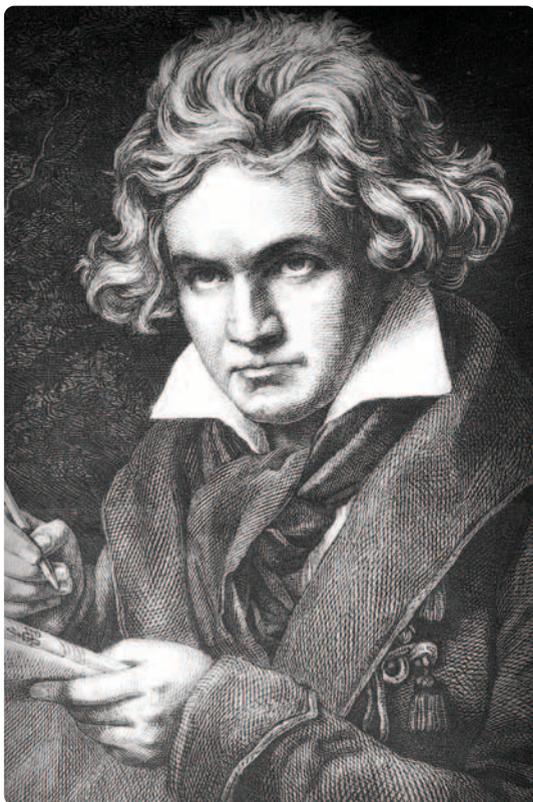


# Beethoven and the Piano

Beethoven was not only a prolific composer for the piano, but for much of his life was a celebrated piano virtuoso. Rather like Liszt several decades later, Beethoven's pianism enthralled and perplexed in equal measure. Contemporary reports describe his piano playing as strikingly expressive, bold and technically brilliant. If that were not enough, while Beethoven was capable of playing exquisite lyricism on the piano, the violent side of his character was often vented on the instrument in string-breaking, key-cracking fashion (he is believed to have gradually destroyed no fewer than seven pianos during his lifetime). After attending a Beethoven performance in Prague in 1798, the eminent pianist and composer Václav Tomášek was so overcome that he was unable to touch a piano for several days. Nevertheless, some twenty years later Tomášek was still lauding Beethoven as the greatest pianist he had ever heard.



Beethoven's early life was one of significant change in the technology of keyboard instruments: namely the gradual transition from the use of the harpsichord to the piano (significantly, his earliest keyboard works were composed to be played on either instrument). Harpsichord sound is produced when a series of quills pluck the instrument's strings, a mechanical process that allows for only limited dynamic variations. On the piano (and on its short-lived predecessor the fortepiano) the strings are struck by hammers, with the varying force exerted on the keyboard by the pianist allowing for extreme dynamic contrast, a feature that gave rise to the name 'Piano-Forte' (literally, 'Soft-Loud'). The harpsichord does not allow for smooth, *legato* playing, while the piano's superior responsiveness allowed for unbroken melodic lines and greater emotional expression. The pedals of the harpsichord produced different tone colours, while piano pedals could lengthen or dampen sounds. In short, unlike its predecessor, the piano was able to transmit a far wider spectrum of dynamics, musical colours and emotions. Beethoven and the piano were made for each other.

Of course, the great Mozart had already taken to the piano with alacrity and had performed on the instrument regularly since the late 1770s. However, if Beethoven is to be believed, Mozart played the piano 'like a harpsichord', suggesting minimal use of the pedals, limited dynamic contrast and even a restricted expressive palette. Whether or not Beethoven's description is wholly accurate, Mozart only loved the piano; for Beethoven, however, it meant more. The new capabilities provided by the piano mirrored and gave expression to Beethoven's extraordinary creative impulses and his need to break away from the confining musical conventions of the 18th century. In turn, Beethoven became one of Europe's most important pianist-composers at the very time the piano needed champions to further legitimise its claims to ascendancy.

Yet Beethoven's relationship with the piano – as with most of the people in his life – was hardly smooth. He forged his early reputation in Vienna in no small measure as a pianist (he was, among other things, a quite brilliant improviser), though there was always a sense on Beethoven's part that for all the new technical and expressive potential offered by the instrument, it was never quite adequate for his creative needs. With the composer gradually declining into deafness his piano playing became ever wilder as he strained to hear his own playing and as he further pushed the boundaries of his own deeply personal musical language. Eventually total deafness did at least spare him the awful sounds of breaking strings and shattering keys, the inevitable consequences of the physical punishment he dealt out to the instrument. Indeed, in his later piano works Beethoven did not seem to have in mind the still-rudimentary and relatively-fragile piano of his day at all, but some as yet undeveloped instrument of the future, a piano more akin to the powerful instrument of today.

As well as his 32 piano sonatas, sets of variations and many other shorter piano works, it was only natural that Beethoven should unite the piano with another 'instrument' so critical to his output, the orchestra, and between 1790 and 1809 he composed five piano concertos. The combination of piano and orchestra provided Beethoven great scope for presenting and developing ideas; it could enact conflicts (and reconciliations) between soloist and orchestra, and it made the overall sound more imposing, more vibrant and more varied. Furthermore, in his piano concertos as elsewhere, Beethoven reveals himself as pathologically incapable of being predictable and formulaic. From the gently mould-breaking first and second concertos through the tragic seriousness of the third and the often limpid beauty of No 4 to the imposing grandeur and sublimity of the *Emperor*, together the concertos form a series of richly-contrasted sound-worlds, each of which makes gloriously manifest Beethoven's very special relationship with the piano.

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