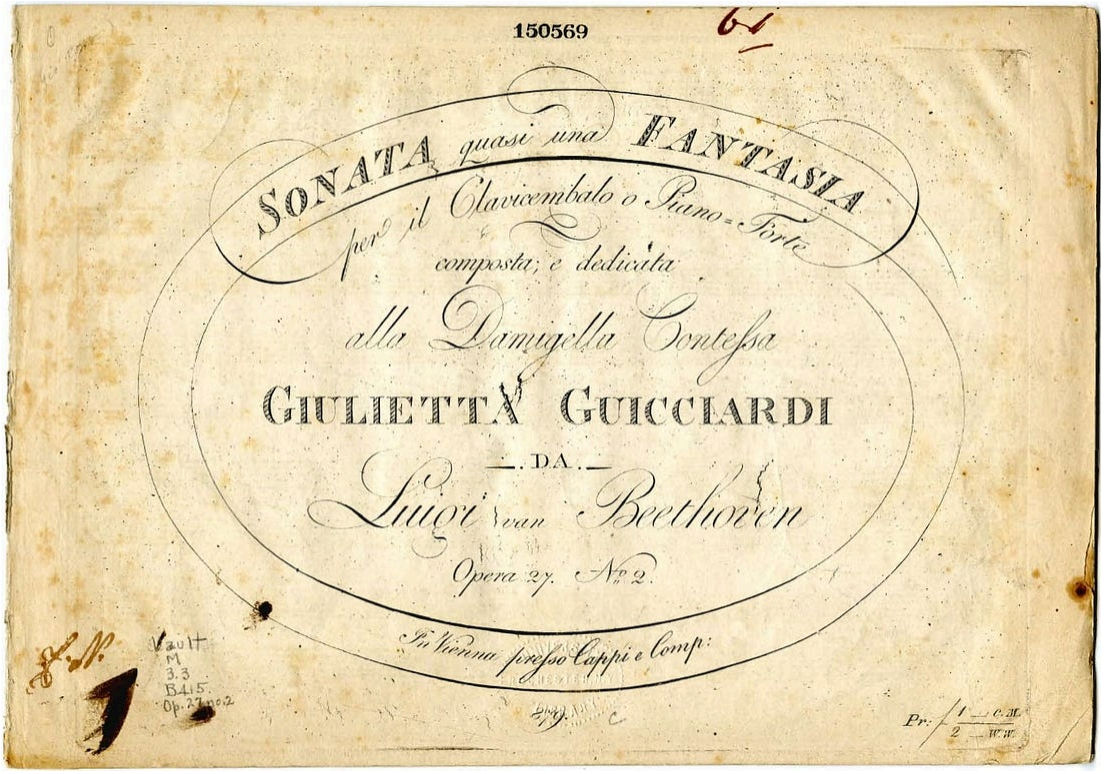
Beethoven, the Conservative

Everyone knows the Moonlight Sonata. Almost no one hears what Beethoven actually wrote: not a romantic prophecy, but a farewell to a vanishing 18th-century tradition.

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by David Boos



Title page of Beethoven's Sonata quasi una Fantasia Op. 27 No.2 - no mention of any light sources

Over the past decades we've learned a lot of new things about Ludwig van Beethoven, the great composer from Bonn. Like that he was black. Or gay. Or both? Who knows. But now we might learn, most shockingly

of all, that the Napoleon-admiring, EU-anthem-composing revolutionary of the music world of the early 1800s had a deeply conservative side to him. His famous Moonlight Sonata isn't the heavy-handed proto-romantic piece as which it cemented its place in public perception. It is a farewell—a last, knowing look back at a musical world that was about to disappear.

How the Moonlight Got Its Name

Beethoven's *Sonata quasi una Fantasia*, Op. 27 No. 2—that is its real title—was first published in 1802. It quickly became one of his most popular works, which annoyed Beethoven himself, who complained that he "had written truly better works." But the name *Moonlight Sonata* wasn't attributed to the piece until after Beethoven's death. During his lifetime, the sonata had another nickname: "Laubensonate" ("Arbour Sonata"), for having presumably been first improvised in an arbour.



Beethoven at the of 31 when he wrote the “Moonlight Sonata”, far from the grumpy stereotype that was popularized later

Only in 1832, five years after Beethoven’s death, did the German poet Ludwig Rellstab (1799–1860) coin the name *Moonlight* after a nocturnal boat trip on the moon-lit Vierwaldstättersee in Switzerland that reminded him of the first movement. But Rellstab was of a younger generation than Beethoven, born almost 30 years after the composer, making him a clear-cut romantic. He had met Beethoven once in 1825, leaving him some poems to be put to music, but the elderly Beethoven didn’t get around to it before he died two years later. His assistant Anton Schindler then passed the poems on to Franz Schubert, who based his *Schwanengesang* cycle on them before passing away only a year after Beethoven.



Ludwig Rellstab and his romantic sideburns



Vierwaldstättersee in Switzerland, the imagery Rellstab had in mind when thinking of the Sonata quasi una Fantasia Op. 27 No. 2



Another image of the Vierwaldstättersee in Switzerland, including the moon, a boat and lots of romantic feelings

The romantic name stuck, and over the course of the 19th century the Moonlight Sonata became a piece of almost mythological proportions—a trend lasting up until today. Interpretations of the first movement range from moonlit romanticism, via an “Epitaph to Napoleon in music” (Wilhelm von Lenz, 1852), to it being an expression of “falling in love with someone that will never love you back” (teenagers in the YouTube comment section).

This reading has been reinforced by almost a century of recordings, in which some of the most renowned pianists—Jörg Demus, Claudio Arrau, Arthur Rubinstein, Daniel Barenboim—have delivered renditions that ignored Beethoven’s original, faster tempo marking in favour of the mysterious romanticism commonly associated with the piece. Like other evergreens of the classical repertoire, it has become almost impossible to escape this pervasive interpretation. And it fits with all the other

tropes describing Beethoven in popular culture: wild hair, grumpy attitude, loss of hearing, and everlasting heartache included.

But there are plenty of reasons to support a different reading entirely.

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Looking Backward, Not Forward

Looking at Beethoven's piano sonatas chronologically, they are commonly grouped into three periods. The first can be described as a time of mastering the classical sonata tradition of his predecessors, in which Beethoven enlarged the models of Mozart and Haydn on all levels —the expansiveness of his melodies, the boldness of his development sections, the sheer size of the overall structure. It is in his second period that Beethoven escaped the confines of the classical forms he had so thoroughly explored, but not by progressively abolishing the rules of old in a frenzy. Instead, he cast his net even further into the past.

From his Sonata Nr. 12, Op. 26 onwards, Beethoven started to experiment with different types of movements beyond sonata forms. Op. 26 starts with a set of variations and features the one and only appearance of a funeral march in Beethoven's piano sonatas. Op. 27 No. 1 is peculiar in that it lacks any clearly separated movements. What can be witnessed in these sonatas is a new tendency to experiment with character pieces and programmatic music. While modern listeners might consider this a tell-tale sign of romantic forms, for Beethoven this meant primarily looking back at baroque forms, which the Viennese classics hadn't given much attention.

This came naturally to Beethoven, who in his youth in Bonn was instructed by the organist Christian Gottlob Neefe (1748–1798). Neefe was a great admirer of Johann Sebastian Bach and owned a copy of Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier*, making it more than likely that Beethoven's first contact with the contrapuntal art of Bach goes back to his childhood. It was also Neefe who introduced Beethoven to the concept of *prosody*—a technique Beethoven used extensively throughout his life to metrically align text and music.

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The Piano Beethoven Knew

It was around the time that Beethoven wrote his Moonlight Sonata that Carl Czerny (1791–1857) became a pupil of the master. In his memoirs, Czerny recalls "being approximately ten years of age when Krumpholz brought me to Beethoven. [...] There was barely a chair, except for the wobbly one at the fortepiano by Walter—the best in their day."


Kriehuber
Wien 1838.
Carl Czerny
gebor. in Wien d. 21. Febr. 1791.

Carl Czerny, whose memoires are a primary source about the performance of Beethoven's works

Anton Walter (1752–1826) was indeed the most renowned piano builder of late 18th and early 19th century Vienna. His instruments were played and praised by Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert. Piano building at that time was still in its infancy, introducing new techniques and growing in size by the decade. This has led to the common misconception that the modern piano—relatively unchanged since the 1920s—represents a final evolutionary step, rendering all previous instruments inferior and obsolete. But by understanding the instrument Beethoven actually wrote on, the Moonlight takes on a very different character.



Anton Walter - not much fun to be around, but he built great pianos

A Walter fortepiano differs from a modern piano in fundamental ways. It is smaller, with a range of only five octaves (expanding to six and a half over Beethoven's lifetime). It uses Viennese action rather than the modern English-derived mechanism. The frame is wooden, the stringing parallel rather than cross-strung, and there are only two strings per note

in the bass, three in the treble. Anyone who has heard or played such an instrument will immediately understand the gulf between it and a modern Steinway. Fortepianos are softer in sound, lighter in touch, thinner in timbre—historically far closer to harpsichords than to concert grands. This is reflected on the title page of the work itself, which reads “per il Clavicembalo o Piano-Forte” (”for the harpsichord or pianoforte”). Since the work asks clearly for extensive dynamic differentiation, this dedication is probably a common attempt at the time to increase sales by also addressing owners of the still relatively widespread harpsichord.

These differences matter, because they are the key to solving the central mystery of the first movement.

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The Damper Problem

Beethoven left two performance indications at the head of the first movement that have troubled pianists ever since. The first reads:

> *“Si deve suonare tutto questo pezzo delicatissimamente e senza sordino”*
>
> “This whole piece ought to be played with the utmost delicacy and without dampers”

The left hand gets a separate reminder:

> *“Semper pianissimo e senza sordino”*
>
> “Always pianissimo and without dampers”



Most modern pianists interpret this as a general instruction to “use pedalling technique,” but that ignores the fact that the modern practice of stepping on the sustain pedal after a chord and releasing it before the next was far from established in Beethoven’s time. Instead, it was common to have prolonged periods of raised dampers, indicated in detail—as Beethoven himself does in the last movement of the Moonlight. Pedalling was the exception, not the rule.

The reluctance of modern pianists to take Beethoven’s indication literally is understandable. A modern piano has several features that make it nearly impossible to perform the piece with dampers raised throughout—though András Schiff has tried to approximate the effect. Due to the size of the resonator, the additional strings, the power and shape of the hammers, and the cross-stringing (where resonating strings influence overlapping strings that haven’t been struck), the first movement turns into mush when played without dampers on a modern instrument. To counteract this, pianists must apply the dampers regularly and reduce the tempo to preserve clarity. And it is precisely these adjustments that transform the Sonata quasi una Fantasia into the Moonlight—the slow, veiled, mysterious piece we all think we know.

So: if we now understand what caused the aesthetic change, how was it possible that Beethoven performed the sonata without dampers throughout?

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The CPE Bach Connection

Another excerpt from Czerny's memoirs gives us a decisive clue. He quotes Beethoven directly:

> "I want to teach him myself and accept him as a student. Do send him to me a couple of times a week. But first, do get him a copy of Emanuel Bach's school on the proper way of playing the Clavier, he should bring it with him already for the next lesson."

The "Clavierschule" Beethoven is referring to is Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach's (1714–1788) *Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen* ("Inquiry into the true way of playing keyboard instruments"). CPE Bach was the second oldest son of Johann Sebastian Bach, and his *Versuch* is the most influential keyboard school of the second half of the 18th century. Czerny and other students have described Beethoven's teaching methods as strictly in line with the rules outlined by CPE Bach, even well into the 1820s, when the next generation of piano virtuosos was already rearing its head. Compared to those virtuosos, Beethoven used a much more conservative hand position—more rounded, lending itself to differentiated articulation and prosodic accents rather than the virtuosic scales that became increasingly popular at the outset of the romantic period.



CPE Bach was highly regarded by Beethoven, who was one of the few composers to pick up on CPE Bach's form of the "free fantasy"

But the decisive clue lies in the very last chapter of the second part of CPE Bach's *Versuch*, entitled *Von der freyen Fantasie*—"On the Free Fantasy." In this chapter, CPE Bach discusses the form of the free fantasy, a short-lived genre mostly associated with CPE Bach himself. These free fantasies, in which moods and affects change rapidly and unexpectedly, are the musical equivalent to the *Sturm und Drang* taking place in literature around the same time. CPE Bach writes:

> "The clavichord and the fortepiano are the most convenient instruments for our fantasies. [...] The undamped register of the fortepiano is the most pleasant, and, if one knows how to apply the necessary delicacy to control the reverberation, the loveliest register for fantasizing."

Suddenly Beethoven's original title—*Sonata quasi una Fantasia*, "a sonata in the manner of a fantasy"—appears in a completely different light.

Before there were pedals, early pianos sometimes had stops, similar to harpsichords or organs, in which a certain effect would be activated by pulling a lever and usually leaving it until there was an opportunity to turn it off, typically at the end of a movement. It was only in the 1780s that a knee lever was introduced to raise and lower the dampers while playing. When Beethoven grew up in Bonn, the techniques and aesthetics described by CPE Bach were the latest fashion. But by 1801 in Vienna, at merely 31 years of age, Beethoven found himself already confronted with a rapidly changing world—politically and aesthetically—in which the fashions of his youth were completely outdated.



Tradition and Progress

This is not to suggest that Beethoven opposed any and all progress. As a still rather young and celebrated composer, he was far from the cultural pessimism that plagues us today. But Beethoven was by no means embracing progress for the sake of it. He valued and cherished the traditions he grew up with, and the heritage passed on to him by his predecessors.

A recurring but moot discussion is whether composers of the past would have preferred modern instruments if they had had access to them. We might consider this the natural attitude of any living culture that views its achievements as the result of evolution from the past. But discussing these matters is already a symptom of a sterile society incapable of living up to the creative standards of its forefathers, patting itself on the back for what Chesterton would have called "preferring Thursday to Wednesday because it is Thursday." Or in other words: there's a good reason why Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert all appeared in Vienna within a span of a few decades, and today they don't.

When Beethoven wrote his *Sonata quasi una Fantasia* Op. 27 No. 2, he didn't write the first romantic piece about an artistic soul engulfed in *Weltschmerz*. He wrote an homage to a time that had passed: the last Bachian free fantasy ever written, a farewell to the 18th century and its traditions at the dawn of a new era. It was the last moment in history for this piece to be composed, when pianos were still delicate enough to recreate the "pleasant" and "lovely" effect that CPE Bach praised so highly. Even then, players had to perform "sempre pianissimo" to achieve it. Only a few years later, pianos would be too massive for the task.

Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* isn't an announcement of the aesthetic ideals of the 19th century. It is a last farewell to the 18th century he came from—a loving, deliberate glance backward, written with full knowledge that the world which made it possible was already slipping away.

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