Beethoven's Piano Sonata Opus 110 in A-flat Major: the Mystery of the Missing Cats

Willem (Wim) Ibes
College of Saint Benedict/Saint John's University, wibes@csbsju.edu

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Beethoven’s Piano Sonata
Opus 110 in A-flat Major:
The Mystery of the Missing Cats

A tantalizing enigma presented itself in the course of analyzing the second movement of Beethoven’s Opus 110, leading me to the tentative conclusion that a measure may be missing in all printed editions of this work. It seems possible that between measures 91 and 92 of this second movement, one whole measure has been inadvertently left out as the result of an orthographic ambiguity in the autograph (the original score in the composer’s own handwriting). It was a particular method of analysis developed over the course of many years that led me to this hypothesis.

This methodology consists of three main essential elements that differentiate it from other generally accepted analytical procedures: (1) a mathematical-proportional understanding of the motif, (2) the proper identification of the motif, and (3) the association of the motif with a text and a meaning.¹

First, I use a mathematical manner of analysis which concentrates primarily on the proportional-metrical aspects of the music, the length of the motif and its placement within the measure, that is, whether it starts on a strong(er) or weak(er) beat. The length of the motif can, of course, be altered by the devices of diminution and augmentation, and it comes as no surprise that Beethoven’s late sonatas with their wealth of counterpoint exhibit these traits in abundance.

Second, I believe that the generally accepted understanding of what constitutes a motif has been the cause of misunderstanding the musical discourse of especially the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

About twenty-five years ago, after having become acquainted with the Ur-text (unedited) editions of the Scarlatti, Beethoven, and Mozart sonatas and the larger works of Bach, I began to wonder about the easier compositions by these masters that I taught to my early and intermediate piano students. For example, all the familiar editions of the famous Bach Minuet in G major (which pianist has not played it?) insert a slur starting from the first measure into the first beat of the
second measure (see Example 1). This always seemed to make perfect sense but what began to bother me was that the next two quarter notes in the second measure, the repeated Gs, didn't seem to have any of what only much later I would begin to think of as meaning. Over the course of many years I became more and more disturbed by these two “cliff-hangers,” as well as by the phrasing of the left-hand figures in, for instance, mm 13 through 16, which were also always slurred across the bar line (see Example 2):

I felt the same uneasiness when teaching the equally famous Beethoven Sonatina in G Major (see Example 3). The phrasing of the first measure into the first beat of the second seemed sensible, but the last three beats of the measure, though sounding pleasant enough, left me hanging in the air, exactly as the two Gs had in Bach's Minuet.
After deliberating internally over many years, I started to correct my students’ copies. I had come to understand that, almost without exception (and always clearly marked), the motifs and motif-syllables do not cross the bar line but are contained within it. Of course, I should have checked editions like Henle’s of the Beethoven Klavierstücke for these shorter works, but I simply stayed with what I myself had been taught and taught in turn for forty years. One might think that finally having Bach’s and Beethoven’s Ur-text editions in hand would have made me see the light, but the virus that infects the work of us all unfortunately remained undetected.

So, what is this virus that has stealthily burrowed its way into our interpretations of Baroque, Classical, and a good number of later composers? It is simply the almost irresistible urge to fall into the cadence, to always play across the bar line or into the stronger beat of the measure (in a 4/4 measure into the third beat, in a 6/8 measure into the fourth beat).

The motif of Bach’s Minuet in G Major (see Example 4) consists of two syllables, “a” and “b,” two perfectly symmetrical measures: in the first measure (leaving out the passing notes) three quarter notes, D G B; in the second measure, D G G. The relation between these two “syllables,” which together constitute the complete motif, is one of thesis and arsis, of down-beat and up-beat.

It is essential that these two parts be properly identified in order to avoid the meaningless “cliff-hangers.” The structure of the first half of the musical sentence (antecedent) thus becomes clear: a+b; a+b; a; a+b (see Example 5).

As shown in Example 6, this articulation of the motif and its syllables remains consistent throughout the piece:
Beethoven does not differ from Bach in this respect. His early Sonatina in G Major has a structure that is identical to the Bach Minuet, a structure that is difficult to pin down without a clear identification of the motif. The motif is composed again of two symmetrical syllables a and b. (Example 7 gives the slurring the way Beethoven wrote it, not the “corrected” version of a presumptuous editor.)
The complete first (musical) sentence, as in the Bach Minuet, is: a+b (mm. 1-2); a+b (mm. 3-4), a (m. 5); a (m. 6); a+b (mm. 7-8).

What is it, after all, that makes music intelligible? In other words, how does music express meaning? Not very different from the way language does. As a book consists of chapters that consist of paragraphs constructed out of individual sentences, themselves built out of words, syllables, and individual letters, so a symphony, sonata, concerto, or quartet consists of movements that are divided into sections, which in turn consist of individual (musical) sentences, themselves made up out of motifs, motif-members (motif-syllables) and individual notes. Here, however, the comparison stops. Whereas language needs many words to make a sentence, in music, a single motif and its permutations almost always suffice to make a (musical) sentence, a movement, and sometimes — as in the case of Opus 101 and 111 — a whole multi-movement sonata.

An obvious requisite for meaning, or intelligibility, in language as well as music, is that letters (notes), words (motifs), and sentences (phrases or musical sentences) are grouped correctly. A word like min ceme at makes no sense, whereas mincemeat is clear. Well, it is my contention that for almost two centuries now we have made and continue to make mincemeat of Beethoven’s compositions, as well as the compositions of many other composers.

If I were to write, “Thesa Turd aynig htsh, Owha sbe enabi gsu cc es swi ththe Enti. recomm unity,” for good measure adding in some strategically misplaced capital letters, commas, and periods, not a soul would understand that I was commenting on the success of the Saturday night show. All the right letters are there, but where is the meaning?

That is exactly Beethoven’s exasperated cry to Karl Holz when he writes in utter frustration (letter from Baden, dated August 1825): “The notes are all right — only understand my meaning rightly.” In the same letter Beethoven continues: “The slurs must stand just as they are! It is not a matter of indifference whether you play  or  . Mind you, this comes from an authority, so pay attention. I have spent the entire morning and the whole of yesterday afternoon correcting these two movements, and am quite hoarse with cursing and stamping.” I am afraid poor Beethoven would completely lose his voice were he to return now, after two centuries, and try to grasp how we could possibly, and so utterly, have deformed his thought and obliterated the meaning of his music.
On the most elemental level, *meaning* depends, quite simply, on how we group the letters into words, separate one word from another, where we start and where we end a sentence. If my name is Wim Ibes (pronounced E-bes) and I write Wimi Bes or WimI Bes I have changed only the grouping of the letters in these two words, but, as Beethoven so bitterly complained, the meaning is gone.

What then constitutes the motif, the Gestalt, the Eidosis of a composition, and how does a composer work with that basic idea? Fortunately Beethoven, especially late-Beethoven, gives us some solid hints by generously supplying his scores with slurs. Those slurs delineate the motif as well as the (musical) sentence. We can argue endlessly about one thousand details, but when a basic understanding of motif is lacking, all the rest becomes guesswork. The rules of punctuation apply to music as much as to language; commas, periods, colons, semi-colons, question marks, and exclamation marks are not a luxury but a necessity. In music, these necessary rules are expressed by “silences of articulation,” a term explained in 17th and 18th century treatises and one that we would do well to re-introduce into our musical vocabulary.4

To recapitulate our investigation thus far we can say that the correct delineation of the motif, in conjunction with a mathematical-proportional approach, provides the blueprint of a composition. Leaving out (initially) all the other elements of music such as melody, harmony, dynamics and even rhythm (but most definitely including the placement within the meter) it uncovers for us the fundamental genetic material, the DNA of the work. In simple pieces like the Beethoven Sonatina this method allows us to easily follow the musical discourse. In complex works, however, we need more precise labeling than is made possible by mere letters of the alphabet. The third of my three main analytical devices is now called for.

Already in an earlier analysis of the piano sonata Opus 101 I had — unwittingly at the time — followed Beethoven’s suggestion when he advises one sometimes to put (underlay) a fitting text under a difficult-to-understand passage and to sing it. [... rieth ferner bisweilen passende Worte einer streitigen Stelle unterzulegen und sie zu singen....]5 A text or motto which correctly imitates the metrical structure of the motif (focusing mainly on its metrical-mathematical properties) enables us to track all the peregrinations of that motif.
The second movement of Opus 110 graciously supplies the implicit text, a folksong in Silesian dialect, “Das liebe Kätzchen” (see Example 8). Beethoven had sent it, together with another folksong, in his own handwriting (which he trusted the publisher would be able to decipher!) with a somewhat insipid harmonization to Simrock in Bonn, perhaps as some kind of joke, perhaps hoping for some other favor.6

Example 8. Beethoven, Das Liebe Kätzchen

Here, in the second movement of Opus 110 (see Example 9), he uses the melody with a substantially revised accompaniment, with hilarious results.


Translated into more or less standard German, the second movement’s Scherzo gleefully relates: Unser Katz hat Kät-zle g’habt, and into English with correct meter-accents: “Ou-r (two syllables) cat did kittens have,” and then the punch line: drei und sechsi’ nai-ni! [Three and sixty did she have!]

The opening 16 measures (excluding the repeat) exclaim:

Ou-r cat did kittens ha-ve; THREE AND SIXTY DID SHE HAVE! THREE AND SIXTY! THREE AND SIXTY! THREE AND SIXTY DID SHE HAVE! (The capitalized words shout out forte.)
The next 24 measures (see Example 10) are based on another popular melody with the following text: Ich bin lüderlich, du bist lüderlich, wir sind alle lüderlich [I am lecherous, you are lecherous, all of us are lecherous].

Example 10. Beethoven, Ich bin lüderlich

A rather bawdy ditty, it is surprisingly sophisticated: a short break between the first and second quarter notes, like the hiccups of a drunken sailor, a repetition of the first (two-measure) motif, then the repetition of just the first (one measure) motif-syllable, followed by an augmentation of the second measure at the end (see Example 11). Everything is exploited in typical fashion with humor and verve.


Before proceeding I must point out that, for a correct analysis, it doesn't make much difference whether or not Beethoven had these texts in mind when he wrote this second movement. I am using the text simply as a device to understand the structure, following the advice of the Master to find passende Worte.

If readers prefer a text like Jesu, meine Freude (after a famous Bach Cantata) for the first four measures, and repeating that fortissimo for the next four, placet. They will reach substantially the same conclusions since mine are based on the rather immutable laws of mathematics.

I believe there is not the slightest doubt that Beethoven was familiar with both melodies and texts of these folksongs. Whether these texts actually also offer a further, deeper level of meaning, in other words whether they express the true character of this movement, is something I will address in an as yet to be published analysis of the Sonata as a whole.

The first section, a Scherzo in all aspects, is followed by a middle section, the Trio, after which the Scherzo is repeated as is standard for the form. If we accept for the
sake of our analysis the text of the Trio (as was the case with the Scherzo section, the
text is not made explicit in the score) as what Beethoven had in mind, then we find
the composer returning here to his prolific cat, starting fortissimo at measure 40 and
continuing piano in each of the three two-measure sequences until the end (see the
Appendix B for a visualization of the structure) as follows:

Mm 40/41
THREE AND SIXTY!! Mm 42 through 47 three times: ou-r cat did
kittens ha-ve; each two measures in length (equivalent to the first 4
measures of the Scherzo in diminution)

Mm 48/49
THREE AND SIXTY!! Mm 50 through 55 three times: ou-r cat did
kittens ha-ve

Mm 56/57
THREE AND SIXTY!! Mm 58 through 63 three times: ou-r cat did
kittens ha-ve

Mm 64/65
THREE AND SIXTY!! Mm 66 through 71 three times: ou-r cat did
kittens ha-ve

Mm 72/73
THREE AND SIXTY!! Mm 74 — in mock surprise asking the rhetorical
question THREE AND…?? is cut off in mid-sentence with an imperious
shout:

Mm 75/76
THREE AND SIXTY!! Mm 77 through 82 three times: ou-r cat did
kittens ha-ve
Then, in piano dynamics (diminuendo):

Mm 83/84
Three and sixty (no exclamation mark!) Mm 85 through 90 three times:
ou-r cat did kittens ha-ve
Dropping to a pianissimo:

M 91
A variant of the original two quarter notes in m 5 (and later e.g., in m
40) embellished into four eighth notes “Three and …..” Three and what?

Oh dear, sixty cats are missing. What happened to them?
If we look at the autograph, page 25 of the facsimile edition, Ichtys Verlag, Stuttgart, we come upon the solution. The sixty cats that we find in the first measure of the second system (a set of staves) in the autograph were mistakenly considered as having been crossed out by the composer! It is true, the following bars have a generous horizontal “X” drawn through them and the top leg of the “X” descending from the left extends a bit into the territory of the previous measure.

But, as shown in Example 12, the ascending leg of the “X” starts from the lower left, precisely at the bar line of — measure 92!

Example 12. Missing measure “92”?

In the autograph, measure 92 continues the downward pattern with the expected⁸ F C E-flat D-flat in the lower register, with the high F in the treble on the second beat.⁹

In other words, if we realize that m 91 is a variant of the Scherzo’s measure 5, it is not difficult to realize that mm 91 and “new” 92 repeat, pianissimo, mm 5 and 6 (or 40, 41; 48, 49 etc.): drei und sechzig, embellishing this time not just the drei but also the original two quarter notes of the sechzig as four eighth notes.

What a relief! All drei und sechzig cats are there.

It is true that, at the end of this Trio, the composer did not extend his phrasing slur over into the second system to include the new m 92 (see Appendix A). It is therefore possible that the phrasing is correct and that the composer is asking another rhetorical question as in m 74 — this time pianissimo — “three and,” giving the answer in the (old) 92, 93, 94, 95, the four times repeated “three-and-sixty” mentioned above. However, I believe there is nothing here in this ebbing away diminuendo to suggest anything — like the surprising jolt in m 74 — to warrant such an interpretation.
We should also keep in mind that Beethoven slurs are not infrequently ambiguous. There are many instances where they do not exactly pinpoint the beginnings and endings of phrases and, in fact sometimes are erroneous.

The pedal markings delineating the “three and sixty” motif are wrong in Henle but Schenker follows the autograph correctly. All editions are rife with editorial legerdemains — the plural is no exaggeration since one “light hand” alone could not possibly account for the massive and disastrous editorial idiosyncrasies, especially when it comes to phrasing slurs. Ignoring the latter makes Beethoven unintelligible, for the primary means of giving meaning to individual notes is how they are grouped to form motifs and phrases. It is almost unimaginable, as George Barth has amply demonstrated in his “The Pianist as Orator,” that the falsification of Beethoven’s thought and writing started even in the composer’s own lifetime and that the main culprit was none other than Carl Czerny of “Etuden” fame, who at one time studied with the Master himself.10

It goes without saying that, as in all Beethoven’s works, a performer must employ proper “breathing” pauses between the different motifs and motif-syllables.11 In casu, there must be a breath between mm 40/41 and m 42, with smaller breaths between mm 43 and 44, mm 45 and 46 and again a slightly larger one in mm 48 and 49. This can only be understood in the light of a correct analysis, the following of Beethoven’s advice to underlay the notes with an appropriate text, and, in the present case, following the pedal markings as the composer wrote them.

I must admit, after having performed this Trio for the past fifty years or so without this missing measure, that adding it in does take some getting used to. But it becomes more and more gratifying to get the full-Monty cadence of the tonic spread out over two bars, instead of the truncated brush with the tonic that m 91 (or 40, 48, etc.) alone provides. This pair of measures finds, as we may want to remind ourselves once again, their origin in measures 5 and 6 of the Scherzo where they solidly emphasize the C major chord.

So, even though my analysis is based solely on the mathematical-proportional properties of the motif (much more fundamental than either melody, harmony or even rhythm), aided of course by musical elements such as dynamics, pedal markings and articulation, both the harmony and the melody — how satisfying that high F! — confirm its validity. One also cannot fail to sense — once again, assuming that the text of the folksongs is what Beethoven had in mind — how much more naturally the following measures (the new 93–96) confirm the previous full D-flat major cadence, as they continue whispering in amazed diminution “three and sixty, three and sixty, three and sixty, three and sixty.”

It should be noted that, besides the Autograph, there exits a copy of the whole
sonata, the so-called Uberprüfte Abschrift written in a different hand, but with copious annotations in the composer’s own handwriting. Beethoven’s main concern in this “Abschrift” is with tempo, articulation, dynamics, fingerings, expressive and pedal markings, with no apparent attention being given to the text itself, which — although not without flaws (inaccurate slurring, missing slurs and pedal endings and at least one textual oversight in measure 193 of the final movement) — is a model of clarity and accuracy. In this very legible copy “my” measure 92 is omitted. Again we may wonder: Did the editor of the first edition and the copyist of the “Abschrift” miss this particular measure and did the composer fail to notice it? Or was it Beethoven’s intention to leave that measure out and, in doing so, leave us (if I may be allowed to mix metaphors) with a hobbled horse? For Beethoven, music’s “architect” par excellence, not to have noticed this discrepancy while composing the Trio and allowing no fewer than 60 cats to disappear into thin air seems highly unlikely. In that case the question arises: Why? What was the composer’s reason for doing so and what did he mean by this? Did he have a different text in mind? No text? Regardless, the enigma of that missing measure remains and the mystery continues.

The last word on this thesis may have to await the contribution of musicologists and I am eager to hear their judgment in the matter.

Even after the repeat of the Scherzo, Beethoven is not finished yet with this remarkable cat. The Coda starts with a forceful augmentation of the Scherzo’s second theme, further reinforced by pregnant rests, “W I R  S I N D   A L L E L Ü D E R   L I C H.” Our felines then come one last time peeping around the corner in a quick recapitulation (in diminution) of the opening eight measures of the Scherzo: “Un-sa kätz häd ka-z’ln g’habt, drai und sex si, nai ni.” Incidentally, in the autograph there is a pedal marking but no (legato) slur under these 8 measures.

The Coda offers another interesting clue concerning the “off-the-beat” counterpoint in the Trio’s left hand; none other than a “hiccuppy” (inebriated, I dare say): “— wir — sind — wir — sind — lü — der … and then rushing a beat to end right side up (i.e., on the strong first beat) … lich.” Not surprisingly, the Master does not leave the smallest scrap of material unused.
Notes

1. In music, the “motif” is what constitutes the basic idea, the “Eidos,” the “Gestalt” of a composition. The four-note “victory” motif of the opening of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony is a famous example. The whole first movement is derived from that pregnant idea.


4. A wealth of information is given in George Houle’s *Meter in Music, 1600–1800: Performance, Perception, and Notation* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987). Perhaps the most lucid description can be found in Father Engramelle’s “La tonotechnie” (1775), with its minute and succinct description of the “silences of articulation.” See especially pages 110–23.


8. Cf. mm 41, 49, 57, 65, 76, and 84 (transposed in mm 57, 65, and 73). I have added Appendix A in an attempt to clarify this.

9. Note the right hand part is written in the bass clef, the left hand part in treble clef.


Appendix A

The end of the Trio with the “missing measure” in a dotted line.
Appendix B

Structural Analysis of Beethoven Opus 110 II Trio