

BEETHOVEN'S VIOLIN SONATA IN A MAJOR OP.47 'KREUTZER': FIRST MOVEMENT

PETER CROPPER gives advice on meeting the technical challenges and dramatic shifts of an exhilarating work in which the violin challenges the piano at every turn



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It was Beethoven who first inspired me to try to earn a living from playing music. I wanted to share his vision and his humanity with as many people as possible. For 40 years I strived to do this through the string quartets, and since 2005 through the piano trios, the string trios and of course the violin sonatas. I have spent so many hours trying to get inside his mind, to understand each sforzando, each subito piano, even his motivation for writing every piece. Of all the ten violin sonatas, the 'Kreutzer' Sonata is the one in which solving mechanical problems (of which there are plenty) most helps to convey the spirit of the music.

Peter Cropper led the Lindsay Quartet for over 40 years and now teaches an MA in Music Performance at Sheffield University. He performs the complete Beethoven piano trios and violin sonatas in February and March at Kings Place, London

[1] First movement, bars 1–4

Adagio sostenuto



[2] First movement, bars 1–4: four different variations with annotations by the author



INTRODUCTION

In the manuscript of the 'Kreutzer' Sonata, Beethoven marked the work: 'scritto in uno stilo molto concertante quasi come d'un concerto'. There can be no clearer indication that he was once again bursting out of the conventional dimensions of traditional forms, as he had done with the 'Eroica' Symphony, the first 'Rasumovsky' quartet and the 'Hammerklavier' Piano Sonata. This is no longer a piano sonata with violin obbligato, as Mozart had described his violin sonatas: after all, there is no piano for the first four bars.

At the very beginning we have Adagio sostenuto, the key signature of A major, *f* with a hairpin to *p* and one slur (example 1). Why A major?

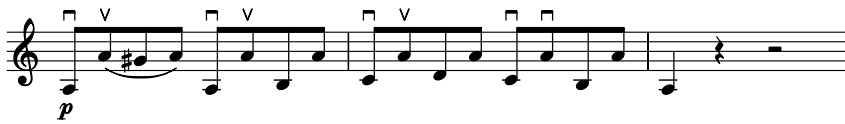
It is the fullest sounding key for the violin. Try transposing the first four bars into A flat major or B flat major and you will hear what I mean. The first two bars nevertheless cause a huge problem for fingering and bowing. Can we achieve what Beethoven wrote or do we have to compromise? Well, first we have to determine the function of this opening phrase. Surely it is a challenge to the pianist: 'Hey, want to play with me? How's this for an idea?' It's not unlike the opening of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto, when the piano invites the orchestra to come out to play. The sostenuto marking means that we have to sing and play as legato as possible. If this is going to be in a concerto style then I'm sure that we have to take two

[3] First movement, bars 18–27

Presto



[4] First movement, bars 45–47, with annotations by the author



[5] First movement, bars 91–98



bows in the first bar, as the first note has to be an explosion to attract everyone's attention (especially the pianist's). **Example 2** shows four playing possibilities from the easiest to the most difficult. I would choose the last because I think changing bow on the last crotchet (♩) avoids the problem of the third choice when the B always sounds after the D, being in the same bow. It is also wonderful when the first chord melts into the second.

The piano, louder and bigger than the violin, of course, and with six-part chords, soon squashes the opening idea with a different take on the tune, using the flattened submediant (which will become so important in the path towards D minor). But after being compliant in bars 8 and 9, the violin soon bounces back (bars 10–12) and, with a devious subito piano after the sforzando C, invites the piano to a small game of catch me if you can. First, we have C sharp to B natural in bar 14, then the negative C natural to B flat in bar 15. We then need new energy going forward until we run out of steam in bar 18. The piano can never quite keep up, always having another couple of notes to play.

PRESTO

Unlike composers before him, Beethoven doesn't end his introduction on the dominant, nor does he start the presto in the tonic. This is important to understand, as the *sfp* in bar 19 (**example 3**) acts like a catapult to create an incredible energy. Again, the violin is setting up a challenge to the piano, aiming this time for A minor but accelerating so fast that it skids into its relative major, C, and Beethoven gives the player the glorious open E string. Now the pianist cannot resist this challenge and outdoes the violin by repeating the phrase but adding a cadenza running up and down the white notes with a grand gesture of arpeggios. Here I should add that this sonata should really be called the 'Bridgetower' after its first dedicatee, the violinist George Bridgetower. The original dedication was 'Sonata mulattica composta per il mulatto Brischdauer, gran pazzo e compositore mulattico'. The story goes that while they were playing through the sonata, in the repeat Bridgetower added his own flowery cadenza in bar 27 and Beethoven nearly fell off his stool laughing and then clapped him on the back. They gave the first performance on 24 May 1803 but fell out soon after, hence the new dedication to violinist Rodolphe Kreutzer.

(Incidentally, the last movement was originally written for the Violin Sonata op.30 no.1, but Beethoven borrowed it for Bridgetower's sonata because he was in such a hurry to finish the work while the violinist was still in Vienna.)

But back to bar 19. The F must sound like a gunshot (its function is like that of a starting pistol), and to do this you have to try to make the wood of the bow touch the hair a fraction before playing the note. To achieve this, the bow almost stops and then springs forwards. This has to be on an up bow, as the crotchets, for me, must be spiccato near the heel as they need to be very exciting. I have heard performances with them at the point and they just sound, well, constipated. When we finally reach A minor (bar 45) one must have incredible bow technique to bring out the bottom line – the wood needs to touch the hair before each of the bottom notes, which is something you can practise, very slowly, in the Second Rode Caprice. If you want to sound like the piano I would also slur the group, as in **example 4**. The *p* marking is a character (furtive) but as you will realise by now, this movement is a sort of competition between the two instruments: I would not play less than a strong *mf*, but slightly sotto voce.

The secret of the sforzandos from bar 61 is to play the chords from on the string, again with the wood touching the hair just before you play. Then in bar 81, if you delay each sforzando by the amount of time it takes to again get the wood touching the hair, it gives a marvellous ping to the note. I think all sforzandos will always be minutely late to get the emphasis the composer intends. The same method applies to the passages starting in bars 128 and 132.

SECOND AND THIRD SUBJECTS

As the first battle between violin and piano ends, we melt into the glorious second subject (bar 91, **example 5**). Although this looks easy, I've found that achieving the right sonority has been an eternal problem, especially when playing with a modern piano. The writing for the piano is so rich that we feel like floating the bow as much as possible, but that means taking a new bow every two bars, which doesn't fit in with Beethoven's phrasing of eight bars. Just before the performance and in practice, I play the eight-bar phrase in one bow so that when I do four bars per bow, it feels like ▶

[6] First movement, bars 155–160

[7] Bars 273–278, with annotations by the author

[8] Bars 281–286, with annotations by the author

[9] Bars 337–348

[10] Bars 559–560

[11] Bars 582–585, with annotations by the author

it's floating and gives me a sense of release. Two bars per bow really does sound too broken up.

The third subject at bar 144, with the violin taking over at bar 156 (example 6), is the same technically as bar 19 but with a massive delay on bar 160. From bar 182 to bar 189, ask your pianist to play as short as possible, as even the greatest player with a wonderful violin can't really compete with eight-part chords.

DEVELOPMENT, RECAPITULATION AND CONCLUSION

In the development section (from bar 194) I suggest taking the tempo back a couple of metronome marks, as this will help to emphasise the struggle between the two instruments coming up from bars 210 to 258. My ideal tempo for the presto is around $\text{♩} = 152\text{--}160$, with this section dropping to around $\text{♩} = 138$. This highlights the glorious change to pastoral F major from the intense E minor of the third subject in bar 144. It also stops the next part sounding rather glib instead of like the boxing match between the instruments that it really is.

At bars 274 and 282 I think it is worth playing across the string, so I suggest the fingerings in example 7 and example 8. In bars 314 to 317 it is essential to start each bar from on the string, otherwise you

will always be late. To achieve the pp in bar 337 (example 9) you really need to play over the fingerboard as it gives a wonderful springboard towards the recapitulation in bar 344. From bar 559 (example 10) I suggest you give a slight portato on each C to give the music a frenzy that gradually subsides into the Adagio. I usually hate using harmonics but bar 577 cries out for one. The tripled third in the chord gives the feeling of a goldfish opening its mouth on the reiterated pp.

I can't make the fingering 3–2–1–4–4–3–2–1 work in bar 584 so I do 3–2–1–1–0–3–2–1 (example 11), but I only pretend to play forte, leaving myself room to get gradually louder in the next few bars. If this isn't the most exciting movement and you finish without feeling you have done the most intense workout ever, then you have missed the point of the vision, drama and sheer exhilaration of this monumental music. ■

>> ONLINE EXTRAS

Download the rest of Peter Cropper's Masterclass, covering the second and third movements of Beethoven's 'Kreutzer' Sonata, at www.thestrads.com