talk of watershed moments – perhaps only visible to us in hindsight – but the *Waldstein*, its every note radiant with inspiration, is surely a landmark in Beethoven's development, as well as in the development of the sonata genre in Beethoven's hands.

The Sonata falls into two distinct parts: the energetic, taut as a wound spring *Allegro con brio* on one hand, and the expansive, poetic, highly imaginative finale with its slow introduction on the other. The very beginning of the first movement is pulsation made melodic, brimming with barely contained energy – the long row of repeated notes seemingly straining against the imposed metre, only content once they arrive at the short melodic figure in bar three. It is immediately repeated higher up, forming a micro-dialogue before the main theme is relaunched, a full tone lower than in the beginning, adding colour to what is usually a neutrally coloured key (no sharps, no flats).

That short, melodic figure proves important later on, as Beethoven builds half the development section around it – first as an imitative narrative, then in a veiled, pianissimo section, and finally as material for a wonderful build-up, from a mysterious (though always driven) half-whisper and up to a blaze of brilliance leading back into the recapitulation. The other half of the development, incidentally, is built around a minor transition motif from the exposition, that Beethoven takes out of its anonymous existence and puts centre stage, repeating twelve (!) times with nearly manic insistence in a wildly modulatory section. This is one of Beethoven's hallmarks: taking tiny musical building blocks and developing them beyond the limits of their perceived potential.

The second movement, a very slow (*Adagio molto*) atmospheric introduction to the finale, is at its heart a similar exploration of the opening motif – a longer note followed by an ascending interval, the three bound by a dotted rhythm. Beethoven never hides his interest in the motifs he develops, and here, too, it is made obvious in the last third of the movement, as the motif is stubbornly repeated, building up to a climax, and then descending, gradually calming down before the seamless transition into the finale.

The opening of the Rondo finale (*Allegretto moderato*) presents us with what was (intentionally, I believe) missing from the first movement – a long melody of true poetic beauty, earning the Sonata its second, much more artistic nickname, '*L'Aurora*' ('The Dawn'), as its gentle caress seemed to evoke the first colouring of the sky at daybreak. And day breaks indeed, with the sun appearing in all its glory above a blazing trill and a burst of energy in the left hand.

A string of episodes follow, most of them boisterous, one remarkably hushed and atmospheric. The final episode, an unstoppable wave of thundering semiquaver triplets, leads into a frenzy of a coda. There, everything is extreme: the tempo (the indication, *prestissimo* – the fastest one there can be – a marked contrast to the uncommonly held back *Allegretto moderato* of the movement proper), the dynamics, the accents, and, not least, the technical difficulty, culminating in an entire section of octave glissandos, which on modern pianos – their keys much heavier and deeper than those of Beethoven's keyboards – often require inventive solutions. But even in Beethoven's time this passage must have been a case of his showing off. Rather than a more common unmeasured sweep of the keyboard, here the glissando is to be played pianissimo, in strict measure, with both hands, and to make things worse, with a controlled stop in the middle of the line. So it was a double victory for Beethoven: a chance to showcase his extreme mastery of the keyboard, while enchanting the listeners with a hitherto unheard sound effect.

Following the glissandos the frantic energy suddenly peters out, and the theme appears several times above a pianissimo trill and a gently flowing left hand. My teacher, Arie Vardi, used to say of this part of the work that 'material melts and becomes spirit', and it rings very true to me; this forms an unexpected connection with Beethoven's last sonata, Op. 111, as both this use of a trill – not ornamental, but part of the music's core – and the concept of material-into-spirit will play a major role in that sonata's second movement. Here, however, it is just a passing, though highly effective episode, whereupon the dazzling energy returns and the Sonata ends in full triumph.

— Boris Giltburg

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