LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827), one of the leading virtuosos of his time, composed the first important body of work for the piano as we know it. He grew up in the first generation of pure pianists and was determined to find new and idiomatic ways to compose for and play the instrument, thinking of his keyboard music as an ongoing exploration of the piano, both in the unsatisfactory present and in the future. As a young virtuoso in Vienna he hectored piano makers to give him more range, more sound, more robust instruments. Every time new notes appeared on the keyboard he immediately used them, thus making them indispensable.

As a performer Beethoven was celebrated for his blazing improvisations, his velocity, his double and triple trills. Observers noted that his fingers were remarkably still on the keyboard, barely seemed to move in rapid passages. Other times he broke strings and hammers, furious at the fragility of the instruments. The keyboard was his laboratory; he conceived and refined much of his music in improvisation. It is and especially in the solo sonatas that the unmistakable Beethoven voice first makes its appearance. He wrote piano sonatas more consistently through his career than any other genre, so in them we see every stage in his evolution.

The hoary division of Beethoven’s work into First, Second (aka “Heroic”), and Third Periods endures in how we perceive Beethoven, but the sonatas show that the perception of the First Period in particular is historically problematic. There are no apprentice works in the sonatas. The first published, the three of Opus 2, show a mature artist, already a master of form both technically and psychologically (though that mastery would deepen steadily). In the same period that he was composing the somewhat careful, rather backward-looking string quartets of Opus 18, he composed the epochal Pathétique Sonata, which shows the fully-developed Beethoven voice and fire.

Along with the sonatas, Beethoven throughout his life sketched out, perhaps through improvisation, dozens of smaller pieces, many of which he collected and published in groups of Bagatelles—the word connotes a trifle, a musical knick-knack—including his Opus 119, which gather pieces written over the course of some twenty years, and Opus 126, one of his last published works. Many such smaller works, though, were not published in his lifetime, such as the famous “Für Elise” (“For Elise”) dating from 1810 but not discovered and transcribed for publication until forty years after Beethoven’s death. There is no definitive answer as to who Elise may have been, but best guesses point to Beethoven’s piano student and friend Therese Malfatti or the young singer Elisabeth Röckel, daughter of the tenor who sang the role of Florestan in an 1806 production of Beethoven’s opera Leonore (later revised as Fidelio). The haunting, recurrent E–D-sharp oscillation of the opening is one of the most recognizable gestures in all of music. This fully formed piece, though, has much more to offer, with two harmonically contrasting episodes interspersed with its poignant A minor main phrase.

From notes by JAN SWAFFORD and ROBERT KIRZINGER (“Für Elise”)

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