

Exploring the Singing Style in Five Lyrical First Movements from Beethoven's Piano Sonatas

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1. Introduction

Although Beethoven's so-called "heroic" style dominates perceptions about the composer, he also composed a number of pieces that have a less heroic, more intimate or "lyrical" style. Focusing on first movements in sonata form from throughout Beethoven's career, this paper aims to explore one character—the singing style—which has rarely been investigated, partly because of a quality that sets it in opposition to the heroic style—its lack of confrontation and struggle.

Up to now, the most extended discussion of this lyrical strain in Beethoven's sonata-form movements has been written by Carl Dahlhaus (1980), who, however, treats the topic primarily from the perspective of thematic unification in pieces written after 1809 by non-motivic means that he characterizes as "subthematicism."¹ In the following I seek to broaden our understanding of the singing style. Approaching the singing style through topic theory, I shall first clarify the singing style as a musical topic and then move to a semiotic discussion of signifiers and signifieds, exploring multiple semiotic parameters of the singing style in the first movements of five of Beethoven's piano sonatas: Opp. 14/2, 28, 78, 101, and 110. Extending the analysis to Beethoven's early works, this paper brings forward the argument that the singing style is not limited to the middle and late periods in Beethoven's music, as Dahlhaus and other scholars suggest; rather, it appears as early as 1798, as specifically demonstrated in the Piano Sonata, Op. 14/2. Ultimately, I hope this paper will shed light on the humanistic value manifested in the singing style that has usually been neglected and undervalued in Beethoven reception.

2. The "Singing Style" as a Musical Topic: a Semiotic Approach

The concept of the "singing" style as a musical topic was first invoked by Leonard Ratner in his ground-breaking book *Classic Music* (1980). But Ratner's explanation of the "singing" style is limited and stops with descriptions of some

¹ Dahlhaus defines the "subthematic," on the one hand, as an abstract, interior, and latent structure as opposed to its conventional counterpart—the concrete, exterior, and manifest "thematic." On the other hand, the "subthematic" can also be understood as a special form of the "thematic" from which the "subthematic" derives and detaches. The "subthematic" becomes the metaphor of form as a network through which the parts of the composition can be united. For example, in his discussion of Beethoven's String Quartet, Op. 132, Dahlhaus constructs a "subthematic" nexus, which is less a "theme" or a "motive" and more an intervallic structure, independent of rhythm and meter, such as "the configuration of two rising or falling semitone steps with a variable interval between them (G#-A-F-E)". Carl Dahlhaus, *Ludwig van Beethoven: Approaches to His Music*, translated by Mary Whittall (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 203.

musical characteristics, such as a lyric vein, a moderate tempo (or a quick one called the *singing allegro*), a melodic line characterized by slow note values and a narrow range, and certain dance rhythms.²

Following Ratner, several scholars have developed and extended topic theory in different ways. One of the most promising paths is to situate topic theory within the discourse of semiotic theory as does Raymond Monelle (2000 and 2006). The realization that the associated meanings of music topics are historically contingent motivates Monelle to discuss topics in terms of the signifier and the signified, semiotic concepts coined by the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913). In the discourse of topic theory, the signifier of a music topic is manifested through musical signs, while the signified refers to a topic's cultural and social meanings or significations. Notably, for Monelle the “singing” style is primarily a set of stylistic traits, and thus it is a simple signifier with a less focused signified.³

Monelle’s devaluation of the singing style’s signifieds or cultural associations has been challenged by Sarah Day-O’Connell in her entry “The Singing Style” in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory* from 2014. Drawing on the historical treatises relevant to the topic of the singing style, Day-O’Connell examines the signifiers of the singing-style topic in terms of vocal melodies and vocal performance and then explores the signifieds of the singing style by concluding that singing invokes such cultural tropes as nature, beauty, and simplicity; the amateur, the feminine; private domains, and sociability. Day-O’Connell lays solid theoretical foundations for further semiotic research into the singing style. However, she does not provide any detailed case studies. I shall apply Day-O’Connell’s semiotic approach to the singing style in five first movements in Beethoven’s piano sonatas.

3. The Signifiers

3.1 The Singing Style in the Main Themes

One character shared in the first movements of all five piano sonatas is the singing quality of the main themes, which differs from the “motivic” and “urgent” character of main themes found in the first movements of so-called “heroic” piano sonatas, such as the “Pathétique” Op. 13, the “Tempest” Op. 31/2, and the “Waldstein” Op. 53. The singing-style melody as applied to instrumental music typically includes (but is not limited to) the following characteristics: narrow range, long note values, small intervals, economic use of disjunct notes and arpeggios, less impetuous rhythms, soft dynamics, homophonic texture, continuous and flowing phrasing (instead of broken or abrupt changes of musical ideas), slow tempo, and a couple of techniques from vocal performance, including *messa di voce* (a gradual crescendo and diminuendo while sustaining a single pitch), legato, *dragg* (a slow descending glissando) and rubato.⁴ To be sure, a theme does not have to include all the signifiers above to be understood as a singing-style melody. The lesson here is to resist a dogmatic analytic approach; rather, according to Leonard Meyer (1973), the

² Leonard Ratner, *Classic Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer Books, 1980), 19.

³ Raymond Monelle, *The Musical Topic: Hunt, Military and Pastoral* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2006), 5.

⁴ “Messa di voce” and “dragg” are probably less relevant for piano music than they are for stringed or wind instruments

purpose of critical analysis is to seek out musical signifiers that corroborate the analyst's aural experience of the music. Ultimately, what convinces is "aural cogency combined with logical coherence."⁵

Generally speaking, the vocal range for a human is about one and a half to two octaves. A survey of ranges in the melody of all five works shows their consistency within this vocal range, instead of a wide range as an instrumental melody usually features.⁶ Also, most of the main themes exhibit the preponderance of conjunct melody with long note values and motion, except for Op. 14/2 with its seeming preponderance of disjunct and leaping intervals and sixteenth notes. Then why, based on our listening experience, does this "deviant" piece still evoke a lyrical or singing style? In fact, if we look at a reduction of the melody in Op. 14/2, all those leaps and disjunct intervals are simply the ornaments of the "core melody" (see example 1 in black notes). The added ornaments by Beethoven, mostly through octave leaps and semitone neighbor notes, serve to energize and enliven the "core melody," and thereby conform to the *Allegro* character. The "core melody," mainly composed of broken triads and descending scales, possesses smooth and conjunct features, and therefore the singing quality here remains present even with added ornaments.⁷ Besides, since Beethoven might also have noticed that the ornamented, disjunct melody in a quick tempo may, to some degree, lessen its lyrical character, he indicates "legato" and *piano* at the very beginning of the theme, which are typical signifiers of the singing style.

Example 1: Beethoven, Piano Sonata, Op. 14/2, I: The main theme, mm. 1-8.

Another musical signifier that points to the singing style is the homophonic texture. There are two types of homophonic texture implying the vocal genres: melody-and-accompaniment and chorale textures. All five piano sonatas make different uses of these two textures: Op. 14/2 and Op. 101, respectively, use the melody-and-accompaniment texture and chorale texture throughout the main themes; Op. 28 employs a three-voice chorale texture supported by a steady tonic pedal; Op. 78 has the same texture as Op. 28 in the introduction, which is followed by a main theme in a melody-and-accompaniment texture; the last one, Op. 110, integrates both

⁵ Leonard B. Meyer, *Explaining Music: Essays and Explorations* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 18.

⁶ The survey of the range shows below: Op. 14/2 (mm. 1-8): C4-C6; Op. 28 (mm. 1-39): A3-A5; Op. 78 (mm. 5-16): B#3-F5; Op. 101 (mm. 1-6): G#4-A5; Op. 110 (mm. 1-12): Ab4-F6.

⁷ The ornaments and leaps in the main theme also suggest the operatic aria-like topic, which is one of the subgenres of the singing-style topic.

textures in a two-part main theme—part A (mm. 1-4) with chorale texture and part B (mm. 5-12) with melody-and-accompaniment texture.

The ideal tempo for these singing melodies should be moderate. Of the five piano sonatas, Op. 110 is the most normative since Beethoven uses *moderato cantabile molto espressivo* in the tempo heading. *Allegro ma non troppo* in both Opp. 78 and 101 also suggests a moderate pace. Op. 14/2 and Op. 28, however, might initially seem problematic since only *Allegro* is marked in the heading. Could the singing style be appropriate in a fast tempo setting? In fact, Ratner explicitly mentions another type of singing style which he terms “singing allegro,” which designates a lyrical melody set in a quick tempo accompanied by either steadily repeated rapid notes or broken-chord figures.”⁸ He refers to the first four measures of Mozart’s “Jupiter” Symphony finale to illustrate this singing allegro.⁹ Coincidentally, Op. 14/2 and Op. 28, respectively, present the two different types of accompaniments that Ratner describes: Op. 14/2 uses the sixteenth-note broken chords, while Op. 28 sets a long and steady tonic pedal in quarter notes. Therefore, both a moderate tempo and a fast tempo with particular accompaniments can be appropriate for singing style expression.

3.2. Thematic Relationships in the Singing-Style Sonata Form

The foregoing discussion points out some important signifiers of the singing style in the main theme in terms of melodic range and types, texture, and tempo; now I shall discuss the lyrical second themes, and analyze one example to show how Beethoven ensures that the secondary theme is related to the first theme and that the movement is thus musically cogent. Relevant here is the concept of “contrasting derivation,” a principle initially proposed by the German musicologist Arnold Schmitz in the early twentieth century as a central principle of Beethoven’s music in general and revived by Dahlhaus in the 1970s and 1980s in his discussions of Beethoven’s music.¹⁰

A “singing” second theme, as opposed to a “motivic and driving” main theme is long assumed to have been standard for sonatas in the decades around 1800. William Caplin’s *Analyzing Classical Form* (2013) explains this stereotypical assumption from the formal or structural point of view.¹¹ From the perspective of practice, however, views that emphasize the contrasting formal function and the assumed character difference between the two themes can be problematic. In those singing-style movements, one might notice that the contrasting character between two lyrical themes is significantly mitigated, thus ensuring an overall singing-style

⁸ Ratner, *Classic Music*, 19.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 19.

¹⁰ Dahlhaus offers a clear definition of “contrasting derivation:” “a first and a second subject have some characteristics—often semi-latent—in common; and at the same time, through other attributes, they express on the surface of the music the complementary opposition that is essential to the thematic structure of sonata form.” Carl Dahlhaus, *Beethoven*, 51-52.

¹¹ Caplin points out that since sonata form is usually perceived as the most inherently dynamic of all conventional forms, the sentential structure becomes “especially well suited to initiate the formal type” due to its “forward-striving character.” (Caplin, 2013, 287). Besides, given that the second theme is destined to fulfill its fundamental formal function as a contrast to the main theme, it is therefore frequent to see a motivic and driving main theme contrasting with a later more lyrical and tuneful second theme (Caplin, 2013, 353).

atmosphere throughout the exposition. What else relates the themes to each other? For the sake of limited length in this paper, I shall only discuss it in the first movement of Op. 78.

Although two themes possess different textures and melodies, it should not be obscure to perceive a lyrical character in both of them. The main theme (mm. 5-16) in a homophonic texture has a clear singing melody mostly in quarter notes. The second theme (mm. 28-36), dominated by eighth-note triplets in both two voices, starts with a typical *piano* dynamic and is marked *dolce*, both of which indicate a singing or lyrical character. Also, the harmonic motion in both themes features the simple oscillation between the tonic and dominant, although they are in different keys. Furthermore, there exists a latent motivic connection between two themes that Dahlhaus has pointed out as the embodiment of the “contrasting derivation”: the prolonged descending tetrachord in the second theme (mm. 28-30: A#-G#-F#-E#) reminds of the manifest descending tetrachord in the main theme (mm. 7-8: F#-E#-D#-C#); one can also easily find the correlation of pitch degrees in the bass of both themes (mm. 10-11: F#-G#-A#-B; mm. 28: C#-D#-E#-F#).¹² Last but not least, as Dahlhaus has also noted, the triplet rhythm prevalent in the second theme is actually from the second half of the main theme (mm. 10-11).¹³ Therefore, the two themes in Op. 78 differ in texture and melody but cohere in harmonic and motivic events and, more importantly, in a lyrical character that dominates the whole movement.

¹² Dahlhaus, *Beethoven*, 207.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 207.

Example 2: Beethoven, Piano Sonata, Op. 78, I: The main theme (mm. 5-16) and the second theme (mm. 28-36).

The image displays a musical score for the first movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata, Op. 78, I. The score is divided into two main sections: the main theme (MT) and the second theme (ST). The main theme is marked "Adagio cantabile" and "Allegro ma non troppo" (5). The second theme is marked "leggermente" and "cresc." (10). The score includes various musical notations such as dynamics (p dolce, p, f, sf), articulation (accents, slurs), and fingerings. Annotations include a red box around the first theme's melody (mm. 5-16), a yellow box around the second theme's bass line (mm. 28-36), and a yellow box around the first theme's bass line (mm. 17-27). A red arrow points from the red box to the yellow box, and a yellow arrow points from the yellow box to the yellow box. The score ends with a "Closing Section" (35).

4. The Signifieds

4.1 Privacy and Domesticity

The sonata as an instrumental music genre in the eighteenth century could be found in a variety of locations and occasions, including church, court, salon, academy, and occasionally public concert hall. Piano sonatas, especially those that were less virtuosic and more intimate or lyrical, were primarily performed in “private” and “domestic” venues as the salon culture began to flourish and culminate in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. In Beethoven’s lifetime, his sonatas were mostly performed in private recitals by his amateur and professional students. Admittedly, some of his more dramatic and large sonatas such as the “Pathétique,” “Tempest,” “Appassionata,” “Waldstein,” and “Hammerklavier” sonatas possess certain symphonic qualities in their structure, style, and aesthetic dimensions that seem more appropriate for public performance. His singing-style or lyrical sonatas, as analyzed in the last section, however, retain a private and domestic quality through their intimacy, directness, and comprehensibility. This privacy and domesticity served as signifieds of the singing style, and they also have a connection with femininity as discussed below.

4.2 Femininity and the Dedicattee

Sonatas were often written on commission, for church services, for public academies, for the private entertainment, and so on.¹⁴ But mostly sonatas in the Classical style functioned as a diversion or a training resource for amateurs.¹⁵ In the Classical era the piano sonata belonged to the amateur, particularly the female amateur, since the keyboard was perceived as the most natural and acceptable outlet for women’s musical talents and ambitions.¹⁶ Both playing a keyboard instrument and singing at home were particularly fashionable among ladies. Therefore, piano sonatas with an overall singing-style quality appropriately correlate with female gender as another signified of the singing style.

Another connection between femininity and the singing-style sonatas lies in the dedication of such works. For composers during the Classical era, one way to secure or improve their livelihood was to dedicate their sonatas to an affluent or influential individual, often an aristocrat. Needless to say, they often had to make concessions in terms of style, instrumentation, technique, and texture to conform to the preferences of the dedicatee. Of the five Beethoven piano sonatas examined here, three (Opp. 14/2, 78, and 101) were dedicated to females who were capable pianists, some even with superb technique and outstanding expressivity.¹⁷ Although Op. 110

¹⁴ William Newman contributes detailed discussions of these different social functions of sonatas in the Classical Era. See William Newman, *The Sonata in the Classic Era*, 3rd edition (New York: W.W. Norton, 1983), 43-57.

¹⁵ Wei-Chun, Bernadette Lo, “The Piano Sonata in the Musical Life of the Early 19th Century,” DMA dissertation (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 2000), 34.

¹⁶ As Newman mentions, some composers specifically wrote keyboard sonatas for women. “[Johann Baptist] Vanhal’s keyboard sonatas were said...to have the graceful and charming melodies that would attract amateurs, ‘especially ladies’.” C. P. E. Bach also composed a set of sonatas for women. See Newman, *The Sonata in the Classic Era*, 45 and 416.

¹⁷ The only one of the five sonatas that does not have a connection with female dedicatee is Op. 28, which was dedicated to Joseph von Sonnenfels (?1733-1817). He was created a baron in 1797 and in

was published without a dedication, Alexander Thayer suggests that Beethoven originally intended to dedicate it to Antonie Brentano (1780-1869), who has been identified by Maynard Solomon as the “Immortal Beloved” of Beethoven.¹⁸

4.3 Nature and Simplicity

“Nature” is a recurring concept associated with the singing style. One thing that connects “nature” and the affiliated concept of “simplicity” to the singing style is the pastoral topic. In topic theory, the pastoral is identified as a distinctive topic from the singing style, and many recent discussions of the pastoral topic have enriched our understanding of it by relating it to the relevant literary genres. It is not my purpose here to discuss the pastoral topic in detail; instead, I aim to show that there is a strong association with the pastoral topic in the singing-style sonatas, especially in Op. 28, Op. 78, and Op. 101, which confirms the cultural significance of nature and simplicity as signifieds of the singing style.

The publisher Crazz of Hamburg gave Op. 28 the not inappropriate title *Pastorale*, since its music exhibits numerous points of contact with the traditions of the pastoral, such as sustained tonic pedals, relatively simple melodic progressions, terraced harmony, and major mode.¹⁹ Most of these features are also shared with the main theme of Op. 101, as Robert Hatten demonstrates in *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*.²⁰ Hatten also offers a poetic reading of Op. 78 in terms of the pastoral: the first movement “might be interpreted as opening with a sunrise (the gradual ascent over a tonic pedal that acts as a horizon) and continuing with a ‘workaday’ set of themes in the following Allegro.”²¹ The representation of scenes from nature and the overall simplicity of the music also conform to a larger conception of the literary pastoral mode, as “peaceful, simple, happy, picturesque, and unsullied.”²²

Although the subtle and complex relationships between the pastoral and the singing style are far from clear and need to be further explored, the association of the pastoral—as one type of song mentioned by Day-O’Connell—in three sonatas nonetheless clearly points to the cultural significance of nature and simplicity for the singing style.²³

1806 he was granted honorary citizenship of the city of Vienna. Beethoven’s dedication of Op. 28 to him has rather puzzled scholars, since there is no known evidence of any contact between them. Thayer surmises that it must have been simply an expression of the composer’s profound regard for a man of high principles, with whose general philosophy he found himself in sympathy. See H. P. Clive, *Beethoven and His World: A Biographical Dictionary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 341.

¹⁸ Maynard Solomon, “Antonie Brentano and Beethoven,” *Music and Letters* 58, no. 2 (April 1977): 153-169.

¹⁹ Lewis Lockwood, “Reshaping the Genre: Beethoven’s Piano Sonatas from Op. 22 to Op. 28 (1799-1801),” *Israel Studies in Musicology* 6 (1996): 13.

²⁰ Robert Hatten, *Musical Meaning in Beethoven*, 97-98.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 83.

²² *Ibid.*, 82, summarizing the definition in *A Dictionary of Literary Terms* (1960). [include full reference in your bibliography.]

²³ Sarah Day-O’Connell, “The Singing Style,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Topic Theory*, edited by Danuta Mirka (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2014), 250.

4.4 Beauty

If one compares both Op. 14/2 and Op. 78 with the piano sonatas that preceded them, one finds drastic stylistic contrasts between the “turbulence” of the earlier works and the “beauty” of these works. The aggressive “Pathétique,” Op. 13, was followed by the gentler sonatas of Op. 14/2; and the tempestuous “Appassionata,” Op. 57, precedes Op. 78. The question raised here is whether such a stylistic and aesthetic contrast was intended by Beethoven. Lewis Lockwood in his article “On the Beautiful in Music,” examines this issue through his study of Beethoven’s “Spring” Violin Sonata, Op. 24. Lockwood’s exploration of “beauty,” a trait identified as a signified of the singing style, mainly draws its meaning from Eduard Hanslick’s famous essay on music’s aesthetic value. He argues that the special character of beauty in Op. 24 can be interpreted as Beethoven’s “early response to questions and feelings about the nature of ‘the beautiful’.”²⁴

Since 1798 Beethoven’s name had appeared repeatedly in the pages of *Allgemeine musikalische Zeitung*, where one could also find occasional negative reviews of Beethoven’s “experimental” works, which deemed such works as “bizarre” and “eccentric.” Beethoven was aware of some of these negative critiques, as demonstrated by a letter he wrote to the publishers Breitkopf und Härtel in April 1801, saying that “they do not know anything about music.”²⁵ But obviously, Beethoven’s most powerful response to those negative critiques is found in his compositions. His musical response is manifested in works with a conspicuous singing and lyrical style in which, according to Lockwood, Beethoven attempted to “minimize those elements within his style that listeners could readily construe as ‘bizarre’, ‘ungracious,’ ‘dismal,’ and ‘opaque’.”²⁶ As Lockwood notes, Beethoven’s special interest of exploring the singing style, or “melodically beautiful,” “not only formed an artistic balance to the elements of power but was a vital element in Beethoven’s quest for the widest possible range of expression in every genre.”²⁷

5. Conclusion

As a practical response to Day-O’Connell’s theoretical discussion of the singing style in the discourse of music semiotics, and as a theoretical supplement to Dahlhaus’s univalent “subthematic” analysis of the structural tensions between the singing style and sonata form, my analysis aims to provide a more integrated and comprehensive understanding of five of Beethoven’s lyrical first movements from his piano sonatas in terms of musical text, and cultural and historical relevance and significance. The singing style in those piano sonatas implies concepts of comprehensibility, domesticity, femininity, nature, and beauty. Taken together, these notions lead us to understand the singing style as an artistic manifestation of a key point in the ideology of the Enlightenment movement: the achievement of loving communication and brotherhood, an ideal that would of course find its most famous manifestation in the choral finale of the Ninth Symphony.

²⁴ Lewis Lockwood, “‘On the Beautiful in Music’: Beethoven’s ‘Spring’ Sonata for Violin and Piano, Opus 24,” in *The Beethoven Violin Sonatas: History, Criticism, Performance*, edited by Lewis Lockwood and Mark Kroll (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2004), 24.

²⁵ Lockwood, “On the Beautiful in Music”, 41.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 44.

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