

MUTH132 Final My Piece Essay

Coco Song

I affirm that I have adhered to the Honor Code in this essay.

The music I chose for the “My Piece” essay was mm.1-136 of the first movement of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 6 in F Major, Op.10, No.2. This piece is part of a trilogy of sonatas, and the No.2 is the most comical and witty among the three. Since this is a sonata from the classical period and is an early work of Beethoven, this chosen movement follows a typical sonata form. In the first 136 measures, Beethoven presented rich musical ideas within which there are a lot of smaller sections of repetitions. In this essay, I want to explore how Beethoven used motives, different kinds of key changes, and aspects of rhythm to keep the piece sounding familiar, interesting, and also unexpected.

In this movement, Beethoven presented several motives and their variations in many different places, which make listeners feel familiar when hearing the repeated motives. Music cognition research has shown that people tend to prefer familiar music. Repetition of a musical element not only makes listeners feel familiar but could also serve for the division of sections. Spotting a familiar element is satisfying, but too much repetition is boring. Therefore, the balance of repetition and variation is important to keep listeners feeling familiar yet surprised. The first motive consists of 16th-note triplets and a quarter note. It is first introduced in the primary theme (m.1 and m.3; Figure 1). It then appears in the last measures in the transition of exposition. Beethoven changed the quarter note to an eighth note, added accidentals, and made a descending melodic sequence.

Figure 1

The first motive. (m.1 & m.3)



Allegro

p

variation of 1st motive (mm.51-53)

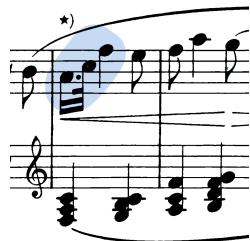


f

The second motive in this movement is three-note ascending chordal skips. It is first introduced in m.5 (Figure 2). Beethoven took this motive and developed it into the second part of the transition in the exposition section, e.g., mm.19-21, mm.23-25, and mm.27-28. These are unexpected because the development and expansion of the motive don’t happen right after the introduction of the motive. Instead, they appear again after a few lines before the listeners start to forget about what happened earlier.

Figure 2

The second motive (m.5).



variations in different chords (mm.18-29)



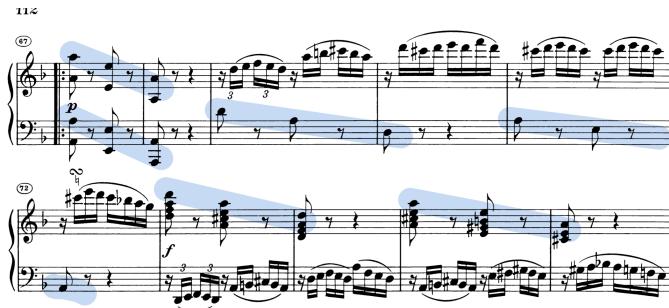
The third motive is three-note descending chordal skips. Its first appearance is at the very end of the exposition in mm.65-66 (Figure 3). Similar to the second motive, Beethoven wrote the entire development section based on this three-note motive. It appears in both the left hand and right hand in the development section.

Figure 3

The third motive (mm.65-66).



Beginning of development (mm.67-76)



Each of the motives appears multiple times in different sections of this movement. By using multiple motives, Beethoven was able to connect each distinct section of musical ideas and make it coherent. From the audience's point of view, those motives are the key to the sense of familiarity, and their variations can make the audience feel unexpected.

The second technique Beethoven used to keep listeners interested and feel unexpected is through key changes. The first key change happens in the transition of the exposition section. Normally, a sonata in a major key would modulate to its dominant key. In this movement, Beethoven first gave an augmented sixth chord in m.13 and m.14 and resolved at V of AM in m.18, which led the listeners to think that it would modulate to AM. Suddenly, it switched to CM without any preparation. Although it's the dominant key of FM, V of AM is an unusual chord to precede CM, thus making listeners feel unexpected. The second key change happens at the transition to the development section (mm.65-68). This modulation is more subtle than the previous one, and its function is to introduce the development section. Here, Beethoven used the technique called pivot chord modulation. The exposition expectedly ends on the tonic chord of CM with a perfect authentic cadence. This chord is also the iii chord in its relative minor key, a minor. This pivot chord makes the tonic chord of A minor sound like the echo of the C major chord, which is an

example of familiarity and unexpectedness. The third key change in the chosen excerpt happens at the beginning of the recapitulation section (mm.118-136). It is called a false recapitulation when the melody is the same as the exposition but is in the wrong key. In this movement specifically, I think it is a little musical joke by Beethoven. After a bunch of key changes in the development section, it lands on the dominant of the D major key in m.116. After a measure of rest, the recapitulation starts with the “correct” melody. For listeners, it sounds very familiar, but obvious enough that it is not in the original F major key. When it reached the end of the long legato phrase at m.129, it seems that Beethoven finally realized he was in the wrong key, and started to try again. Then in m.130, he wrote a D major chord preceding the Gm chord. While the DM chord is still in the DM key, Gm has come back to the home key indicated by the B_b, but still sound searching for “home”. In m.133, the dominant seventh chord of F major key finally appears (C⁷) which has a strong tendency to resolve to the tonic. The three modulations discussed above used different techniques to achieve the unexpected and surprising side of the piece.

In addition, aspects of rhythm in this movement help make it sound witty, light, and delightful. Throughout the movement, Beethoven used a lot of fast notes. For example, the sextuplets in mm.30-35 in the left suddenly make it sound sped up (Figure 4). In the coda section of the exposition, Beethoven wrote a combination of 16th-note triplets and 32nd-notes in the left hand (Figure 5). Similar to the function of the sextuplets, they make the music sounds faster, especially the 32nd-notes. The use of sextuplets, 16th-note triplets, and 32nd-notes speeds up the music, and thus make it sound light, delightful, and naïve.

Figure 4

Sextuplets in the left hand.



Figure 5

16th-note triplets and 32nd-notes in the left hand in coda of exposition.



Another aspect of rhythm is the use of metric dissonance. There are many places where the

phenomenal accents of the left hand and the right hand don't line up. In mm.47-50 and mm.77-94 (Figure 6), the left hand and the right hand plays alternately, meaning alternating in different registers. The timbre difference between the high and low register on the piano and the staccato articulation make it sound comical. Another spot is at the beginning of the movement in mm.4-8 (Figure 7). The legato contributes to the singing aspect of the phrase, but when the left and right hand don't line up, it sounds less serious, and still create a contrast to the opening short chords. This is also true for this phrase in recapitulation (mm.121-125).

Figure 6

Metric dissonance in mm.47-49.



Metric dissonance in mm.77-84.



Figure 7

mm.4-8.



In his piano sonata No. 6 in F major, Beethoven presented several motives and use them to connect each distinct musical ideas into a coherent movement. There are also several key changes in the excerpt each used different technique to accomplish. They create musical jokes that surprise the listeners. Together with the repetition of motives, it could achieve a balance of familiarity and unexpectedness. Aspects of rhythms are important in making this movement sound light, witty, and delightful, including the use of triplets, sextuplets, and 32nd-notes, and metrical dissonance. Another element that contributes to the comical and unexpected feeling is the use of contrasts. There are plenty of contrasts in this movement, such as dynamic contrast (mm.12-13 and mm.14-18) and sudden change of mode (mm.38-41 and mm.42-45). These contrasts enrich the texture of the movement and make sound witty and interesting.