

# Ludwig van Beethoven's *Rondo, Op.51 No.1*

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## **General Remarks**

Contrary to the implication of the opus number (51), this rondo was composed early in Beethoven's life, around the same time as the first three piano sonatas, Op. 2.<sup>1</sup> It bears a considerable degree of individuality, including a fairly unique approach to rondo form, and affirms that even in his small-scale compositions, Beethoven was pushing the boundaries of previous efforts.

According to traditional letter-name analysis, this work is in five-part rondo form: ABACA. This labeling will only be used to divide the work into sections of manageable size and should not be considered as an accurate description of the form as it ignores the unique features that account for the subsequent formal organization.<sup>2</sup>

## **Rondo, Op.51 No.1**

### ***A - (mm.1-17)***

The structure of the main theme (small ternary form) is quite ordinary for a rondo; however, the contrasting middle (mm. 9-13) offers something very unique in that it fails to modulate to the dominant.<sup>3</sup> This lack of tonal variety is quite striking and can only be understood in retrospect. For the time being, it may be assumed that Beethoven was reserving the arrival of a prolonged dominant harmony (within the main theme) for an important passage later on in the work.<sup>4</sup>

Aside from innovative formal structures, Beethoven's music is often characterized by the development of small motives. This developmental procedure is most salient

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<sup>1</sup> The rondo was composed between 1796 and 1797.

<sup>2</sup> For example, letter-name analysis does not deal with the implications of unusual characteristics (e.g. unconventional tonal relationships, significant modifications of smaller formal units, etc.), all of which inform the structure of the work.

<sup>3</sup> A similar phenomenon can be observed in the second movement of Beethoven's early Op.18 No.5 string quartet.

<sup>4</sup> This is an early instance of Beethoven's tendency to transform an element of conventional practice into something unique.

when its germinal subjects are presented in isolation;<sup>5</sup> however, in this rondo, rather than constructing phrases using motivic units, Beethoven extracts characteristic elements from a fully-formed theme and uses them as a basis for new material.

For example, the first of these elements is the syncopated rhythm that appears in mm. 2-3 of the main theme. Its local function is to break up the squareness of the main theme and to initiate rhythmic and harmonic drive toward the cadence. The 7-6 suspension in m. 2 sets off a quickening of the harmonic rhythm and the sixteenth notes become more plentiful as the half cadence (m. 4) is approached. Its global function, however, is more complex. When the syncopated figure becomes the rhythmic basis for the *minore* section, it provides a non-melodic link to the main theme creating a sense of coherence amidst seemingly unrelated material. This rather distant relationship can be contrasted with one that occurs between two gestures of great

Moderato e grazioso Op. 51 No. 1

*p dolce*

| - V<sup>4/3</sup> - | - V<sup>6/5</sup> - IV<sup>6</sup> - V<sup>6</sup> - | - I<sup>6</sup> - ii<sup>6</sup> - V<sup>6/4 - 5/3</sup>

Half-Cadence

■ Syncopated rhythm that forms the basis of the *minore*

■ 7-6 Suspension

proximity earlier on in the work.

The contrasting middle of the A section's ternary form is built on a two measure idea and its repetition. The repetition does not maintain the rhythmic make-up of the initial gesture, but retains the overall contour. In order to avoid a strong sense of closure on the first hearing of the motive, Beethoven prolongs the tonic chord in its first inversion; the repetition gives a greater sense of completion as it is supported by the tonic chord in root position. The composer draws attention to this difference by adding a small dialogue between the tenor and bass to the texture, and enhances the repetition's sense of completeness with a small re-transition in mm. 12-13.

<sup>5</sup> In the music of Beethoven, these motives are often presented in this way since drawn-out melodies usually come later on as a result of developmental procedures.

## Performance

Although the work is marked “*Moderato e grazioso*”, one must remember that it is written *alla breve*. As such, a moderate tempo applied to a reading of the work in four is much too slow.

Great attention should be paid to the articulation and phrasing as Beethoven’s markings are quite specific. For example, the turn figure at m. 2 should be played on the last beat rather than as an upbeat. Also, the run in the right hand at mm. 12-13 requires three different articulations. The first descending passage may be played with a small touch of pedal or with a slight overlap between successive notes, the second is played staccato, and the third may be played legato with no overlap between

- Dialogue between tenor and bass
- The gesture maintains the overall contour but differs in rhythmic content.
- Three different articulations

neighbouring pitches.

The tenor-bass dialogue mentioned above may be highlighted but should remain subordinate to the melody.

**B - (mm. 18-43)**

The first couplet, approached by a fast ascending scale, brings an increase in momentum. This energy is carried through the first four measures with a sequence which then gives way to continuous sixteenth notes until the new tonic (G) is reached at m.34.

One may notice that the melody at m.18 is an augmentation of the dotted rhythmic figure from the opening; however, like in many derivative forms of development, the connection is not very audible and thus does not warrant much attention. What is worth noticing is that although the entire B section is formally independent, it contains numerous connections to the opening material and reflects many developmental qualities.

The image shows a musical score for the B section (mm. 18-43). The score is written for piano and treble clef. The first system shows measures 18-20. The second system shows measures 21-23. A red box highlights a rhythmic diminution of a 4-3 suspension in the treble staff. A blue box highlights suggested fingering and execution of a turn figure in the treble staff. A yellow box highlights a slight added emphasis with the 7th note in the bass staff.

■ rhythmic diminution of 4-3 suspension

■ Slight added emphasis with 7<sup>th</sup>

■ Suggested fingering and execution of turn figure

For example, one would expect another 4-3 suspension in quarter notes at m.21 to complete the sequence. Instead, Beethoven shortens the length of the suspension, accents

the second beat, and jumps directly into a new idea. This abrupt sort of transition differs greatly from the smooth links found in expository sections, and is characteristic of development sections.<sup>6</sup>

Another interesting formal question arises at m.27 when Beethoven repeats the previous two measures rather than proceeding directly to the material at m.29. The most obvious reason for the repetition is that Beethoven is trying to establish the key of G major; the repetition of the dominant seventh chord resolving to the tonic (G) emphasizes the arrival of the new key. Due to this brief moment of repose on the new tonic of G, the use of the same material leading to a pre-dominant chord of the new key (ii) in mm.29-30 exudes a renewed sense of departure. The resulting increase in harmonic rhythm that spans mm.31-33 comes to rest on the tonic at m.34.

Over the course of the next ten measures, Beethoven transforms the function of the pedal tone (G) from tonic to dominant. The shift occurs in mm.38-39 when a progression of two parallel diminished seventh chords leads to a I chord in C major followed by a V<sup>7</sup> of C on the downbeat of m.40. F# (the leading-tone to G) and Ab (borrowed from the minor mode) are introduced in the bass voice to emphasize the re-contextualized G and give way to their C major mode equivalents (F natural and A natural respectively) just prior to the entry of the main theme in C major; the drawn out standing on the dominant finally yields its anticipated resolution.

### *Performance*

The *sforzando* at m.21 initiates a passage of tireless sixteenth notes that leads to a local climax at m.24; it should be played with great energy. A suggestion for the fingering and execution of the turn figures at m.23 is as follows:

■ Parallel diminished chords
 ■ I in C is reached and followed by V<sup>7</sup>
■ Note the difference in articulation

<sup>6</sup> This follows logically from the typical classical-period development section that serves to put the opening material (including tonality) into conflict.

Pay careful attention to the phrasing in the bass voice at mm.31-33. A break in phrasing helps to clarify the relationship between m.31 and m.33 (the same material transposed by an octave).

The shift of the G pedal from tonic to dominant may be highlighted by slightly emphasizing the downbeat of m.40. Be sure, however, that the crescendo continues beyond this to the high point of the phrase (mm.41-42). Note the difference in articulation between the end of m.40 and the end of m.41 (*sfp* versus *sf*).

### ***A'* - (mm.44-51)**

Beethoven ignores the conventional treatment of rondo form that calls for a repetition of the main theme in its entirety. Instead, the main theme is truncated to include only the opening section of its original ternary form. The reason for this is, most likely, to permit the inclusion of a false recapitulation. Had Beethoven included a complete return of the main theme, the formal importance allotted to it would have been too great in comparison to the false recapitulation, which, as an unusual accent in the form, deserves to be temporally highlighted. Also, the false recapitulation (m.75) allows the listener an extra hearing of the main theme; the traditional refrain in addition to the main theme's unexpected appearance in the false recapitulation would render the material stale and superfluous.

It is rare that Beethoven repeats material verbatim, even in rondo form where

■ Added syncopation that foreshadows *sforzandi*    ■ Introduction of sextuplet figuration

such a thing is supported by the traditional discourse. As in this work, Beethoven often introduces subtle changes that foreshadow other elements of the composition in question. The added syncopation at m.49 prepares the off-beat *sforzandi* that characterize the ensuing *minore* and the sextuplets at m.50 prepare the arpeggiated triplets of the same section.

### ***Performance***

The turn figure at m.44 should be played on the downbeat and that in m.48 should be played as an upbeat triplet sixteenth pattern. One suggestion for the fingering of the sextuplets at m.50 is as follows:

Be sure not to rush the upbeat to the *minore* section; a micro-pause separating it from the A' section is appropriate.

### ***C* - (mm.52-75)**

Like the main theme, the *minore* is in small ternary form. Unlike the main theme, however, the *minore* begins in c minor and modulates to the relative major of E<sup>b</sup>. The outer sections develop the rhythmic syncopation from from m.2 of the opening theme and the middle section alludes to the rhythmic material of the main theme's middle section (for example, compare mm.8-11 with mm.59-62).

The return of the *minore*'s opening section is altered to include a deceptive

- Deceptive cadence that foreshadows the tonality of the false recapitulation
- The modulation to A<sup>b</sup> is achieved melodically
- Change in articulation (softening)

cadence on A<sup>b</sup> at m.70. This change serves three purposes: it balances the outer sections of the ternary form, it allows Beethoven to smoothly bring the register down an octave, and it highlights the tonal region of A<sup>b</sup> thus foreshadowing the key of the false recapitulation.

In the transition to the false recapitulation Beethoven introduces an ascending scale-like gesture that bears a strong sense of improvisation. This process becomes more frequent as the movement develops and the form becomes perpetually looser. In this particular case, it seems as though the minor has closed on C; however, after repeating the tonic several times of a triplet rhythm, Beethoven raises the pitch to D<sup>b</sup> and finally D natural<sup>7</sup>. The accompanying *calando* marking further highlights this passage as a significant formal event. This leads to what seems like the return of the main theme in A<sup>b</sup> major.

### ***Performance***

The accent over the eighth note preceding each *sforzando* implies that it is to be played quite lightly, almost as an up-beat to the ensuing syncopation.

A slight hesitation between the end of m.58 and the beginning of m.59 is an effective way to contrast the very strong cadence in E<sup>b</sup> major with the *piano* marking on the downbeat of m.59.

One must pay careful attention to the articulation in mm.72-73 as it prepares the

The image shows a musical score snippet with two staves: a treble clef staff and a bass clef staff. The treble clef staff contains a melodic line with several notes. Three specific areas are highlighted with colored boxes: a red box highlights a group of notes, a blue box highlights a group of notes, and a yellow box highlights a group of notes. The bass clef staff contains a rhythmic accompaniment. The score includes dynamic markings such as *sf* and *calando*.

- Discontinuity of the melodic line
- Very prominent harmonic shift
- The contrasting middle of the main theme is finally presented over a dominant pedal

character of the false recapitulation (the modulation from C and A<sup>b</sup> re-contextualizes the tonic as the third of A<sup>b</sup> and thus softens the harmonic discourse significantly).

### ***False Recapitulation - (mm. 76-91)***

<sup>7</sup> This type of melodic modulation is one commonly used by Beethoven. See, for example, the final movement of the piano sonata in D, Op.10 No.3.

A sense of discontinuity is immediately presented by the composer in order to indicate to the listener that something is amiss. The changes of register in the main theme render the material somewhat disjointed and the harmonic shift at m.82 fully reveals the section's formal role as a false recapitulation. Beethoven finally gives us the middle section of the main theme over a dominant pedal, but maintains a closer melodic and rhythmic association to the middle section of the *minore*. These features along with the minor mode colouring of the middle section all contribute to the sense of false recapitulation. A more elaborate scale-like improvisational gesture leads to the true recapitulation of the main theme at m.92.

### ***Performance***

The discontinuities mentioned above can be brought out by the performer. For example, the changes in register can be highlighted with a change in tone colour.

One must pay special attention to Beethoven's detailed alternation between legato and staccato.

### ***A'' - (mm.92-106)***

The main theme continues as it was originally presented except for some minor changes that reflect the influence of previous sections (e.g. triplet eighth-note figures, sextuplets). It is, however, more emphasized due to the preceding detour into A<sup>b</sup> major. This emphasis makes formal sense as the final return of the theme is the most anticipated event in rondo form. Again set in small ternary form, the return of the opening section of the main theme is interrupted by a series of *fermate* and a modulation to D<sup>b</sup> major (one step further toward the flat side than the false recapitulation). This leads to a full coda - a formal element that Beethoven would continue to develop throughout his entire life.

### ***Coda - (mm.107-135)***

It becomes evident at the entry of the coda that the continually loosening formal structure of the work coincides with its harmonic continuity; as the structure loosens, the tonal regions become more remote. It is no surprise then, that the coda is set in the key most distantly related to the home key. The arpeggiated sixteenth notes from mm.110-115 represent the most improvisational material of the entire work and the *fermate* at mm.105-106 lend the entire section a cadenza-like feel. The dominant of the home key is finally reached at m.116 and the ensuing post-cadential material, beginning at m.120, contains several references to the opening theme. This reflective quality reaches its most pronounced moment in mm.131-133 where the *rinforzando*

markings emphasize the allusions to previously heard material; the feeling is almost nostalgic.

### *Performance*

A small pause between m.109 and m.110 is appropriate due to the drastic change in material.

Do not accent the downbeat of m.118, even though it is marked *forte* after a short section played *piano*; the accented attack is reserved for the arrival of the dominant at m.116 where the formal context (arrival on the dominant) supports the emphasis.

The nonuplet at m.128 does not need to be played strictly in time. It may be thought of as a surge leading to the local climax on E. This said, the triplet divisions should still be maintained.

The *rinforzando* markings at m.132 and m.133 permit a slight stretching of the tempo in keeping with the reflective quality.