

Transcending Form: Aesthetic Dualities and Musical Ontology in Beethoven's Piano Sonata--A Case Study of the Third Movement of Third Movement of Op. 110

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Abstract. Beethoven's Piano Sonata in A-flat major, Opus 110, stands as a major piece from his late compositional period. It reflects not only his mature style but also the deep tension between structure and lyricism, between philosophical thought and musical expression. This paper, drawing on both literature review and detailed score analysis, explores the formal innovations and aesthetic characteristics of the sonata. It further examines the dual aesthetic nature of the work from the perspective of musical ontology and performance practice. The study argues that the alternation between recitative, *arioso*-style melody, and fugue in the third movement creates not only a structural tension within the music but also constructs an emotional progression that moves from collapse to transcendence. This reflects a late-style compositional mindset in which Beethoven seeks to go beyond structural norms, while also mirroring a broader philosophical shift in nineteenth-century musical thought from Enlightenment rationalism toward the inner world of subjective spirituality.

Keywords: Beethoven's Piano Sonata, Third Movement of Third Movement of Op. 110, Musical Ontology, Aesthetic duality, Performance Interpretation.

1. Introduction

In the early nineteenth century, Europe was undergoing a significant transition from Enlightenment rationalism to Romanticism. During this period of ideological change, philosophy, literature, and music influenced one another and contributed to a deeper transformation in aesthetic awareness. Music was no longer seen merely as a representation of formal conventions, but increasingly became a powerful medium for expressing individual consciousness and spiritual belief.

As a key figure of this cultural shift, Beethoven built a bridge between artistic expression and philosophical reflection through his late works. The Piano Sonata in A-flat major, Opus 110, completed in 1821 and regarded as one of his final three sonatas, represents a peak of his late style. It reflects his deep interest in the interplay between reason and emotion, as well as the connection between form and freedom.

In this composition, In this work, Beethoven broke away from the traditional three-part structure of the sonata form, incorporating recitative, aria, and two sections of fugue, creating a highly integrated composite structure. Particularly in the third movement, its structural logic and emotional layers interweave and progress in a way that builds a tense spiritual trajectory between freedom and order.

In recent years, scholarly research in China on Beethoven's late piano sonatas has become increasingly refined, especially with regard to formal innovation, performance technique, and stylistic evolution. Scholars have demonstrated that *Third Movement of Op. 110* exhibits exceptional originality in both structural layout and philosophical expression. Zhu Yuanyuan notes that the sonata abandons the traditional tripartite sonata model, opting for a slow-fast-slow architectural design, and extensively integrates fugue and *arioso* idioms in the final movement. Drawing on Kant's concepts of "attraction and repulsion", Zhu interprets the internal tensions and spiritual architecture of the work, highlighting its symbolic significance in expressing metaphysical ideas [1]. Li Wenzhuo, approaching the piece from a performance perspective, focuses on rhythmic control, polyphonic texture, and tone

coloration, emphasizing the heightened demands the piece places on a performer's grasp of structural coherence and emotional nuance [2].

In contrast, international scholars tend to approach *Third Movement of Op. 110* from broader philosophical, ontological, and perceptual standpoints. Kinderman emphasizes that the contrapuntal structure in Beethoven's late works embodies the composer's intention to construct a "spiritual order" [3]. Ockelford, applying theories of musical perception, analyzes the interaction between structural awareness and aesthetic experience, and develops a formal model of *Third Movement of Op. 110* [4]. Taylor, examining the concept of temporality, argues that the movement subverts linear time, instead expressing a flow of "spiritual time" [5]. Rosen interprets the sonata as a philosophical reflection on traditional structuralism, emphasizing the internal logic between tonal architecture and thematic motives [6].

Despite the growing body of literature, much of the existing scholarship remains focused on technical structure, stylistic features, or performance issues, with limited attempts to systematically explore the tripartite relationship between structure, emotion, and spirituality. This paper aims to fill that gap by conducting a score-based analysis of the third movement, investigating how structural configurations guide emotional expression and ultimately reveal a spiritual narrative trajectory imbued with philosophical meaning.

2. Structural Analysis

This chapter presents a systematic analysis of the structural development of the *Third Movement of Op. 110*, focusing on its formal logic, sectional organization, contrapuntal treatment, and structural design techniques. Following the movement's chronological progression, four core sections will be discussed in sequence: the Lento introduction and arioso, the first fugue, the return of the arioso, and the second fugue with the climactic passage. Through score-based analysis, the chapter reveals the underlying logic and tension system embedded within this atypical sonata structure.

2.1. Lento Introduction and Arioso dolente (Recitativo & Arioso dolente)



Figure 1. Excerpt of the recitativo [7]

The third movement opens with a highly declamatory Recitativo section (see Fig. 1), marked in the score as *Klagender Gesang* ("Song of Lament"), which immediately introduces a dramatic and emotionally charged atmosphere (Fig. 2). In this segment, Beethoven employs compositional techniques akin to operatic recitative, utilizing free rhythm, irregular pitch contours, and non-functional harmonic progressions to create a speech-like and theatrical effect. This design simulates the intonation and emotional cadence of human vocal inflection, thus granting the piano an expressive capacity that transcends its instrumental limitations.



Figure 2. Excerpt of the Arioso dolente [7]

According to acoustic analyses conducted using Praat software, the fundamental frequency in this movement mainly concentrates between 100–500 Hz, with the most intense fluctuations occurring in the Recitativo section, thereby revealing a high level of emotional volatility [8]. The frequent intervallic shifts and unstable melodic centers in this segment produce a near-"linguistic" expressive mode. This indicates Beethoven's deliberate blurring of boundaries between instrumental and vocal idioms, generating a musical form that lies beyond traditional instrumental syntax or linear narrative logic.

Immediately following this is the Arioso dolente ("sorrowful arioso") in A \flat minor, introduced through a fragmented, irregular melodic line, supported by a descending chromatic lament bass (lamento bass) and punctuated by frequent rests. This passage evokes a sense of profound internal collapse. The melodic line drifts upward and then falls, interrupted frequently by silence, thus evoking sounds akin to sighing or sobbing. The fragmentary texture and disrupted phrasing further weaken any traditional motivic development, transforming the compositional drive from a functional expansion into an assemblage of emotional utterances and fractured expressions.

2.2. First Fugue: Structural Counterattack and the Restoration of Rational Order

With the entrance of the Allegro ma non troppo section (6/8 meter, A \flat major), the first fugue is introduced (Fig. 3), marking a sharp turn away from the free rhythm and fragmented expression of the opening sections. Here, the music enters a zone of rational construction and contrapuntal precision. The fugue subject itself is simple and lucid, with a clearly defined rhythmic identity, symmetrical motivic design, and a stable intervallic contour. It is introduced sequentially in three voices--middle, lower, and upper--forming a standard subject-answer-counterpoint exposition.



Figure 3. Excerpt of the first fugue [7]

In this fugue, Beethoven combines traditional contrapuntal techniques with personal innovations, constructing a system that is both inherited and subversive. Specifically, he employs invertible counterpoint, retrograde motion, tonal displacement, and rhythmic compression to create a fugue that is not merely a Baroque-style structural showcase, but rather a dialectical musical argument concerning the reconstruction of rational will.

Structurally, the fugue displays a highly organized hierarchy: the subject is layered across voices, forming a clear "construction–development–response" architecture. Meanwhile, complex rhythmic interplay, shifting meters, and subtle modulations between tonal centers provide a sense of dynamic tension and ongoing transformation. This structural framework is not purely formal; more deeply, it signifies a psychic effort to reestablish internal order amid prior chaos--a sonic allegory of the will's return from disintegration to coherence.

2.3. Return of the Arioso: Collapse of Spirit and Expression at the Edge of Silence

Following the rational construct of the first fugue, the music takes an abrupt turn, returning to the Arioso dolente theme. However, this reprise is treated in a far more fractured and nearly collapsed form (see Fig. 4). This segment contains some of the movement's most psychologically charged materials. Here, Beethoven no longer reuses the arioso as it was initially stated; instead, he intentionally deconstructs it, pushing the language to the limits of expressive instability. This collapse is not merely structural but also existential: a descent from the hope of reconstruction into the abyss of near-nihilistic disintegration.



Figure 4. Reprise of Arioso dolente [7]

The musical syntax in this section is heavily deformed: melody becomes disjointed and episodic, constructed from frequent rests, jagged motifs, and irregular rhythms. The once-fluid arioso line is now interrupted and segmented, paired with *p* and *pp* dynamic markings and the use of *una corda* pedal (see Fig. 5). The overall texture becomes thin and fragile, generating a perceptual effect of "approaching silence." In music psychology, such moments of near-inaudibility are often seen as "emotional vacuums", signifying an affective state beyond verbal articulation.



Figure 5. Fragmented expression in the reprise [7]

Although formally a reprise of the Arioso dolente, this section has undergone radical transformation both in form and content. The texture is sparser, the tempo more stagnant, and the emotional meaning inverted: it no longer laments--it disintegrates. As Fine suggests, this portion enacts a simulation of aphasia, in which the fragmentary phrasing symbolizes the collapse of inner language [9].

Matheson, in her analysis of the melodic texture, points out that the right-hand line can no longer be interpreted as "melody" in the traditional sense; rather, it becomes the monologue of one who has lost speech. The left hand, progressing through slow, non-functional harmonies, descends as if pulled by gravity, generating a psychological implosion within the sound [10]. Here, Beethoven forgoes any pretense of communication with the listener. Instead, the music becomes a gaze into the self's existential state, using disruption, disorder, and non-functionality to manifest a mode of expression that symbolizes the core of Beethoven's late musical philosophy.

2.4. Second Fugue and Coda: Sublimation of the Will and Liberation of Structure

When the fugue theme re-emerges in the final section of the movement, it is no longer a mere restatement. The return of the fugue marks a new phase in the spiritual arc: following the collapse, it now represents reconstruction and transcendence. This section signifies a full emergence from internal implosion--through contrapuntal technique and intensifying energy--resulting in a sublimation of the will and a spiritual breakthrough in form.

The fugue theme is now introduced in G major, and the shift in tonality already suggests a change in its symbolic function. The tempo accelerates with markings such as *più moto* and *crescendo*, generating gradual momentum and upward tension (see Fig. 6). The left hand's arpeggiated harmonies ascend persistently, while the right hand develops motives with increasing rhythmic density, producing a sensation of psychological surge.



Figure 6. Tempo primo--Return of fugue subject in G Major [7]

Beethoven applies advanced fugal variation techniques--inversion, rhythmic compression, register expansion, and textural densification--transforming the fugue subject into a process of emotional elevation through formal evolution. This embodies a path of simultaneous rational and affective development, achieving aesthetic expression that is both structural and spiritual.



Figure 7. Final coda [7]

From measure 174 onwards, energy converges toward a climax. The Tempo primo passage (m. 176) acts as a transition. Then, from measure 180, the right hand executes wide-ranging, rapid scalar

and arpeggiated figures, reaching the upper register extremes (Fig. 7). Frequent sf and ff accents generate dramatic sonic contrasts, producing a climax of maximal tension. The harmonic motion emphasizes Ab major's tonic–dominant polarity, achieving structural closure and offering semantic resolution to the work's spiritual journey. The 8va marking raises the melodic line to the highest register, creating a sense of spatial transcendence, symbolic of the soul's ascent from darkness to light.

As Ribeiro notes, although this passage may superficially appear to be virtuosic showmanship, its true interpretive demand lies in maintaining lightness and control of tone color, thereby revealing Beethoven's intended "spiritual liberation" [11]. Structurally, this final movement represents a fusion of ecclesiastical counterpoint, Romantic emotionalism, and improvisational expansion—a testament to Beethoven's late compositional philosophy.

3. Discussion

3.1. The Integrative Path Beyond Structure

Building upon the score-based analysis presented in Chapter 2, this section shifts the focus toward a synthesis of the expressive characteristics of the third movement as a whole. It emphasizes how Beethoven interweaves structure, emotion, and spiritual tension across multiple dimensions to present a mode of musical expression that transcends the traditional paradigms of sonata form. The movement begins in the fractured expressive landscape of the *Recitativo* and *Arioso dolente*, proceeds through the rational construction and spiritual reflection embodied in the fugue, and ultimately arrives at a state of unity and sublimation in the second fugue and climactic section.

The idea of transcendence in the third movement emerges across multiple dimensions. Structurally, Beethoven blends contrasting forms such as *arioso*, fugue, and *recitativo* into a coherent and fluid whole, defying conventional sonata expectations. Emotionally, he makes use of fragmented textures, flexible rhythms, and harmonies that do not follow traditional functional progressions, creating a sound world charged with tension and fragility. As the movement unfolds, it traces a gradual transformation from spoken-like gestures to lyrical song, from breakdown to renewal. This process outlines a spiritual journey shaped by conflict, reflection, and eventual resolution. From the listener's perspective, the increasing rhythmic urgency, thicker textures, and widening pitch range intensify the expressive arc and stretch the boundaries of formal perception.

3.2. Philosophical Translation and Spiritual Expression

The Musical Translation of Philosophical Semantics. In this movement, Beethoven relies on contrapuntal and fugal language to effect a transformation from sensuous musical speech to philosophical meaning. The strict logic of the fugue, the freedom and lyricism of the *arioso*, and the dialectical interplay between these two modes together form a kind of musical embodiment of the movement of consciousness. As Gebauer observed that the internal motivic relationship between the *arioso* and the fugue not only constructs a sense of musical unity, but also reveals Beethoven's philosophical aim: the pursuit of spiritual coherence through formal conflict and structural contradiction [12]. This dialectical movement is not a manifestation of unchecked romantic sentimentality, but rather a form of existential artistic inquiry. Musical structure here is not merely a framework of formal logic—it functions as a bridge to the spiritual domain.

Philosophical Reflections in Beethoven's Late Style. The structural and spiritual expressions in the *Third Movement of Third Movement of Op. 110* engage in a profound dialogue with nineteenth-century philosophy, especially with the tradition of German classical thought. Concepts such as Kant's dialectical unity between reason and sensibility, Hegel's logic of the self-realization of Spirit, and Schopenhauer's notion of the will transcending suffering all find resonant correspondences in the architecture of this movement. In this context, the fugue becomes more than a technical form—it

becomes an "architecture of the will", whose unfolding mirrors Nietzsche's description of form as a force that emerges from the abyss—a structure of light born from despair.

As DiPaolo has noted, the emotional trajectory of the piece traces a continuous arc from stillness to illumination, and the progressive development of the fugue intensifies the psychological and dramatic weight of this transition [13]. Through structure, the work accomplishes the sublimation of the soul, guiding the music from language, emotion, and form toward an ontological realm of artistic achievement. Beethoven, through music, completes a systematic inquiry into the relationship between human existence, rationality, and emotion without uttering a single word. This transdisciplinary and spiritual character elevates the work beyond the category of a single musical composition and allows it to enter the domain of what may be called a "musical-philosophical text."

4. Conclusion

This study has centered on the third movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata *Third Movement of Op. 110*, seeking to construct a coherent interpretive pathway that interlinks structural analysis, emotional logic, and philosophical meaning. Through score-based examination and theoretical framing, this paper has demonstrated how Beethoven integrates recitative, *arioso*, and fugue into a complex and dialectical formal design. On this foundation, the research further reveals the mechanism by which musical structure directs emotional expression—namely, that emotion is not simply imposed upon the music from without, but rather activated, guided, and ultimately elevated by the formal design itself. In the final chapter's philosophical reading, the paper argues that this movement not only reflects Beethoven's aesthetic pursuit of structural order but also manifests a profound philosophical meditation on the condition of being.

The findings indicate that the structure of the third movement is far from a closed technical framework; instead, it constitutes a dynamically generative spiritual vessel. The fractured linguistic character of the *Recitativo* and *Arioso*, the rational construction of the fugue, and the ascending motion of the climactic section together compose a spiritual journey from aphasia to order to transcendence. This journey is built upon structure as its skeleton, emotion as its flesh, and philosophy as its soul—thereby endowing the music with a temporal and existential power that surpasses its historical moment.

Nonetheless, this research bears certain limitations. Primarily, the analysis is focused exclusively on the third movement and has not yet incorporated the first and second movements into a broader comparative framework. A holistic interpretation of the entire sonata remains a task for future study. Subsequent research may also benefit from integrating the subjective experiences of performers and listeners, through interviews and experimental performance-based methodologies, to further investigate how emotional content is translated and mediated through structure. Additionally, cross-disciplinary approaches—drawing on phenomenology, aesthetics, and cognitive psychology—may allow for deeper analysis of how consciousness and spiritual meaning are constructed within Beethoven's musical language.

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