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.

The three sonatas of Beethoven’s Opus 2 date from 1795. If the first is terse, driving, and minor, the Sonata No. 2 in A, Opus 2, No. 2 is playful, eruptive, and visceral, though a certain incipient melancholy turns up repeatedly, and always unexpectedly. It opens with three gestures: a hop, a swoop, a staccato stride, all of them downward. That foreshadows a three-part first theme section: that opening, then gentle lines flowing upward, then a scale zipping upward. There will be lots of zipping, rippling, and swooping to come. In the second theme section the gaiety runs head-on into an E minor that is troubled, surgingly passionate, almost Schubertian.

The Largo, in D major, is dominated by a quiet, string-like chorale theme with a quasi-pizzicato striding bass. Near the end the theme erupts fatalistically in d minor—the incipient melancholy, again unexpected. The scherzo’s theme is marked by giddy ripples; its Trio is an a minor expanse that tempers the high spirits without disturbing them.

The swoops find their glory in a final rondo, marked Grazioso, whose main theme rushes upward only to dip gracefully back down in a lilting, wide-spanning gesture. The middle—another surprise—is a pounding, staccato, A minor furioso section. With a quick, almost choked ending the music seems to leave the struggle against melancholy unresolved. Already Beethoven shows his gift for psychological subtleties.

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

Jan Swafford is a prizewinning composer and writer whose books include “Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph”; “Johannes Brahms: A Biography”; “The Vintage Guide to Classical Music,” and “Language of the Spirit: An Introduction to Classical Music.” An alumnus of the Tanglewood Music Center, where he studied composition, he is currently working on a biography of Mozart.

Composer and writer Robert Kirzinger is the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s Associate Director of Program Publications.

Program notes copyright © Boston Symphony Orchestra, Inc. All rights reserved.