

Time-traveler

During its heyday the piano sonata served as the main vehicle for great piano works, giving rise to an expansive range of styles. Joseph Smith traces its development

The western musical canon was composed within an amazingly brief period (compared to the visual arts and letters, which span not centuries, but millennia). New compositional techniques and styles were discovered and adopted with dizzying speed and often overlap unexpectedly. I remember when I was a teenager, a friend posed the question, "Which was composed first, Brahms's *Four Serious Songs* or Debussy's *String Quartet*?" Even though I knew that the songs were late Brahms and the quartet early Debussy, it gave me a strange, queasy feeling to realise that the Debussy (1893) was earlier than the Brahms (1896).

Because of this compression of events, the passing of even a year or so can be significant in the history of musical style. Thus, I thought it would be useful – both for myself and for readers – to trace the development of the piano sonata through a timeline. Don't even look at this timeline until you have read the following important disclaimer: this does not propose to be a list of the 'best' piano sonatas – I am not suggesting they are all equivalent in intrinsic value. Rather, I have sought to represent the wide range of styles changing and co-existing during the sonata's heyday: the list covers a 60-year period during which the sonata served as the primary vehicle for great piano works. I have chosen works for various reasons: many, because they seemed to me to boast some novel stylistic feature, several because they seemed to mark some significant point in an individual composer's development, and some because they challenge common generalisations about the classical era. The dates are of (probable) completion rather than publication, unless noted.

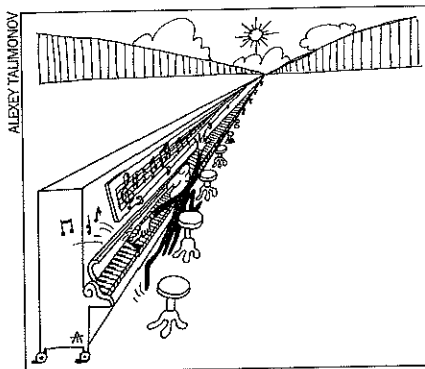
1766 JC Bach (1735–82): Six Sonatas (in B-flat, D, G, E-flat, E, C minor) Op 5

Qualities such as the relaxed cantabile opening of the G major and the symphonic texture of the first movement of the D major may remind us of similar features in Mozart's piano sonatas. We can be certain that the young Mozart knew these sonatas – he arranged three of these sonatas as

modest but effective piano concertos, K 107, about five years after their appearance, with little formal re-working.

1771 Joseph Haydn (1732–1809): Sonata in C minor, Hob 20

Haydn's C minor, unlike most of his early sonatas, is distinguished by its wealth of dynamic nuances in the first movement, impossible to realise on the harpsichord, suggesting that it was composed expressly for the resources of the piano.



The development of the piano sonata through a timeline

1779 CPE Bach (1714–88): Sonata No 5 in F, from Six Sonatas for Connoisseurs and Amateurs

These collections, some of which contained rondos and fantasies as well as sonatas, were tremendously popular. (This is the first set, the last dates from 1787.) The fifth sonata makes false starts in C minor and D minor before revealing its tonic key of F major. This is surely a more tonally deceptive opening than that of Beethoven's First Symphony, so often cited as 'revolutionary'.

1783 Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791): Sonata in A, K 331

When is a piece a sonata? Whenever the composer calls it 'sonata', as this work – variations, minuet, and *Rondo alla Turca* (ie, at once a generic form and a character piece) – proves, a Classical sonata need not always include a movement in sonata-allegro form. While

a Classical sonata in a minor key will often have a finale in its parallel major, which other Classical sonata in a major key has a finale in its parallel minor? I cannot think of one.

1784 Mozart: Sonata in C minor, K 457

After completing this sonata, Mozart added to it the *Fantasy*, K 475, making the fantasy more or less a gigantic slow introduction to the first movement. The finale is closely modeled on the first movement. An episodic theme of this sonata's adagio will inspire the theme of the adagio to Beethoven's *Pathétique* (1798).

1785 Muzio Clementi (1752–1832): Sonata in F minor, Op 13, no 6

When Clementi composes in a minor key, he means business: all three movements here are in the minor. (The same for the later F-sharp and *Didone Abbandonata*) The finale incorporates his bravura specialty, rapid double-thirds, without compromising the serious mood.

1789 Mozart: Sonata in D, K 576 (his last in D)

This (and also K 533/494) is more explicitly contrapuntal in texture than his previous sonatas. Mozart's patron, Baron von Swieten, collected works of Bach and Händel, and exposure to this library is believed to have stimulated Mozart's interest in counterpoint.

1790 Haydn: Sonata in E-flat, Hob 49

Haydn was in love with Frau Genzinger, for whom he composed this sonata. He told her in a letter that he would only confide the 'special significance' of its adagio to her in person. Even lacking this 'explanation', we may suspect that this tender, luxuriant movement is a love poem. Unusually, all of its three movements are in 11 meter.

1790 Clementi: Sonata in C, Op 25, no 1

The C major Sonata has a concerto-like cadenza in the first movement, as will Beethoven's Op 2, no 3 in the same key. Mozart had written cadenzas in rondos, that of K 333 being especially elaborate, but not in sonata-allegro movements, like Clementi's first movement. Op 25 also includes Clementi's popular Sonata in F-sharp minor

1794 Haydn: Sonata in E-flat, Hob 52

Therese Jansen Bartolozzi, the dedicatee of this sonata and Haydn's two of 1795 (as well as sonatas by Clementi and Dussek), was a brilliant London pianist, and this is easily Haydn's most showy sonata. Passages in the first movement prepare the distant tonality of the second movement – E major.

1795 Haydn: Sonata in C, Hob 50 and Sonata in D, Hob 51

The first movement of the C is a particularly satisfying demonstration of how much drama and variety a 'monothematic' scheme can yield. Haydn has composed 'memory lapses' into the quirky finale. In the D major Sonata, both the cantabile character of its first movement and its passages in thirds suggest a more 'modern'

keyboard style than that of Haydn's piano sonatas in general.

1795 Beethoven: Sonatas in F minor, A, C, Op 2

How appropriate that Beethoven's first mature sonatas should appear the same year as Haydn's last, since Beethoven's style uses Haydn's as a point of departure. However, all three sonatas are in four movements, unlike any piano sonatas of Haydn or Mozart.

1795 Clementi: Sonata in G minor, Op 34, no 2

What appears to be a slow introduction turns out to be part of the first movement proper, being developed at the start of the development section.

1798 Beethoven: Sonata Pathétique Op 13

The comment on Clementi G-minor Sonata immediately above applies here!

1800 Jan Ladislav Dussek [Dusik] (1760–1812): Sonata in E-flat, Op 44 The Farewell

This sonata was dedicated to his friend (and rival) Clementi. Dussek was the one leaving London, to escape his creditors! The combination of title and key cannot help but make us think of Beethoven's Op 81a, of about a decade later. Dussek, however, gives no programmatic titles to the individual movements. Certain figurations in Dussek's first movement remind one of Beethoven's finale, also in 6/8.

1801 Beethoven: Sonatas in E-flat and C-sharp minor, Op 27

Beethoven qualified each of these as 'almost a fantasy'. In both, the movements are to be played *attaca*. Much later, Schubert's *Wanderer Fantasy*, Schumann's *Fantasy*, and Liszt's *Sonata* all suggest a conflation of sonata and fantasy.

1802 Beethoven: Sonatas in G, D minor, and E-flat, Op 31

All of Beethoven's previous piano sonatas establish a tonic chord virtually immediately (Op 28, by implication at least). The D minor, however, begins with a prolonged dominant chord, and the E-flat delays its tonic for several bars. In the E-flat, Beethoven designates a movement in 2/4 meter and sonata-allegro form as a 'scherzo', proving that, to him, the term was an indication of character rather than form.

1807 Dussek: Sonata in F-sharp minor, Op 61 Élégie harmonique

Composed to commemorate the death of Prince Louis Ferdinand, this sonata suggests an outpouring of grief through tonal instability and remarkably persistent syncopations. Much of the piano writing seems to presuppose pedal.

1810 Beethoven: Sonata in E-flat, Op 81a

This is the only Beethoven sonata of which the movements bear programmatic titles. A note identifies it as written on the departure of the Archduke Rudolph (Beethoven's student, patron and friend) from Vienna. The movements are entitled 'The Farewell', 'The Absence' and 'The Reunion'.

1812 Carl Maria von Weber (1786–1826):

Sonata in C, Op 24

Can you think of an earlier sonata which begins with a diminished seventh chord? I can't! (In 1827, Beethoven's Op 111 will.) The finale, which the composer nicknamed 'the indefatigable', is traditionally known as 'perpetual motion'.

1816 Beethoven: Sonata in A, Op 101

A dreamy fragment of first movement bridges slow movement to finale.

1816 Weber: Sonata in A-flat, Op 39

This sonata is utterly traditional in form, utterly romantic in content.

1817 Franz Schubert (1797–1828) Sonata in A minor, D 537

This is the first of Schubert's completed piano sonatas to survive. But its dreamy lyricism, singing lines, harmonic boldness, and rapid shifts between parallel major and minor already warrant the adjective 'Schubertian'.

1818 Beethoven, Sonata in B-flat, Op 106

While Beethoven had already designated the gentle Op 101 as for *Hammerclavier* – simply the German for 'piano' – the nickname has stuck to Op 106, I suppose through association with its 'hammered' opening motif and forceful character.

1819 (published) Johann Nepomuk Hummel (1778–1837), Sonata in F-sharp minor

Wilhelm von Lenz was the source for the legend that Beethoven's Op 106 was composed to outdo this sonata in difficulty. This seems more than unlikely (even if Beethoven heard Hummel play it before its publication), but it does indicate the reputation of this ambitious work. The sonata is no mere bravura piece, and boasts an especially serious slow movement. Schumann singles it out in a survey of 'recent' sonatas.

1821 Clementi Sonata in G minor, Op 50, no 3, Didone Abbandonata, Scena tragica

The Queen of Carthage vents her sadness and rage through three impassioned movements. Long pedallings are dictated for special effects.

1821 Beethoven: Sonata in C minor, Op 111

Before this monumental work, Beethoven's last word on the piano sonata, two-movement sonatas were generally lighter works than those with three or four movements.

1823 Weber: Sonata in E minor, Op 70

Like Weber's *Konzertstück* for piano and orchestra, this sonata has a program which Weber chose not to publish. He told his student Benedict that it depicts a depressed man's decline to death, tempered by the *andante* – the consolations of friendship. We may well wonder how many other pieces of 'absolute music' are likewise program music for which the composer has withheld the program from the public.

1825 Schubert: Sonata in A minor, D 845 (the long, four movement A minor)

This (third) A minor sonata was one of the works

that established Schubert as an instrumental composer (his songs were already known). The Scherzo alludes to the fifth of Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* (1823). Schubert composed his exuberant D major Sonata (D 850) only a month after D 845.

1826 Mendelssohn: Sonata in E, Op 6

Undisguisedly copying elements of Beethoven's Op 101, this sonata is, paradoxically, at once derivative and personal. Taking a hint from Beethoven, Mendelssohn unifies the movements of his sonata by 'cyclical' quotations of a passage from the opening movement.

1826 Schubert: Sonata in G, D 894

In the case of Schubert, 'spacious' is not just a pretentious euphemism for 'long'. The length of the outer movements is not achieved through oppositions of contrasting material (as in the brilliant D major), but through a flow of related ideas and moods. It creates the illusion that time itself has slowed.

1826 Schubert: Sonatas in C minor, A, B-flat (D 958–960, his last sonatas)

Schubert was planning to dedicate these masterpieces to Hummel (as a mark of respect, or in hopes that the famous virtuoso would promote them?). The last movement of the A major has the same theme as the slow movement of D 537, of about a decade earlier. Did this allusion have some hidden meaning, or was Schubert simply reusing a theme from a work he supposed would be forgotten?

I find the timeline useful as an antidote to the misleading labels 'Classical' and 'Romantic'. I acknowledge that in order to organise a large body of material, it is necessary to simplify and to ignore exceptions. Some work or other on this timeline, however, can be used to challenge every assumption about the classical period. The opening of a classical sonata establishes a tonality – but the CPE Bach sonata cited does not. A classical sonata includes a movement in 'sonata-allegro' form – but Mozart's K 331. Sonata does not. A classical sonata is 'absolute music', but the *Adagio* of Haydn's Hob 49 has a secret meaning – a program.

The timeline also reminds us of the extent to which the Classical and Romantic 'periods' overlap in time. Since Weber's sensibility and pianistic figurations are so archetypically 'Romantic', it takes effort to remember that his C major Sonata precedes Schubert's first completed piano sonata by five years. Mendelssohn's dates may place him firmly in the Romantic era, but he developed so young that he was able to compose his masterly Sonata, Op 6 a mere ten years after the Beethoven sonata that inspired it. How much more complex and interesting is the interpenetrating of 'Classical' and 'Romantic' styles than the simple division these labels suggest.