

# Edexcel GCSE: Beethoven's *Pathétique* Sonata

**Jonathan James** is a freelance music educator and teacher trainer who works with numerous orchestras, venues and organisations to explain classical and jazz music.

by Jonathan James

## INTRODUCTION

The first movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 8 is the longest and potentially most challenging of all the new Edexcel GCSE set works for teaching from 2016. This resource is about how to open it up in an exciting way for GCSE learners and to prepare them to excel at the main criteria of Edexcel's Appraising component.

Accordingly, the following core areas from the component will be covered in order to help students form the critical judgment and opinions required, particularly in the long-form answers in Section B:

- Context and conventions for the classical piano sonata and Beethoven's style.
- Musical elements, including sonata form and a detailed analysis.
- Use of appropriate musical terminology throughout.

The score used is the one printed in Pearson's anthology of the set works, a reproduction of the Peters edition. That said, given the level of analysis, any edition with bar numbers will serve the purpose.

### Useful background reading and resources

The go-to guide for stylistic context has to be Charles Rosen's *The Classical Style*, in particular the chapter on Structure and Ornament and the later chapters on Beethoven. Rosen's later analyses in *Beethoven Piano Sonatas: A short companion* are also excellent for those wanting to delve deeper – although obviously they are far beyond the requirements of a Level 2 qualification!

Out of the many Beethoven biographies, one of the most recent by Jan Swafford offers an interesting insight on the *Pathétique*: see his *Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph*. Lewis Lockwood's *The Music and Life of Beethoven* gives a more concise overview of the composer's life and style, including a helpful commentary on the development of the piano and the early sonatas.

There are several useful YouTube resources available. Andrew Schartmann's analysis correlates well to the analysis given later, although some American terminology is used for describing cadences.

Many of the musical illustrations for this resource have been put into this [Spotify playlist](#) for ease of reference.

### STORYBOARDING – A WAY IN

Before even opening the anthology, a good way of introducing the *Pathétique* Sonata is to present it as a powerful dramatic story. Get the students to listen through once without scores, drawing a 'storyboard' for the narrative the music suggests to them.

Alternatively, they could come up with some basic graphic notation to reflect the structure of the movement's story, noting the moments of greatest tension and the return of main ideas.

## CONTEXT AND CONVENTIONS

In order to answer the comparison questions in section B of the Appraising assessment, students will need to demonstrate an awareness of the Classical style and Beethoven's contribution to it, as well as some knowledge of the piano sonata as a genre.

## Introducing Beethoven

Was Beethoven the Mohammed Ali of Classical composers? Haydn called him 'die grosse Mogul', or 'big shot', after his bullish rise to prominence in the Viennese musical scene in the early 1800s. A lot of his music expresses fight and struggle. When listening to it you are struck by the squat energy of his rhythmic motifs, the multiple accents and the feisty dynamic contrasts. The development of the opening movement to his 'Eroica' Symphony is an excellent example, delivering one body blow after another in a series of off-beat accented chords. In a world of bantamweights, Beethoven emerged as a heavyweight.

### A CLASSICAL BOXING MATCH

Who would win a fight between Mozart and Beethoven? Compare Mozart's First Piano Sonata to Beethoven's *Appassionata* (see Spotify playlist), for example. Beethoven's music 'wins' in the first round in terms of its weight and power alone.

Here are some of the key characteristics of Beethoven the man and his writing style:

- visionary and revolutionary
- early Romantic, in terms of literary themes and the expressive range of the music
- harmonically daring
- provocative
- surprising

Although dating from relatively early in his career (1799), the *Pathétique* Sonata demonstrates a lot of these qualities. As we will see, the first movement manages to bridge Baroque, Classical and even early Romantic styles in a way that is typical of Beethoven.

As the last of the 'three greats' who retrospectively form the 'first Viennese school' of Classicism, Beethoven took the developments of Haydn and Mozart onto a 'new path', as he put it. More than his predecessors, he changed the understanding of what was possible in music. Composers have been comparing themselves to his achievements ever since.

Which adjectives would your students use? Can you make a word cloud from them?

## The three periods

Scholars have categorised Beethoven's output into three periods, according to his works' principal style and approach:

Dates	Period	Characteristics	Examples
1770-1802	Early	Influenced by Haydn and Mozart. Classical constraints respected: symmetrical periodic phrasing, conventional instrumentation and form.	Piano concertos nos 1 and 2 Piano sonatas nos 1-14 Septet for wind Symphonies nos 1 and 2 String quartets, Op. 18
1802-1812	Middle, 'heroic'	The beginning of the 'new path'. Epic, ground-breaking forms, heightened emotional language, surprising rhetoric.	Symphonies nos 3-8 <i>Appassionata</i> and <i>Waldstein</i> piano sonatas <i>Coriolan</i> Overture
1813-1827	Late	Increasingly 'hard', eccentric material that would take several generations before being fully appreciated. Visionary.	<i>Hammerklavier</i> Piano Sonata Diabelli Variations Symphony No. 9 'Late' string quartets opp. 127-135

Beethoven wrote the 'Grande sonate pathétique' in C minor, Op. 13, between 1797 and 1799, on the cusp of the middle, heroic period. It observes certain conventions within Classical first-movement sonata-allegro form, but flaunts others. It stands out among its more orderly neighbours – the sweeter and lighter-natured Op. 14 sonatas, for example – with an opening movement that is more Romantic and surly. As such, it points the way to the more emotionally direct style of Beethoven's middle period, and it was an immediate hit with the Viennese public of the time (making the ladies swoon, according to one contemporary critic).

### Beethoven the pianist

Beethoven famously broke strings on the piano with his unrestrained, passionate playing. As biographer Harold Schonberg put it: 'Beethoven banged the hell out of a piano'. You can imagine Beethoven pounding his way through the Allegro of the *Pathétique*, sweeping all before him. A more sober account from Germany's *General Musical Times* of 1799 puts it this way:

Carl Czerny, Beethoven's pupil, called his playing 'rogueish'.

**'Beethoven's playing is brilliant in the extreme, but not very delicate and at times becomes unclear. He shows to the best advantage in free improvisation.'**

This last point in this quote is key, because Beethoven was first and foremost known in the 1790s as an amazing improviser – someone who, like Bach and Mozart before him, could spontaneously create a fully formed piece out of the tiniest of musical scraps. When listening to his piano sonatas, we are always on the look-out for those parts that sound the most 'improvised' and fantasia-like, imagining how embellished the first performances would have been.

Once Beethoven set his ideas to paper, though, he turned from free-wheeling improviser to pedant. Listening to other performers play his piano music was excruciating for him, such was his intimate connection to the work and the instrument. In 1805 he wrote in his diary:

**'God knows why my piano music still always makes the poorest impression on me, especially when it is badly played!'**

The detail of the music, as far as we can discern it after generations of publications and editors, is therefore critical. Beethoven meant what he wrote. And, crucially, he would have contested editorial 'improvements'. This is particularly pertinent to the *Pathétique* Sonata, which has sometimes undergone such 'improvements'. Rudolf Serkin, a famous interpreter of Beethoven's piano music, started a tradition of replaying the entire opening Grave introduction in the exposition repeat – a brave but questionable decision.

### BEETHOVEN'S PIANOS

Given his enthusiastic, sometimes heavy-handed style at the instrument, you can imagine Beethoven thinking: 'I'm going to need a bigger piano.' His sonatas, works for chamber ensemble with piano, and the five piano concertos all show how he was continually longing for a superior instrument, with greater reach and more depth of colour. He was always experimenting with different effects – whether lute stops, new pedals, or some other latest fad in piano technology – and by the height of his fame in the 1810s, piano makers were sending him their latest creation to test.

The *Pathétique* would probably have been written on a Streicher piano, a Viennese make of fortepiano whose small frame and light touch frustrated Beethoven. He was after a heftier sound, and found the quaint, muted colours of the Streicher more suited to polite after-dinner entertainment than the concert stage. Graf and Broadwood pianos were to follow, with a wider octave range and more sonority.

Given his experimental nature and Romantic temperament, you get the sense that Beethoven would have loved to have heard his sonatas on a present-day eight-foot grand, in all their might and glory.

### Sonata form and Beethoven's 32 sonatas

Sonata form developed from ternary thinking (A-B-A in essence), taking initial ideas, developing them, then returning to them in a new light. A good sonata in that sense is like a good novel. We have clearly defined

characters that we want to follow through conflict and transformation, and to be reassured that all will be neatly resolved at the end, whether happy or tragic. The main thing is that there is a logic that we can instinctively understand: a clear beginning, middle and end.

The problems start when trying to tie sonata form down in more detail than that. Expert Charles Rosen is characteristically cautious on the matter in *The Classical Style*:

**‘The “sonata” is not a definite form... It is a way of writing, a feeling for proportion, direction, and a texture rather than a pattern.’**

So, it's more of a principle than a form. However, the standard textbook definition of sonata form can be applied to the first movement of the *Pathétique*, with a few exceptions due to the reinsertion of the introductory material in surprising places. Beethoven's choices of key are also unorthodox:

Section	Content	Bars	Key centre
Introduction	Grave material, in the style of a French overture	1-10	C minor
Exposition	First subject group, made up of two themes	11-50	C minor, modulating to...
	Second subject group, made up of three themes	51-112	E flat minor/major
	Closing material, incorporating some of the first theme	113-132	C minor
Development	Grave episode	133-136	G minor, preparing E minor
	Development of earlier themes and textures	137-194	Multiple
Recapitulation	First theme, extended. Note, no subsidiary theme this time.	195-220	C minor
	Second subject group	221-276	F minor, C minor
Coda	Cadential material	277-294	C minor
	Grave episode	295-298	C minor
	First theme	299-close	C minor

## BEETHOVEN'S CANON

Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas (or 35, if you count the 'Electoral' sonatas he wrote when he was 11) span his creative life from the 1780s to 1822. Listening to examples from the three main periods can be a very useful way of situating the *Pathétique* in the canon, as well as demonstrating how his overall style developed. You could compare the following, for example (given on the Spotify playlist that accompanies this resource):

- **Early period:** Piano Sonata No. 1 in F minor, final movement. Dramatic yet refined, you can imagine it bristling away on a fortepiano.
- **Middle period:** Piano Sonata No. 23, Op. 57, *Appassionata*, final movement. This is Beethoven the Romantic, turbulent and seething.
- **Late period:** Piano Sonata No. 29, Op. 106, *Hammerklavier*, opening. A grandiose opening to a sonata full of surprises and previously unmounted technical challenges.

Even this brief comparison should show how Beethoven's treatment of ideas got looser and freer with time. The overall structure and internal logic remain under strict control, but the expressive range and musical vocabulary widen and get more extravagant. It's like moving from sonnets to free verse. Both are poetry, both have their own inner coherence, but the rules of engagement for both writer and listener are different.

The piano sonata as a genre represented a unique creative space for Beethoven, a laboratory of sorts, to try out ever more outlandish ideas. It was through his piano writing that he primarily pushed into the unknown, with some of the innovations ending up in his string quartets or symphonies. The 32 sonatas testify to an

extraordinary creative development, driven by genius. And the *Pathétique* marks the first important crossroads on that journey.

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## THE *PATHÉTIQUE* SONATA: SPECIFIC BACKGROUND

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What's in a name? First, a lot of marketing potential and greater sales returns. Beethoven's publisher recognised that, and often added titles to sonatas, chamber works and symphonies to capture the public's attention. Beethoven, always concerned with getting the best deal, certainly wouldn't have minded on this occasion – although he did take issue with some of the publisher's other choices of titles (*Moonlight* being one of them).

In length alone, the first movement is grand, with its solemn introduction and multiple themes in the Allegro section. The opening heavy C minor chord and haughty dotted rhythms help set the tone, rolling out a velvet carpet for the entrance of the Allegro.

The *Pathétique* of the title relates to a sense of pathos and suffering. The biographer William Kinderman says Beethoven would have most likely been aware of Schiller's essay on the subject, which defines pathos occurring 'when unblinkered awareness of suffering is counter-balanced by the capacity to overcome it'.

In other words, the *Pathétique* is not about succumbing to life's woes, but to the struggle to transcend them. This first movement is about a fight. And in it, Beethoven the heavyweight is limbering up for the future 'rounds' of his middle period.

### 'PATHETIC' MUSIC

To give a later comparison of music as pathos, you might turn to Tchaikovsky's Symphony No. 6, which he called the *Pathétique*. In the final movement (see Spotify playlist), the strings cry out underneath the crushing hand of fate. It's music to weep to. This was a man who was bitter about life and what had been dealt him, giving vent to his suffering in the music. The movement ends in acquiescence, regret and death. But where Tchaikovsky wallows, Beethoven fights back. 'Pathos' for Beethoven is a spur to embrace life, not reject it.

### Tonality and influences

Beethoven did not pick C minor arbitrarily as the key centre for the first movement. It has a long-standing association with the tragic temperament, dating from the pre-Baroque. For Beethoven, C minor was the key of choice for funeral marches (for example the slow movement of the *Eroica* Symphony) and for relentless, agitated music. He was greatly impressed by Mozart's C minor Piano Concerto, No. 24, K491, and there are echoes of the unsettled mood of that piece as well as the final tragic moments from *Don Giovanni* in the *Pathétique*. Around the same time as writing the Sonata, he had embarked on the String Quartet, Op. 18 No. 4, also in C minor. It makes for interesting comparative listening (see Spotify playlist).

Other precedents in a similar tragic mode are:

- Bach's Partita for keyboard in C minor
- Mozart's Fantasia in C minor, K475
- Beethoven's own 'Electoral' Sonata No. 2 in F minor

The *Pathétique* may indeed borrow certain features from all the above, whether the ornate introduction or a more general reflection of mood, but it also set a new benchmark for writing in the tragic style.

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## DETAILED ANALYSIS

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What follows is an in-depth analysis of each section of the Sonata in turn, noting those specific elements that GCSE students will need to be able to identify, as well as giving further commentary that could support their 'critical judgements' in comparison exercises.

### The introduction

The pianist András Schiff hesitates to call the opening ten bars of the *Pathétique* an 'introduction'. In his illuminating talk on the Sonata he notes how the Grave material should actually be treated as belonging to the first subject group, given how it is used in the Development (eg bars 140-141). Most Classical and Baroque introductions, he rightly points out, do not contain material that will be used later. They are merely there as an ornate pair of doors to open onto the 'first subject proper', given in the ensuing Allegro.

Beethoven, however, does things differently. A feature of his working mind seems to be how tightly knit the thematic units and motifs are. And so it comes as no surprise that the rising and falling gesture in the very opening bar forms a seed that will be germinated later.

The very fact that there is a Baroque opening in the grand style of a French overture is in itself striking. It immediately recalls the overture of a Bach sinfonia, or a Haydn symphony. This is an interesting clue to how we might listen to the piece. As Schiff again points out, much of the material seems as if it is a 'reduction of an orchestral score'. The fortissimo (*fp*) accents, for example in the first three bars, are directions more suitable for a string section than for a piano, where you have little control over the decay of sound in a held chord (unless you're as skilled as Schiff, who manages a wonderful work-around).

For more advanced students, you could invite them to suggest a different orchestral instrumentation for each section, encouraging them to hear the piece in more symphonic colours.

The other striking feature about the introductory material is how it will be quoted later in the Sonata, stepping back on stage in a black hood, reminding us that suffering and death are always close at hand. It's a theatrical device, and one that Beethoven used elsewhere (for example in the finale of the String Quartet Op. 18 No. 6).

Notice how many diminished chords there are. Discuss the character of this chord at the piano with the students.

Bar	Commentary
1	A colossal C minor chord opens deep in the piano's register. It would have rocked a fortepiano on its legs. The dotted rhythm recall the French Baroque overture style, saved for grand entrances and, when in the minor, for presaging works of high tragedy. The rise-and-fall shape will be referred to later in the Development (bars 140-1, 146-7). After a dramatic falling away on the <i>fp</i> , the phrase heads into the third beat, a dramatic diminished 7th that acts as a discord in this context. Notice the falling semitone in the final couplet, a typical device to connote weeping.
2	Another surprise <i>fp</i> chord, this time starting with a diminished 7th to return the phrase to C minor.
3-4	A stretto as the idea is repeated in succession, insisting now with <i>sf</i> (sforzando, sharper) accents on the same diminished 7th discord, peaking on B flat 7 which, after a fantasia-like flourish, leads us to E flat major.
5-6	After the unison movement of the opening, the accompanying texture here allows the melody in the right hand prominence. Both are good examples of homophony. There are two characters being drawn here, one pleading, the other negating angrily. It feels as if we're on stage, watching a melodrama. The bass slowly creeps downwards, offset by some contrary motion in the melody.
7-8	The right hand continues its upward rise as the idea contracts and the implorings get shorter and more desperate. The octaves are kept in the melody for extra power.
9	The highest point in the introduction, both in register and mood. The tension is broken by an interrupted cadence into A flat.
10	A last pause for thought, in a gradual move to the dominant, G7. The scalic flourish is not showy: a simple chromatic scale played quietly, almost as a deflation, until the the final accented A flat in a dramatic minor 9th suspension that is begging to be resolved.

### The exposition

'Allegro di molto e con brio' – just from that marking we know this section needs to have urgency and brilliance. The mood is impetuous and, due to the sustained 'piano' marking, one of repressed rage. The suffering of the Grave is over, and the fight back begins. The time signature is 'alla breve', a brisk two in the bar.

Bar	Section	Commentary
11-19	First subject group, principal theme	Notice how long the quiet dynamic is held, to keep the tension high. A rebellion is afoot, but it is being kept underground for now. The 8-bar phrase has a pleasing symmetry: surging up for 4 bars, then falling. The octave pedal in the left hand is not very pianistic, better suited to a cello section. Tension is added through off-beat emphasis in bar 13, especially in the context of the preceding couplets falling on the strong beats. Chromatic movement colours the cadence back in to C minor in bars 17-18.
19-26		The same 8-bar phrase, this time moving to the dominant through extending the secondary dominant, D7, in bar 26.
27-35	First subject group, subsidiary theme	Flashes of lightning and a sudden virtuoso display here as the right hand tumbles through a broken chords of dominant 7th (bar 29) and augmented 6th (bar 30). The 4-bar phrase is repeated for emphasis. So far, so symmetrical.

Bar	Section	Commentary
35-50	Transition	The primary theme comes back, this time creeping upwards in sequence through the keys, A flat in bar 39, B flat by bar 45, preparing us for the expected relative major key of E flat major...
51-88	Second subject group First theme	... except we're in E flat <i>minor</i> – the first harmonic surprise. Here the 8-bar phrases are broken into 2-bar ideas, balancing lower register against high. The effect is one of a duet, achieved by some flashy hand-crossing, with the right hand playing both the baritone line and the soprano response. The mordent ornaments begin to decorate the line more and more in bars 65-66, culminating in a 8-bar passage where every strong beat is ornamented. This ornamentation and the overall lightness of the theme would have particularly suited to the graceful touch of a fortepiano. The accompanying figure (a held bass note and three repeated chords) is a typical Classical feature, a way of bringing motion into a simple chord much like the Alberti bass. Every bar has either staccato or an <i>sf</i> accent. Compared with the brooding first subject group, this theme is light and bright. The key is E flat minor until bar 63, where it moves to D flat. The harmonic pace picks up at bar 75, moving quickly through E flat minor to F minor (bar 83) then back via C minor to B flat to return to E flat, this time in the major.
89-112	Second subject group, second theme	Glowing in E flat major this time, this second theme is initially quite static, just using a broken chord of E flat over a dropping bassline. Then contrary motion sets in, propelling us to a IV-V-I in E flat at bar 101, effecting a crescendo in dynamic and register. This 12-bar paragraph is repeated in its entirety.
113-132	Second subject group, third theme. Closing material/ codetta	After the broken chords come the scales. This theme repeats a cadential pattern of I-vi-IV-V in E flat before returning in bar 121 to the first subject surging idea. A series of repeated <i>fs</i> in bars 129-132 act as accents, not mere dynamic marks. The right hand leaps from high to low over the engine-like broken octaves below – an athletic way to bring the exposition to a close. Notice the extreme voicing of the D7 first inversion in bar 131. Huge space is created between the two hands, followed by a dense dominant chord afterwards.



## THE DEVELOPMENT

For the third time now (if you do the exposition repeat) the Grave material is restated, marking the start of the development section. This in itself is dramatic and surprising, given that introductory material rarely gets another look-in in traditional sonata form. It reminds the listener of the underlying pathos, and of the reason for the agitated Allegro response.

Bar	Commentary
133-136	The Grave material returns with three dramatic <i>fp</i> blows in G minor, repeating the same ascent in 133-4 for emphasis. In bar 135 the E flat is enharmonically changed to D sharp in order to modulate through B7 to E minor. E minor is unrelated to the home key, and so another harmonic surprise.
137-139	The first two bars of the first theme in E minor, with a new dramatic crescendo.
140-149	This upwards sweep is responded to by the stepwise rise and fall of the Grave idea, restrained and quiet. The two ideas are in conflict: one fighting, the other suffering, the two sides of pathos. This dialogue is repeated down a tone in D major.
149-167	The left hand does a variation of the first theme, this time reduced to couplets that fall in semitones, a typical device to denote weeping or suffering. The right hand takes over the tremolo figure that until now has been delivered by the left. As is typical of a development section, this passage is harmonically unstable and involves a lot of chromatic movement.
167-194	After that instability, a dominant pedal on G is given which lasts, in effect, 28 bars (implied in the final 8). The tremolo figure for that pedal has been a constant feature from the previous paragraph, starting in bar 149. It provides great momentum. The broken chords in bars 167-170 and bars 175-179 add to the tension as they quietly circle G7min9. Played <i>pp</i> , this gives a claustrophobic effect. The first theme tries to break free each time, pushing close to the top of a fortepiano's range. Combine this with the rumbling bottom Gs below and you have a large chasm that can only be resolved by...
187-194	... the right hand tumbling down to meet the left, in a G7 broken chord with some chromatic colouration.

## THE RECAPITULATION AND CODA

The traditional role of the recapitulation is not just to restate the principal ideas in a more related key, bringing them home in effect, but also to show how they've been irrevocably changed by the development section. What scars and transformations do these characters now bear from the earlier conflict?

Bar	Section	Commentary
195-220	First subject group, principal theme	The principal theme is back in the home key of C minor. This time there is no response by the subsidiary theme from before. Instead, the block descending chords of the principal theme are extended and propel the music through different keys: a sequence upwards through D flat in bars 207-210, E flat minor in bars 208-214, then finally to F minor in bars 215-220.
221-252	Second subject group, first theme	The second subject material is now in the more related subdominant key compared to the E flat minor of before. Bars 245-252 take us through a pleasing cycle of 5ths – C minor, F7, B flat, E flat, A flat – before settling back to the dominant, G.
253-276	Second subject group, second theme	The expanding contrary motion from before, this time starting in the home key of C minor rather than E flat. Before it was reassuring in tone, but now it seems to threaten, building up for the final coda.

Bar	Section	Commentary
277-end	Third theme Coda	The same cadential sequence to brace us for a closing statement: i-VI-iv-V in C minor. This time, though, the first theme drives up to the densest, most bludgeoning chords yet, two diminished 7ths, the iconic chord of this movement (bars 293-4). A dramatic pause in bar 295. The Grave material makes one last, gasping appearance, this time stripped of the heavy downbeats to leave just the pleading motif. The spirit of suffering has been broken. Bars 299-end: the first theme returns defiantly, and the battle is wound up with abrupt hammer chords and a decisive perfect cadence.

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## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

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There is a lot here to share with GCSE learners, but this is helped by the fact the movement has such a clear and compelling narrative. In that sense, the piece should appeal directly to the emotions and get the listener excited, whatever their age group. In Beethoven's day this Sonata was so popular that it was made into into versions for wind nonet, string quartet, string quintet and piano quartet. It remains one of his most performed sonatas in piano recitals. We can be confident in its appeal.

You will have your tried and tested teaching methods for explaining sonatas such as these. The approach suggested by this resource is to start with the story, then pick out different characters to relate to the themes, noting how and when they recur, layering up the detail as you go – and where possible unpacking everything at the keyboard, wringing out the pathos at every corner!