

# Exploration of Beethoven's Early Harmonic Language: Taking the First Movement of Piano Sonata in C-sharp Minor as an Example

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**Abstract:** *Beethoven's "Piano Sonata in C-sharp minor" (also known as "Moonlight Sonata") is a very famous piano masterpiece in the world, and it is also a typical example of his early exploration of harmonic language style, which can enable analysts to find a lot of information from it. The use of Naples chords, various relative major & minor, Parallel major and minor – with the same tonic, and the use of diminished seventh chords for modulation, are all evidence of Beethoven's desire to seek breakthroughs and innovations in harmonic language. However, his early style was basically a continuation of harmony in classical music, but it already showed his own unique personality.*

**Keywords:** *Beethoven, Moonlight Sonata, Harmonic style*

## 1. The Creation Background of "Moonlight Sonata"

As the pioneer of Romanticism, Beethoven's creation can be divided into four periods. The "Moonlight Sonata" was created in the Vienna period (1793-1802). At that time, Beethoven was influenced by the humanist thought of the French bourgeoisie, pursuing freedom, equality, fraternity, and so on. He also learned about the French Revolution and was exposed to French music during that period, which changed his musical creative thinking. Many of his important works reflect the optimism and intense revolutionary enthusiasm of that period. He wanted to abandon the old rules in the early sonata form, and in order to pursue profound content and perfect form, His idea of hating feudal oppression and advocating freedom was completely permeated in the Moonlight Sonata.<sup>[1]</sup> Beethoven composed the work in 1801, it was written for his first love, Juliette Guichardi, who was then a student of his. Beethoven is very enamored of the girl. At that time, Beethoven has begun to suffer from ear disease, Juliet is like the white moonlight shining into his painful life, so white and quiet, so that he reignites his confidence in life. However, because of the difference in identity, the love did not succeed, Beethoven was very sad. Due to heartbreak and ear disease, his works began to be filled with painful and sad emotions. This work is a reflection of his own state of mind that his pain and sadness outweighed love when his fantasies were soon shattered after they were sustained.

The work is called "Moonlight" because of a German poet's poetic description of the work, who compared the first movement to "like a boat ripening on the moonlit surface of Lake Lucerne in Switzerland." Therefore, "Moonlight" has become another name for this well-known piano masterpiece<sup>[2]</sup>. Moreover, in Beethoven's early works, this work was no longer the inherent sonata form structure, he broke through the shackles, but wrote the form of this work according to his own ideas, and the application of movement arrangement and skills are full of his own unique personality.

## 2. Music Analysis of Moonlight Sonata

### 2.1 An analysis of its musical form

There are many different views on the analysis of its musical form of the first movement of Beethoven's Moonlight. All emphasis is put on "freestyle" in the description of this movement in "Masterpieces of Western European Music" and the 1969 new edition of "The Great Composers of Milton Cross and their New Encyclopedia of Music". The domestic "Music dictionary" said that this chapter is the fantasy sonata form, in addition, there is another saying is "three sections (single three parts)", which is widely popular in many colleges and universities in China.

The author believes that this work is still sonata form. The principle of sonata that we often refer to

is of two themes, different tonality, and returning to the main tone when reproducing, which is reflected in both works. The musical structure is as follows: as shown in Figure 1.

Board of Music		Musical Bars	Modal Tonality
Exposition	Introduction	1-5	#C minor
	Principal part	6-9	E major
	Connecting part	10-15	e minor - b minor
	Accessory part	16-19	B major
	End part	20-23	# f minor
Development	Theme	24-27	# c minor
	Preparation stage	28-42	#c minor
Recapitulation	Principal part	43-47	#c minor -E major
	Connecting part	48-51	#c minor -#f minor
	Accessory part	52-55	#c minor
	End part	56-60	#c minor
	Coda	61-69	#c minor

Figure 1: Structure diagram of Beethoven's Moonlight-curve

The overall form structure of the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata is sonata form, which is divided into exposition, development and reappearance, #c minor, adagio sostenuto.

The bars of exposition (1-23) consist of the principal part, the connecting part, the accessory part, the end part, and an introduction to the appurtenance. The five-bar introduction begins in the main key #c minor, and all slowly enters in a right-handed triplet sound-type, and goes downward in a left-hand octave progression until the melodic theme is introduced.

The main melody appears in the high voice, which starts with a weak front dot rhythmic pattern, repeated notes restoration 5. The theme is basically dominated by the rhythm of quarter notes and half notes. The connecting part uses the material of the principal part, which forms a structure of up and down sentences with the principal part. The accessory part entered the key of b minor, and then switched from b minor to parallel major with the same tonic of B major, and the overall melody created a slow and quiet feeling. The main theme is shown as Figure 2



Figure 2: "Moonlight Sonata" five bar changes

From the overall point of view of the presentation, its changes of tonality are around the key of #c minor, and changes in the Relative Major & Minor and the Parallel major and minor – with the same tonic, highlighting the contrast of colors between the major and minor keys, as if the moonlight is disappearing and appearing in the thick clouds, and as if Beethoven's desire for love but there is full of inward struggles in his heart.

The development consists of the development of the main theme and the preparatory phase. At this point, the modal tonality has returned to the main tone and entered the preparatory phase from the 28th bar, in which the D<sub>9</sub> chord is often used. In the recapitulation, the tonality of the main theme still begins in #c minor, but moves from bar 44 to the relative major of E major and ends in the T chord. The connecting part is greatly shifted from E to #c minor, and the theme of accessory part also develops in #c minor, reflecting the principle of tonal regression in sonata form.

## 2.2 Tonal layout and harmonic analysis

In this work, Beethoven wanted to make a breakthrough in the arrangement of harmony, and the harmonic language and tonal layout used were also very rich. In terms of tonal layout, he uses function progression, Relative Major & Minor, parallel major and minor – with the same tonic or Tonal confrontation of parallel major and minor – with the same tonic. In terms of harmony, he used dominant altered chords, subdominant altered chords, as well as attribute dominant chords and secondary dominant chords. He also used Adim7 for modulation, greatly enriching the vocabulary of

harmony, promoting internal dynamics and dramatic conflicts in music, and providing strong support for the establishment of tonality. Next, we will provide examples for explanation.

**2.2.1 The confrontation of parallel major and minor – with the same tonic**

The last two beats of the seventh bar of the movement are modulated from #c minor to E major by common chords, and after performing function progression of the SII-K46-D7-T, they are modulated again to e minor, creating a tonal confrontation, as shown below: Figure 3.



Figure 3: The seventh section of the Moonlight Sonata

Then they are modulated into b minor in bar 12, still functionally performing SII34-K46-D-t, and then into B major, once again forming a tonal confrontation. These two consecutive tonal confrontations make the color of the whole work flicker and dim, increase the complexity of melody and harmony, and enrich the musical language.

**2.2.2 Modulation of Adim7**

In bar 19 of the first movement, Beethoven uses Adim7 for modulation from the key of B major to the key of #f minor. Since the Adim7 does not have a strong sense of belonging in tonality, it is very convenient to modulate to four different keys through this chord. This modulation of Enharmonic Chord but far-relationship is often used by Beethoven, as shown in the picture: Figure 4.



Figure 4: The 19 bars of the first movement of the Moonlight Sonata

**2.2.3 The application of bII Napoli chords**

<sup>b</sup>II Napoli chords were also fully utilized by Beethoven in the Moonlight Sonata. In the introduction at the beginning of the work, a descending bass line is constructed through the bass t-t2-tsVI-b1sII6-D7-t. In the second section, he also uses the tonic through the seven-note form. This linear harmony enhances the overall sense of flow of the music. As shown in the picture: Figure 5.

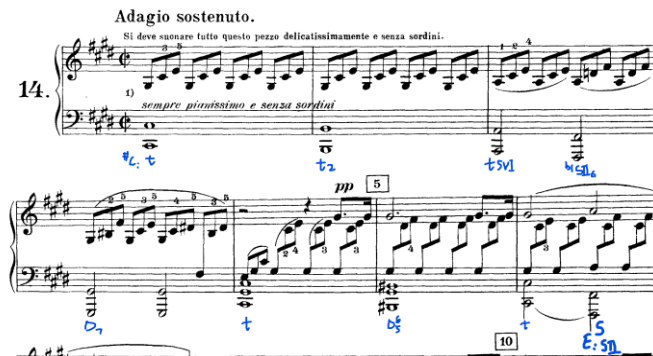


Figure 5: The second section of the Moonlight Sonata

And because the  $^bII$  Napoli chord itself has a very strong subdominant function, and is itself a major triad, which forms a strong contrast in color with the minor tonic, highlighting bright changes, which seem to indicate Beethoven's psychological changes. And the entire movement is full of "fantasy" contradictory mood. In addition to using the typical form of the  $^bII$  Napoli chord  $^bII_6$ , He also used its in situ form in the 12th bar and the first inversion of the seventh chord in the 16th bar. The excellent use of Napoli chords strengthens the contrast between the brightness of the major triad and the dimness of the minor triad, enriches the auditory effect of the work, echoes the atmosphere of the whole piece, and reflects Beethoven's meticulous thoughts and exquisite skill in constructing chord techniques.<sup>[3]</sup>

#### 2.2.4 The application of dominant ninth chord

The use of the dominant ninth chord is focused on the dominant preparation phase of the development. Starting from bar 28, the bass begins the drone bass up to 12 bars long, until the appearance of the recapitulation, where the dominant continuation is alternated by the chords  $D_7$ ,  $D_9$ ,  $t_4^6$  as shown in the figure: Figure 6.



Figure 6: Section 28 of the Moonlight Sonata

The frequency of use of the dominant ninth chord is greatly increased, highlighting the dominant chord, anticipating the appearance of the recapitulation, and the dominant continuation of 12 bars also makes the listener more eager for the appearance of the tonic.

### 3. Performance characteristic analysis

#### 3.1 The performance of the three-tone

At the beginning of the music, there is a continuous triple sound, which is a very fantasy melody. Beethoven also marked the music as a "fantasy sonata", as if symbolizing Beethoven's inner feelings and his yearning for a better life. Therefore, in the performance of the three links, we must pay attention to the coherence and uniformity, but also deep and not strong, to experience the author's inner feelings. 1-5 bar introduction position should slowly introduce the melody with a weak strength, the right hand is not layered, playing should be close to the keyboard, weak but clear and coherent, sound and sound should be independent, when playing fingers light, finger belly touch the button, with the wrist to drive the performance of the triple tone, make the tone soft and coherent.

Fifth section theme began to appear, right hand began to change the technical requirements, need to highlight the administrative levels of melody, and there is a technical difficulty, most melody is controlled by the right five fingers, and the right hand need to control two parts at the same time, it requires the player in the mind for two melody parts is very clear, hand control also need to be very accurate. Hand control also needs to be very precise. 1, 2 and 3 refer to the internal part, 4 and 5 refer to the external part, which needs to be highlighted to make the timbre more transparent and coherent and highlight the theme, so it is very important for the player to control the hand muscles. The triple plet of this chapter is weak on strength, but it hides great power, expressing Beethoven's anger and disappointment for life, and more inner pain and depression.<sup>[4]</sup>

#### 3.2 The use of the pedal

The whole song adopts the pedal after the sound, the first few sections of the introduction pedal cannot be too deep, the middle position can be, the length is as long as the value of the left hand, the pedal position is too deep to make the sound stick together, the music here should feel as hazy as moonlight, so add the application of weak sound pedal here. When the back theme begins to appear, the pedal should follow the theme. In order not to make the sound of the theme become cloudy, the amplitude of the pedal here should be slightly smaller, and the pedal needs to be replaced quickly and

quickly.

After the 23 bars enter the climax, as the emotion advances, so during the transition before the 23 bars, you should follow the melody of the right hand, and then turn back to the pedal to follow the octave of the left hand. At the end of the continued use of the weak sound pedal, 62,63 and 64,65 the two same sections to pay attention to the difference in pedal use, The 62 bar pedal lasts a whole bar, and then the 63 bar goes down with the triplet, and the theme moves to the left finger, when the pedal is the sound pedal. The 64 bar changes the pedal after the first triplet plays, and by the end of the bar follows the triplet of the right hand, The pedal is replaced at the end of this subsection. These two groups of sections are completely different in the use of pedals, in the performance is to reflect the differences in music, and emotionally reflects Beethoven's painful and helpless inner activities.

At the end, the pedal changes with the notes of the left hand. When playing, we should pay attention to the weaker and weaker and gradually disappear. At this time, the weak sound pedal should pay attention to the cooperation with the music.<sup>[5]</sup>

#### 4. The Summary of the Characteristics of Beethoven's Early Harmony Style

It can be seen from this work that Beethoven had already begun to seek various breakthroughs in harmony and tonality in his early creation. The layout of the three movements of Moonlight Sonata also broke the fast-slow-fast structure of classical sonatas, which was also a major innovative breakthrough of Beethoven. The use of musical materials in this work is also very free, expressing Beethoven's fantasy of a better life. In the first movement, there is a strong contrast of the confrontation of modes, the alternations of major and minor modes throughout it, and the use of enharmonic chord (Adim7) for the modulation of far-relationship, which are breakthroughs he seeks in tonality. The use of dominant ninth chords, attribute dominant chords and transition chords, subdominant altered chords (Napoli chords) make the harmonic color of the whole work very rich.

However, while seeking a breakthrough, Beethoven was still inevitably influenced by classicism. Functional harmonic vocabulary was still the dominant language of the whole work, which showed that once a harmonic style was established, it could reflect a huge traditional conservatism. Even though Beethoven was trying to seek a breakthrough, due to the historical stage he was in, these explorations he made had to be refined and summarized by the new age, which required the joint efforts of the later generation of romantic composers to achieve.

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