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 brilliant and thematically tight-knit Sonata No. 3 in C, Opus 2, No. 3 alternates quiet, inward music with explosions of virtuosity, the whole seeming a two-handed version of a piano concerto, complete with cadenzas at the end of first and last movements. It begins with a measured trill that will resonate all the way to the spectacular triple trills at the sonata’s end. After what sounds like a quiet orchestral introduction in strings, the piano breaks into pealing virtuoso figuration—and thus the basic pattern of this expansive and largely high-spirited movement.

With the slow movement we are in virtually middle-Beethoven territory: its key a jump to distant E major, the poignant, thoughtful first theme falling into a darker, pleading middle section. The third-movement scherzo largely banishes the heaviness of the slow movement, its main theme wry and contrapuntal. For contrast, a babbling and entirely untragic A minor Trio.

Everything comes down to a scampering and brilliantly virtuosic rondo finale, its main theme, like all the main themes, subtly based on the opening bars of the sonata. Here the unflagging rhythmic drive is entirely at the service of gaiety.

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

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