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Evaluating the Innovative Fantasia Concept in Beethoven's Piano Sonatas, Op. 27 "*Sonata Quasi Una Fantasia*"

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Abstract

Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas are considered seminal works in Western music history as they represent perhaps more clearly than any other body of works the innovative processes that are at the core of Beethoven's creativity as described by American musicologist Stewart Gordon. The 32 sonatas are so popular among scholars and pianists that each of them features unique innovations that are uncommonly observed by previous composers. The differences between numbers are extreme, not only just between Opus number but also within Opus number; as a result, the impact of these works upon the nineteenth century was so immediate that they quickly challenged composers to have a new standard of sonata writing by means of redefining, transforming, and elevating the genre. One of the most original works of the 32 sonatas is both numbers of Op. 27, marked "sonata quasi una fantasia" by the composer himself, in which there were no known composers who had written similarly in combining the concepts of fantasia and sonata. The fantasia concept in these two works is not expressed as common fantasia in the previous historical eras – a highly imitative contrapuntal work with many sections; Beethoven, instead, implies a new fantasia concept in Op. 27 by merging the two concepts together – one being so free and sectional, while the other being rigid in structure – into such "perfect marriage," resulting in such original works, which became an immediate impact to the "romantic" style and its composers.

Keywords: Beethoven, Sonatas Op. 27, fantasia, sonata, *sonata quasi una fantasia*, structural unity.

INTRODUCTION

Entering the nineteenth century musical landscape in Europe, Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) was immediately considered as the most important figure to represent the change from "classicism" to "romanticism." It is during the period when Beethoven went to Vienna (from Bonn) in 1787 for the first time, Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) said after hearing the future composer play, "keep an eye on him; he will make a noise in the world." (Matthews, 168). Known primarily as an excellent pianist and improviser, Beethoven emphasized the creation on

piano works, especially piano sonatas; in fact, nearly all of Beethoven's compositions were written for either solo piano or chamber works for piano.

Many scholars and pianists consider his works as seminal works in Western music history, especially his unparalleled 32 piano sonatas. Stewart Gordon, American musicologist, stated,

> "The 32 piano sonatas represent perhaps more clearly than any other body of works the innovative processes that are at core of Beethoven's creativity. From the beginning works, Beethoven shows us many of directions he will explore, and one can follow his thinking about structure, key relationship, emotional content, and sonority through the sonatas." (Gordon, 1996).

John Gillespie, another American scholar, stated,

> "Beethoven's keyboard works clearly displayed the outstanding characteristics of his gift for innovation. By following these works, we can penetrate to the beginnings of his genius and watch it unfold on the artistic as well as the human plane, for with Beethoven the work and the man are one. A high point in music history occurs in his piano music: his contribution to the sonata." (Gillespie, 1965).

The piano works were the focus in Beethoven's creative life, and they represented Beethoven's creativity at all stage of his professional life. Unlike Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) or Mozart, Beethoven constantly wrote piano music (as Haydn focused more on chamber music, whereas Mozart on opera) and devoted himself largely to piano music that would display his full capabilities as a performing pianist, including the 32 piano sonatas, five piano concerti, and 21 variations sets (both based on the popular songs designated as WoO number and the more ambitious one designated by Opus number).

The 32 piano sonatas have been constantly performed and analyzed since they have unique characters, uniqueness, and continuous innovations. These works represent the gerne sonata to its highest model since Beethoven transcended the architectural limits of musical logic and structure that no composers had written the genre in such similar level. From work to work, the music is filled with frequent and abrupt turns of character, along with many extreme changes between numbers. The innovations include modification in form and structure, new and bold harmonic vocabulary, motivic melodic treatment, and imaginative orchestral textural writing. American pianist Robert Levin thought of Beethoven's sonatas only to be performed in the most professional way as follows:

> "Beethoven the sonata as a vehicle for amateurs and a source of income for composers had begun to yield to a more ambitious genre destined for first-rank performers, transforming it into a peer of the quartet and the symphony."

The purpose of this research is to investigate further the sonatas, Op. 27 (composed in 1801), in which Beethoven provided the title as "sonata quasi una fantasia." By labeling the work as indicated, Beethoven clearly differentiated these two works from the formal structure of sonata genre, and the "rigidness" of classical form were no longer applied. American musicologist, F.E. Kirby, considered the sonatas, Op. 27 as the most innovative among sonatas of the early period (sonatas written up to 1802),

> "The fantasia character was by no means entirely new to the piano sonata, as is clear from Haydn's, Mozart's, and even some of Beethoven's earlier essays in the genre. In the sonatas of Op. 27, the fantasia aspect affects the disposition of each work as a whole." (Kirby, 121).

While fantasia is one of the earliest genres for keyboard music – which had been written since Renaissace – however, Beethoven did not follow adherence to that older fantasia quality, being highly contrapuntal in many sections. In Op. 27, Beethoven implies the new concept of fantasia within a sonata genre, merges the two concepts together – one being so free and sectional, while the other being rigid in structure – into such "perfect marriage." The new concept concerns with strong structural unity with creatively endless varieties, meaning that through the effective and economic materials, Beethoven successfully wrote music in the most logical and cohesive way that influence the entire musical landscape of nineteenth and early twentieth century.

BRIEF ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF FANTASIA UNTIL 1802

Fantasia first appeared in Italian tablature during sixteenth century, and its first application in keyboard music was by Hans Kotter (1485-1541). This early writing of fantasia was simple, which purpose was as an introductory and improvisatory composition with varied textured and musical ideas for five specific purposes: first, to introduce a song; second, to fill the silence gap during a church service; third, to establish the mood of a subsequent hymn; fourth to test the tuning of an instrument; and last, to entertain themselves or audiences.

Entering seventeenth century, the fantasia became a highly imitative counterpoint, as written by the leading composer Jan Pieterszoon Sweelinck (1562-1621) and Samuel Scheidt (1587-1654). Fantasia during the late seventeenth century was often paired with fugue and became associated with a freer style of writing rather than a strict imitative, with the leading composer being Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750). Bach's writing of his Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D minor, BWV 903 involves extreme changes of character and key, along with passages marked recitative.

The development of fantasia as an imitative counterpoint declined drastically in the keyboard music of the eighteenth century, mostly because of three reasons: the emergence of the galant style, sonata as the principal new genre, and the neglection of Baroque's doctrine of affection. Mozart was one of the composers who continued to compose fantasia in a much freer style of writing. His Fantasia in D minor, K. 397, consists of four themes with different texture and character.

BRIEF ORIGIN AND DEVELOPMENT OF SONATA UNTIL 1802

The roots of sonata as a genre, sonnare, date back to the thirteenth century, which indicate an instrumental composition. Sonare means "to sound," which description was simply something played as opposed to something sung. The term is used in general to describe any format of Renaissance instrumental music. The term was first used in Renaissance by Giovanni Gabrielli (1557-1612); the following development was during early seventeenth century was in Germany and was mainly associated with Johann Kuhnau (1660-1772), one of the prominent figures of the early keyboard sonata.

In the late seventeenth century, the development of sonata became significant as there were two types of sonatas: the solo and trio sonata. Solo sonata was a genre for solo instrumental piece with single movement, while trio sonata – the more popular genre during the Baroque era – consisted of multi-movements played by two melodic instruments and a basso continuo. Corelli was among the first to write trio sonatas, in which he wrote total of 48 numbers; and his impact was immediately felt by George Frederick Handel (1685-1756), Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750), and Henry Purcell (1659-1695). As time progress, composers wrote two categories of trio sonata: sonata da chiesa and sonata da camera.

Sonata continued to develop in Italy, particularly by Scarlatti, who composed more than 550 keyboard sonatas for the Portuguese Princess Maria Barbara. His sonatas are one-movement works, mostly cast in the same structure – rounded binary – with endless variety including wide emotional range spanning various characters and temperaments. Regardless Scarlatti's large output in sonata, however, the one-movement form was no to become characteristics of the keyboard sonata due to the variety of sonata composed in Italy during late eighteenth century; instead, the multimovement sonata became the most common of the sonata genre which development located in Germany particularly by Carl Phillip Emanuel Bach (1714-1788) and Johann Christian Bach (1735-1782); the three movements became common with first and last movements marked fast with slow middle movement.

The genre had such quick development and evolution during the years of 1750s to 1810s, as composers such as Haydn, Muzio Clementi (1752-1832), Mozart, Beethoven, and Franz Schubert (1797-1828) wrote several sonata compositions. Both Haydn and Mozart were excellent in representing the mature sonata writing; and both wrote piano sonatas mostly for teaching purpose and for domestic entertainment.

BRIEF OVERVIEW OF BEETHOVEN'S PIANO SONATAS UNTIL 1802

In 1855, Wilhelm von Lenz (1809-1883) – Beethoven's biographer – in his book Beethoven et ses trois styles [Beethoven and His Three Styles], originally divided the 32 piano sonatas into three periods: early, middle, and late. Lenz divided the three periods that each has distinct characteristics and stylistic features. The first (formative) period spans to 1802; the second (heroic) from 1803-1812; and the third (transcendental) from 1813-1827.

The piano sonatas that Beethoven wrote in the first period show the high classic influence by Haydn and Mozart, although gradually Beethoven started experimenting with many new directions. Overall, there are six main features that can be summarized for the sonatas written up until 1802:

1. Beethoven not only showed the craftmanship of writing in a high classic style of Haydn and Mozart, but also already experimented and expressed many new directions.
2. The treatment of the musical forms is already expansive.
3. The exposition of the first movement is usually long and multi-thematic.
4. The slow movements are typically long and avoiding cantabile writing.
5. Most third movements remain true to the minuet origin.
6. The last movements are typically set to be longer than the first movement.

ABOUT PIANO SONATAS, OP. 27

The sonatas were written during 1801-2 with subtitles sonata quasi una fantasia [sonata in the manner of fantasy] by Beethoven himself. Beethoven dedicated the second number to Giulietta Guicciardi, his sixteen-year-old student. This work is often associated with the sorrow of Beethoven's losing Guicciardi due to the forbidden love, as described by Suzanne Elliott, an American musicologist:

> "It is certain that Beethoven proposed marriage to Giulietta, and that she was inclined to accept. But the other – probably her father – forbade her to marry a man without rank, fortune or permanent engagement, a man, too, of character and temperament so peculiar. Giulietta married instead Count Wenzel Robert Gallenberg, a prolific composer of ballet and occasional music, on 3rd November 1803." (Elliott, 2013)

However, Timothy Jones, a music professor at the University of Exeter, stated that it had something to do with the loss of Beethoven's hearing:

> "Perhaps the 'Moonlight' sonata is not, after all, an expression of Beethoven's sorrow at losing Giuletta: the claim, though made often enough, has absolutely nothing to recommend it from a biographical perspective. A far more precious loss to Beethoven at that time was his hearing." (Jones, 14)

THE INNOVATIVE FANTASIA CONCEPTS IN SONATA, OP. 27 NO. 1

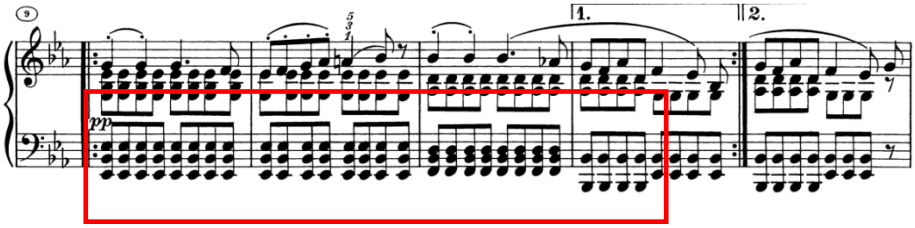
In this work, Beethoven did not adhere to the fantasia concept written before him – a highly imitative counterpoint with many sections; instead, the fantasia concept in this work is to have strong structural unity with creatively endless varieties throughout the piece into one logical cohesive form. The fantasia elements are based on two main motivic materials written in the beginning of the first movement: triadic motive and short-short-long (SSL) rhythmic figure.
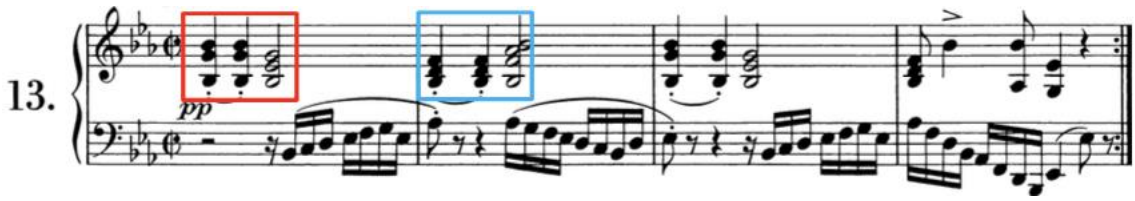


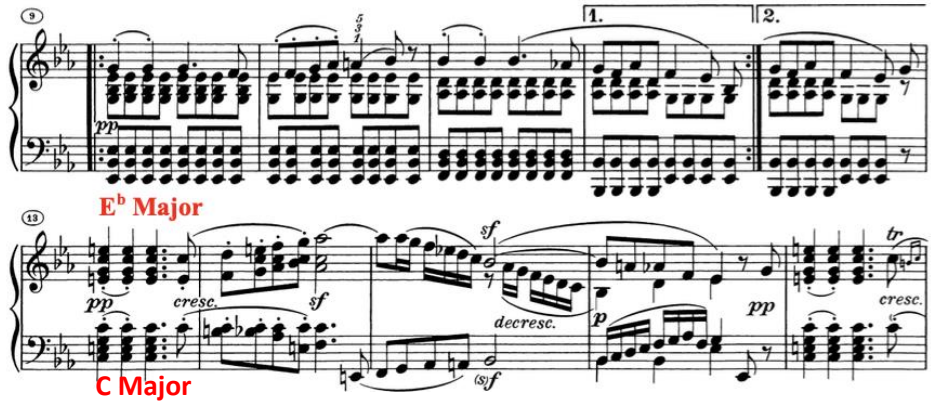
Figure 1. Sonata Op. 27, no. 1, 1st mvt, mm. 1-4

These two materials are pronounced into a creatively endless varieties throughout the entire work with 17 specific ways:
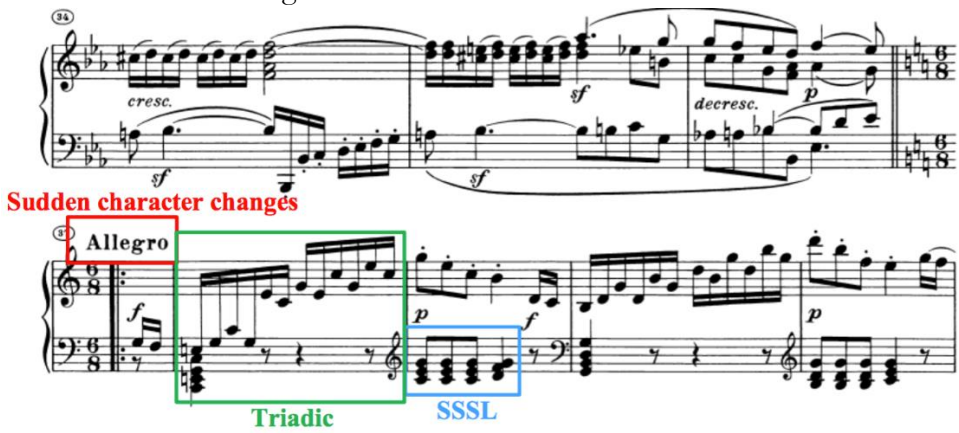
1. Prolongation
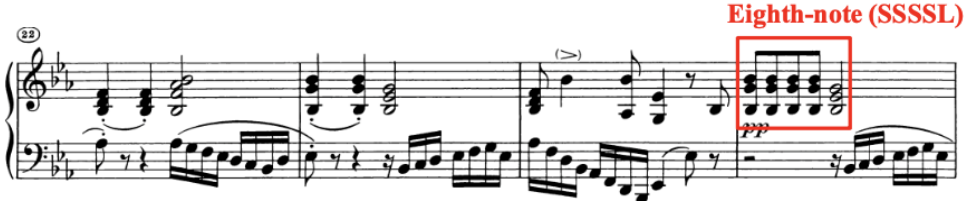


2. Sudden harmonic changes
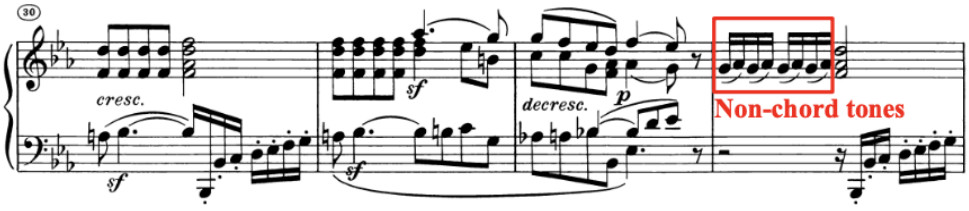


3. Sudden character changes
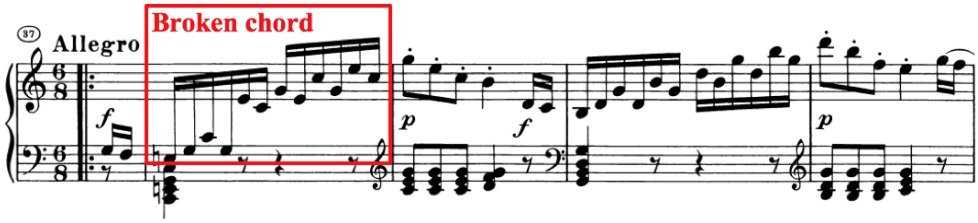


4. Rhythmic diminution
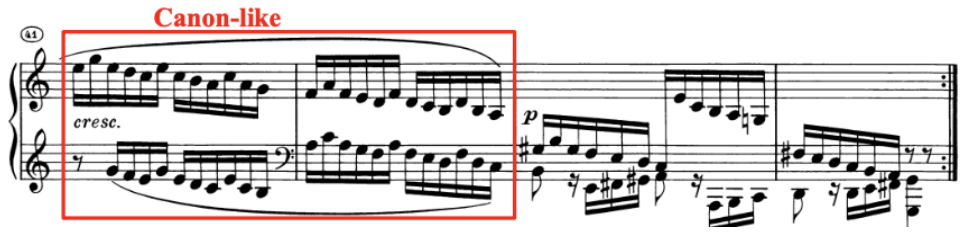


5. Non-chord tones
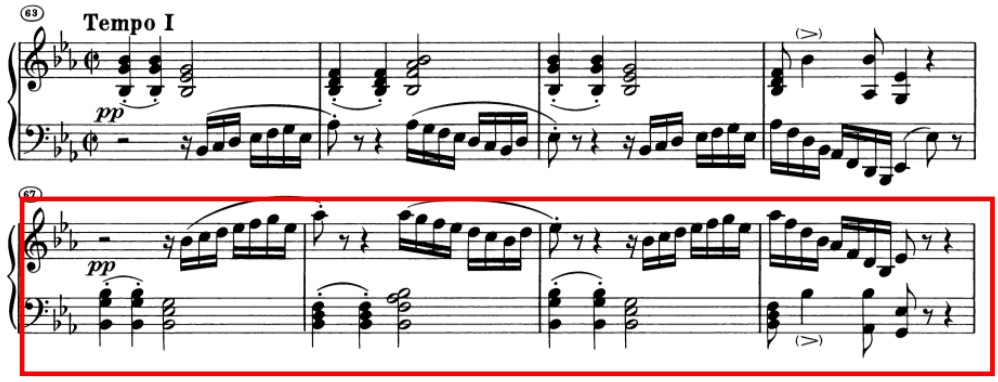


6. Broken chord



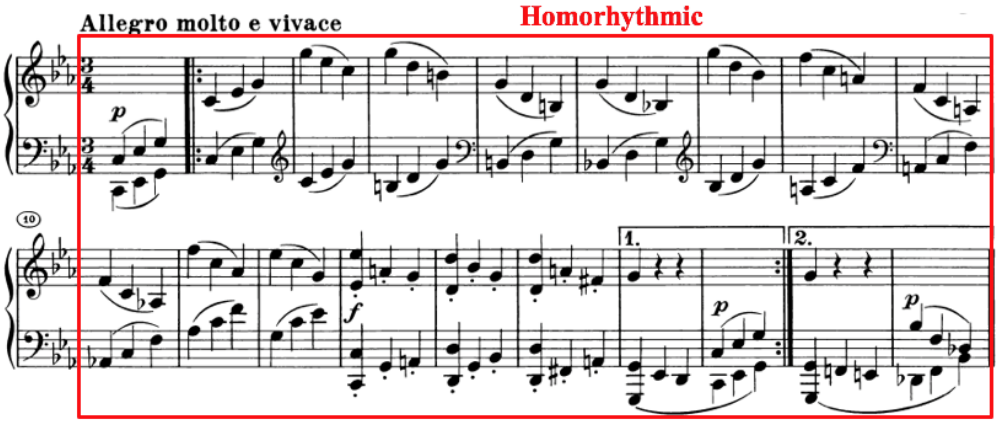
7. Canon-like
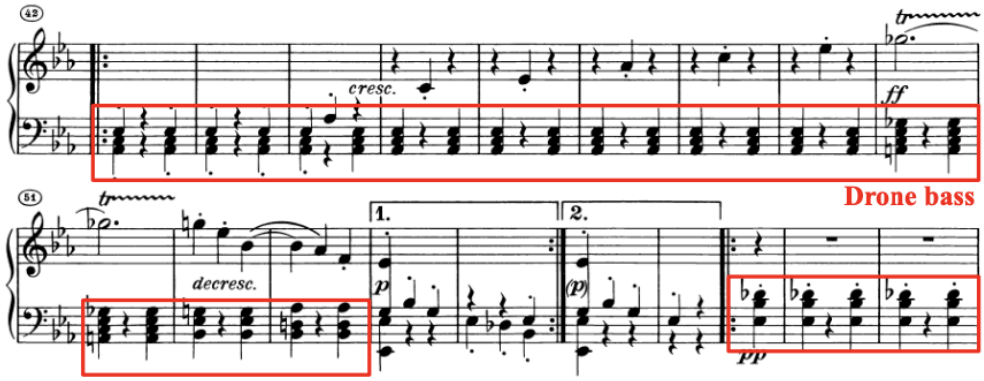


8. Invertible counterpoint
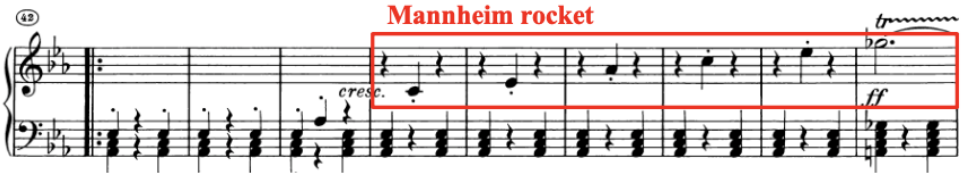


9. Homorhythm texture.



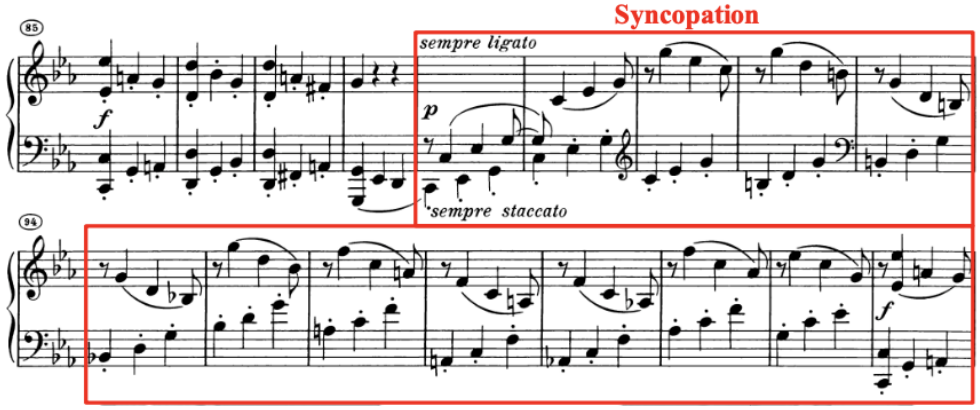
10. Drone bass folk idea.



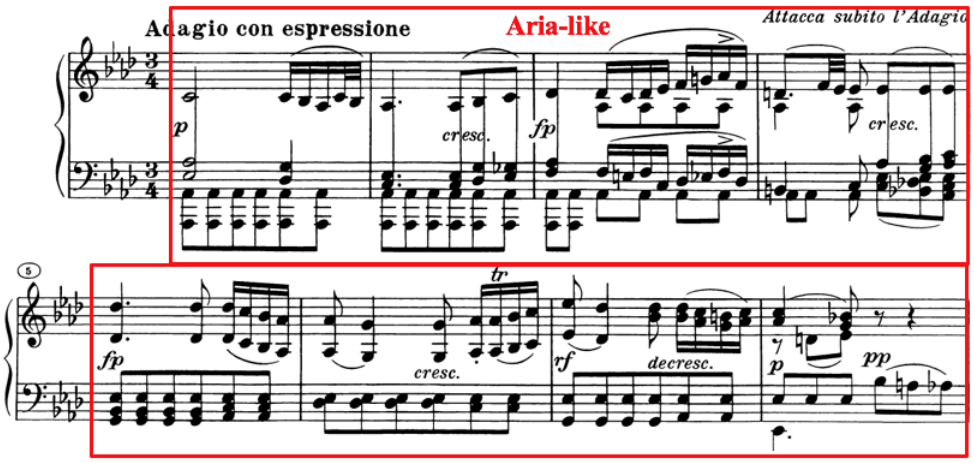
11. Mannheim rocket texture.



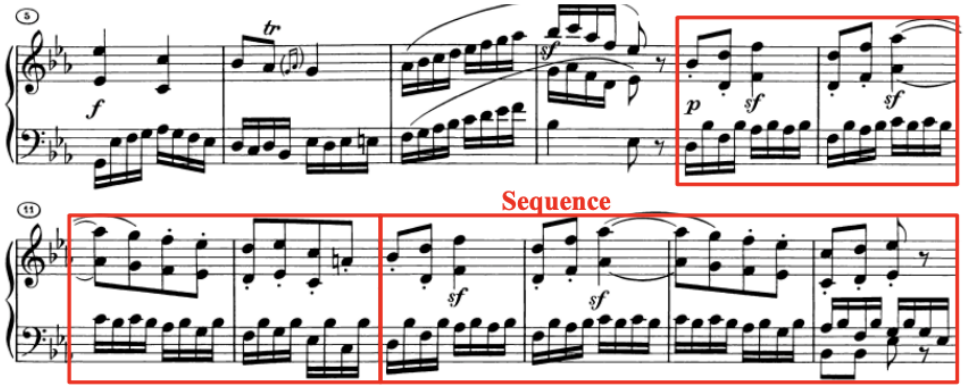
12. Syncopation.
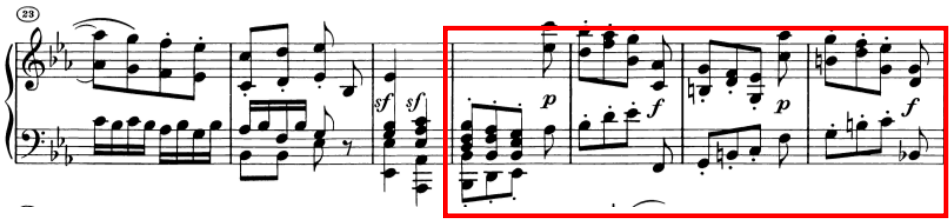


13. Aria-like.
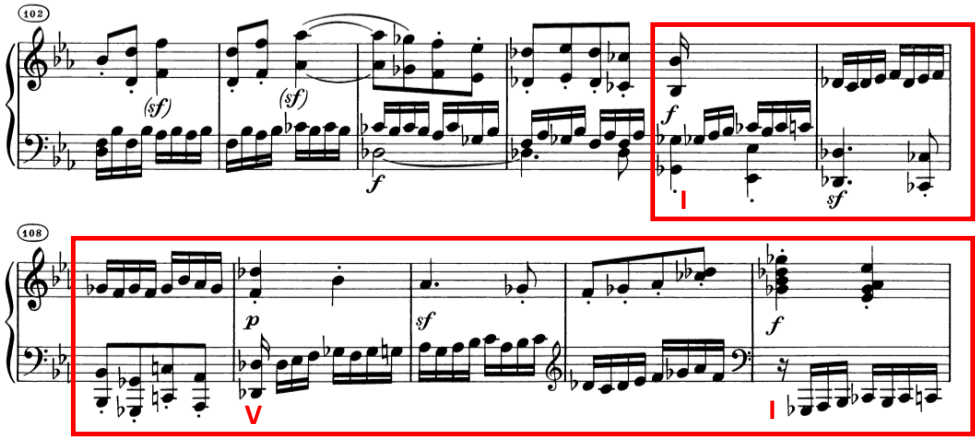


14. Sequence.



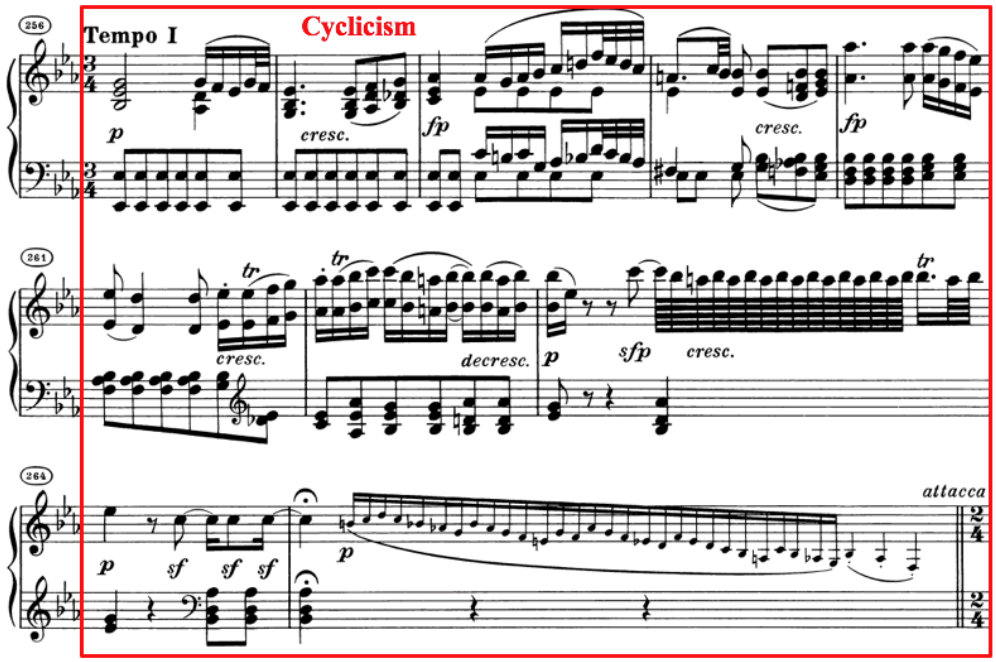
15. Imitative counterpoint.



16. Fugato-like.

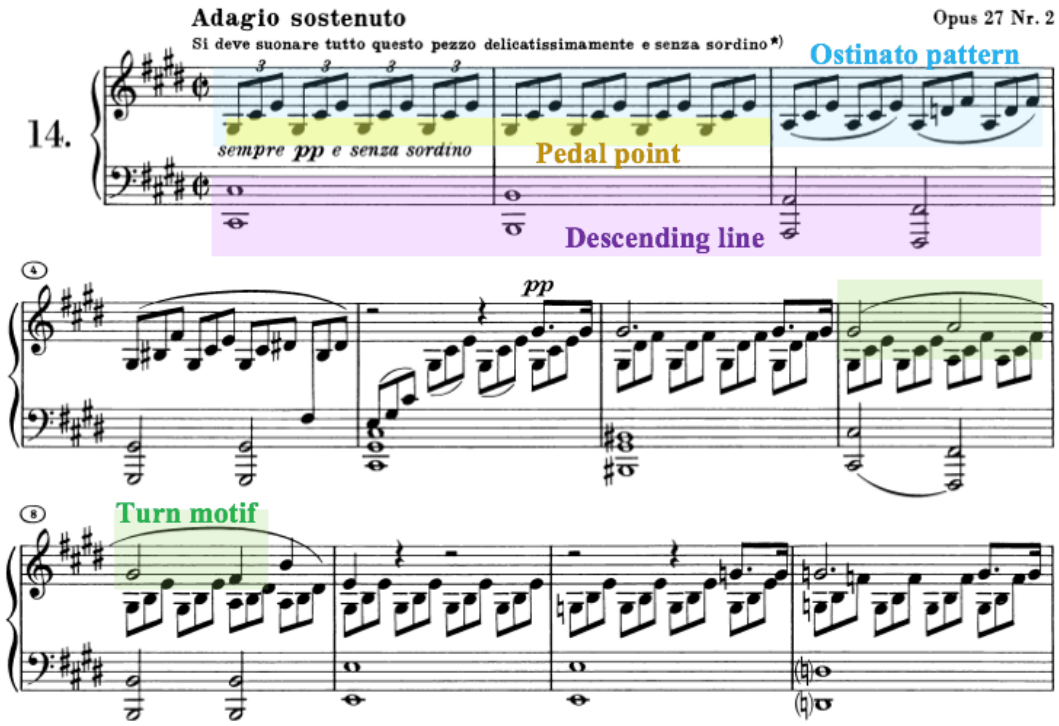


17. Cyclicism.
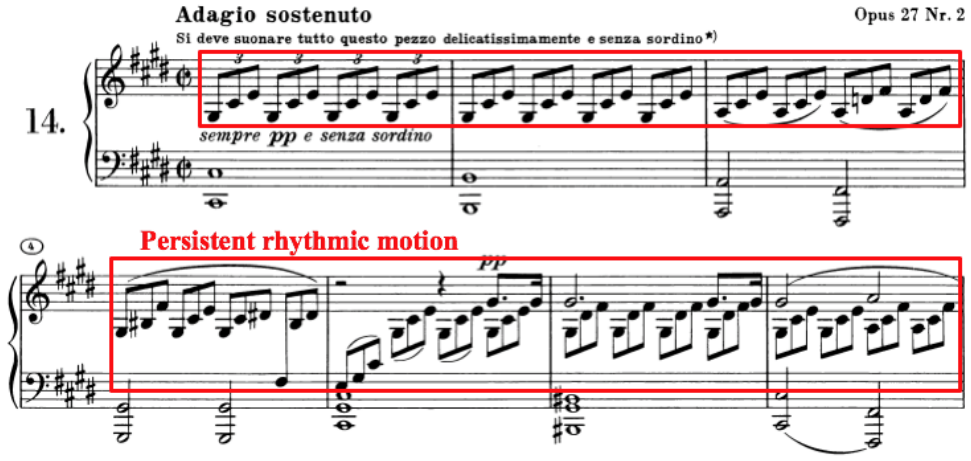


THE INNOVATIVE FANTASIA CONCEPTS IN SONATA, OP. 27 NO. 2

Similar approach with the first sonata, the fantasia concept in the second sonata relies on four main materials descending line, ostinato figure based on texture and rhythm, turn motive, and pedal point, which again, creates one logical cohesive form of structural unity with creatively endless varieties.

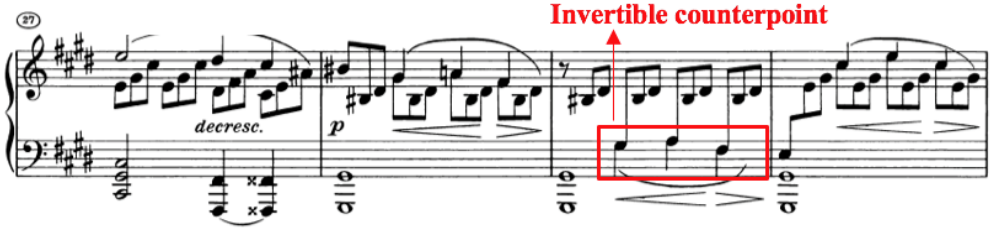


The four materials are then pronounced into a creatively endless varieties throughout the entire work with 13 specific ways:

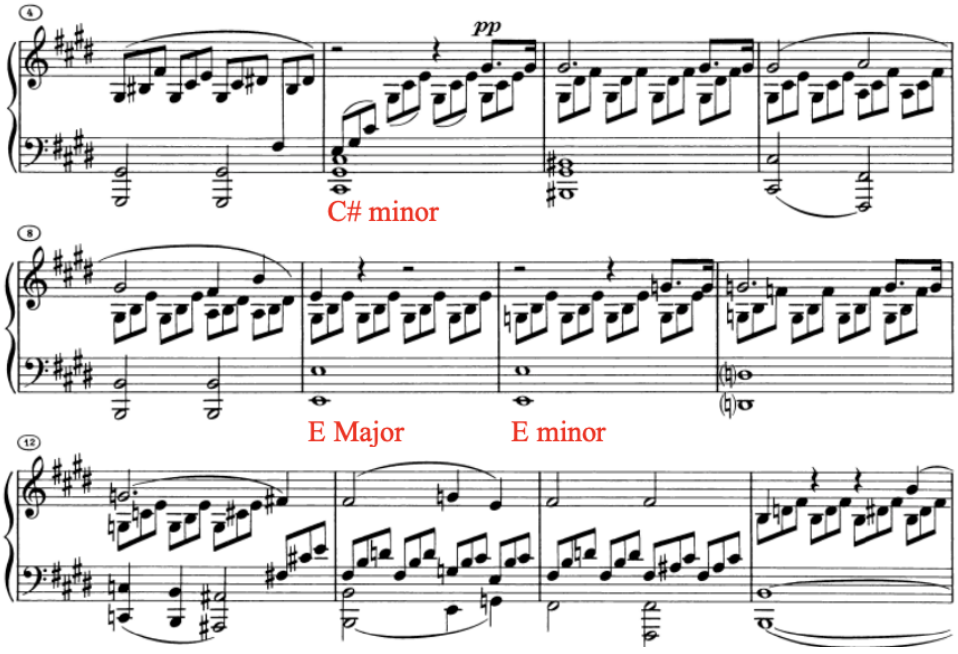
1. Persistent rhythmic motion.



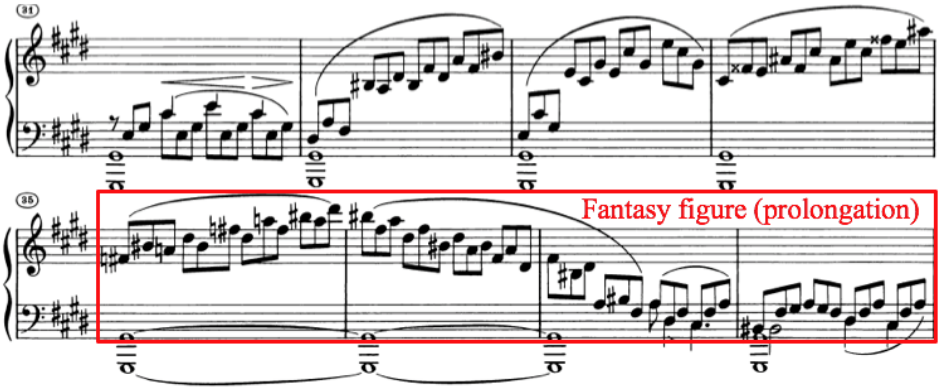
2. Invertible counterpoint.
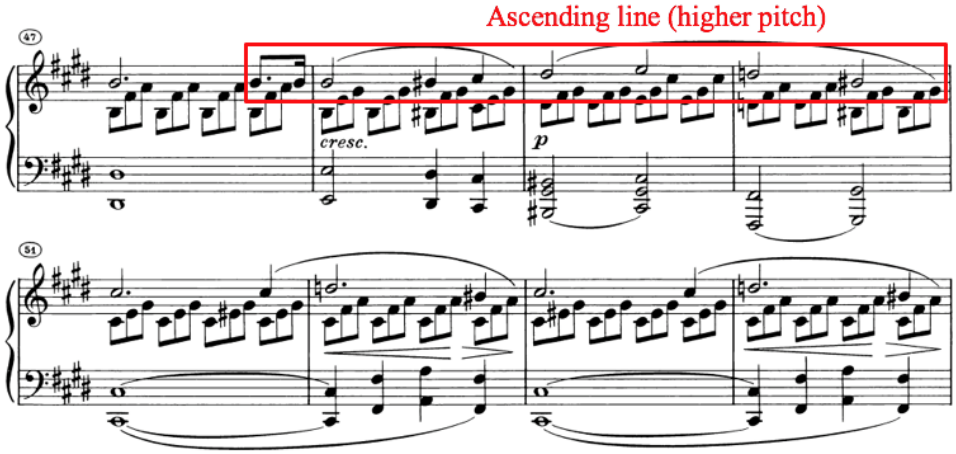


3. Sudden harmonic changes.
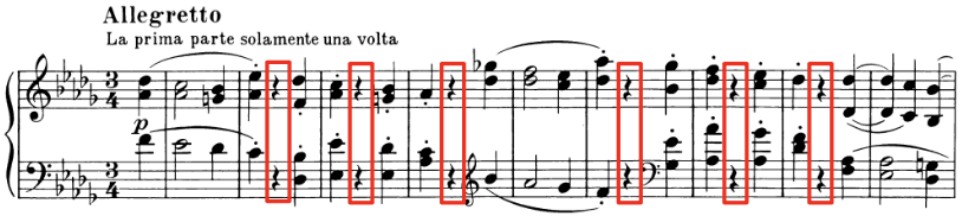


4. Prolongation of fantasy figure.
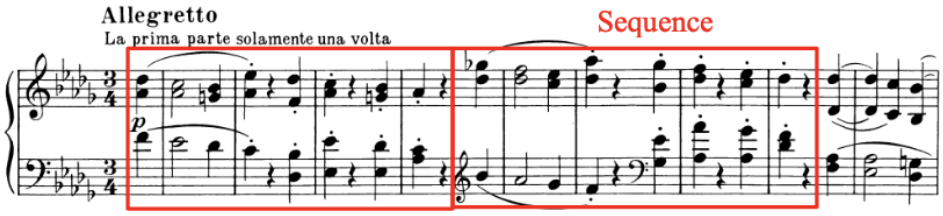


5. Artistically dramatic recapitulation.
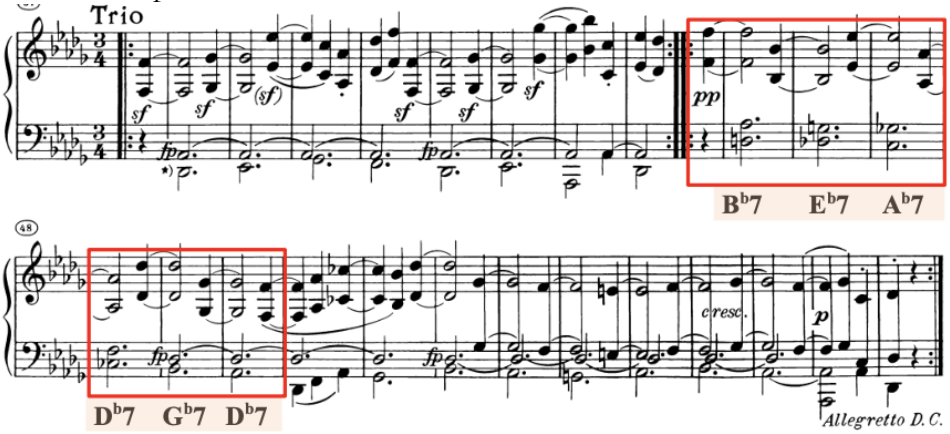


6. Minuet in scherzo-like.
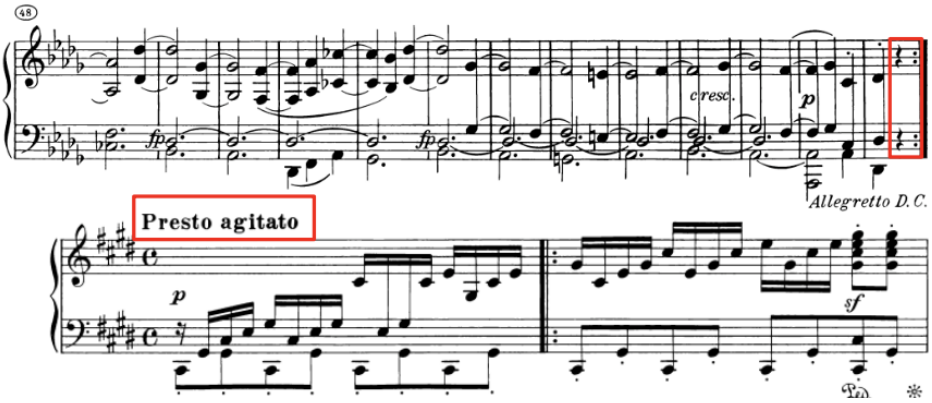


7. Sequence.
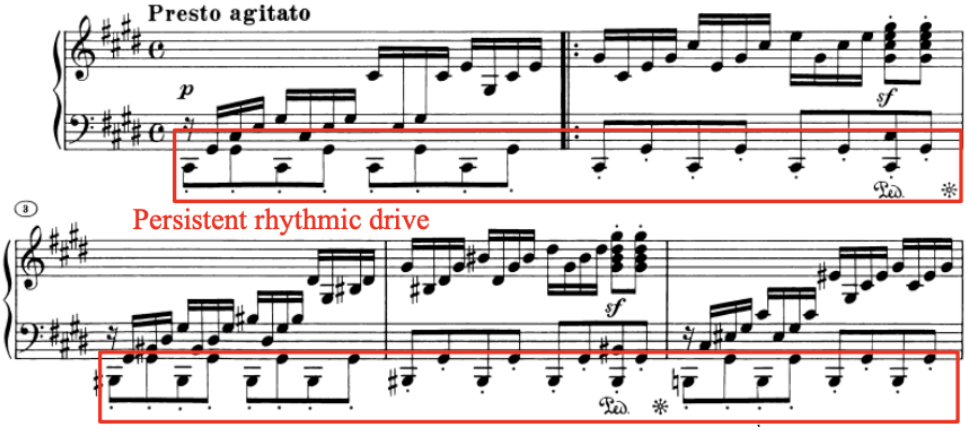


8. Chain of suspension.
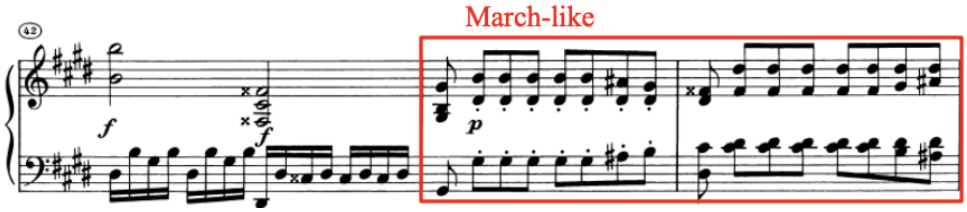


9. Sudden character changes.
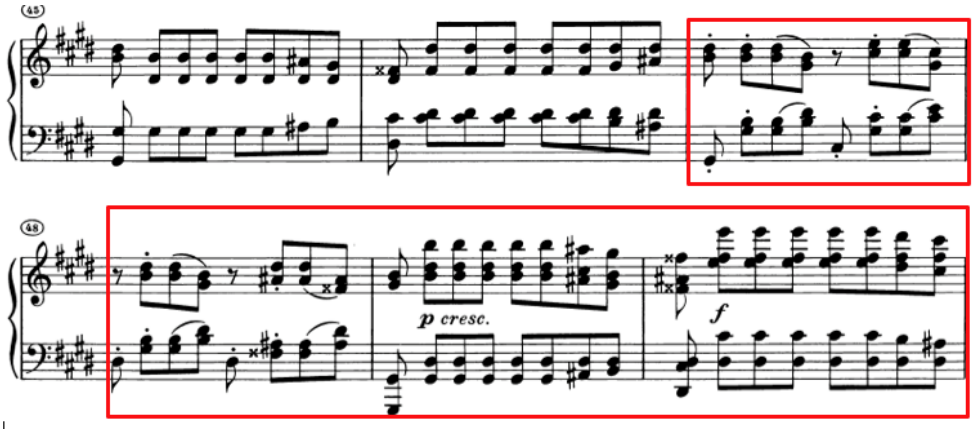


10. Persistent rhythmic drive.
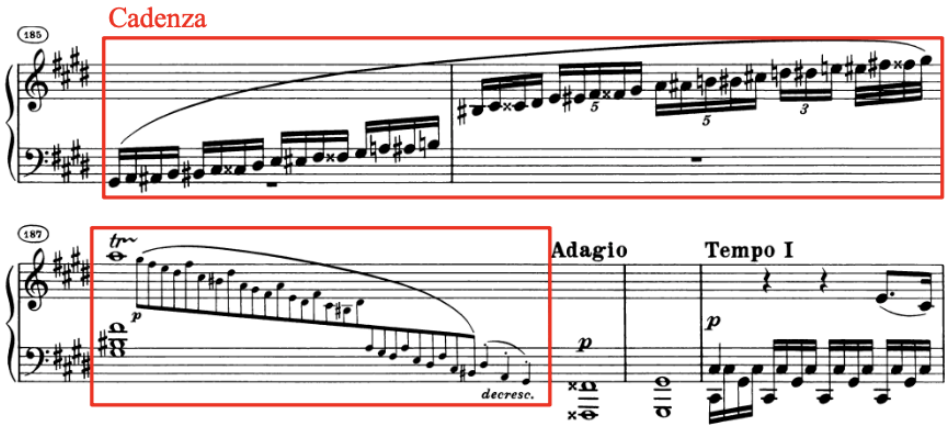


11. March-like.



12. Dance-like.



13. Cadenza.



CONCLUSION

Both piano sonatas, Op. 27, subtitled as sonata quasi una fantasia, do not have similar concept with the older fantasia written in the previous historical eras. The fantasia concept in this sonata is how Beethoven concerns with strong structural unity with creatively endless varieties by means of the most effective and economic materials, in which Beethoven successfully wrote music in the most logical and cohesive way that influence the entire landscape of nineteenth and even early twentieth century.

Second, the subtitle sonata quasi una fantasia is not a one-time experiment because ultimately the rest of the sonatas would have certain sets of fantasia elements. Through Op. 27, Beethoven explicitly expressed these works of having a "perfect marriage" between fantasia (free form) and sonata (rigid form) into one big cycle while maintaining his creativity and intellectuality.

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