Beethoven, The Five Cello Sonatas

The five cello sonatas by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) span and represent his three master periods. The two sonatas of Op. 5 come from his early Viennese years; the great A Major Sonata (Op. 69) is the single representative of his incredible middle period; and the two Op. 102 sonatas epitomize his late works. As in the symphonies and string quartets, Beethoven’s cello sonatas, as a whole, reflect his spiritual development and chief musical innovations.

Sonata No. 1 in F Major, Op. 5, No. 1, and No. 2 in G Minor, Op. 5, No. 2

Like Mozart before him, Beethoven traveled to Berlin and made a deep impression on King Frederick William II of Prussia, himself an amateur cellist. In his employ, the king had the virtuoso cellist, Jean-Louis Duport, for whom Beethoven wrote the Opus 5 sonatas. Beethoven and Duport performed them at court, among Beethoven’s recital appearances there in 1796, and the composer dedicated the two sonatas to the king. In return, the monarch rewarded him with a gold snuff box filled with Louis d’ors.

Beethoven’s first cello sonata made history, because for the first time the keyboard and cello are equal partners, presenting and working out the musical ideas side by side. The opening of the first movement’s Adagio gives us a hint of the advanced thinking that went into this work. Then, cello and piano take turns at the forefront, frequently coming together in a concerted manner. This is the paradigm for the Allegro section as well. Although this is cast in a classic sonata form, the music’s energy, high emotion, and striking contrasts forecast a later, consummate Beethoven. (Also, the short Adagio near the end could be considered a forecast of the Fifth Symphony’s finale.)

The jolly, tripping main theme of the second (and final) movement might remind one of Haydn, who was such an important influence on Beethoven at this time. The music’s effervescence, however, is “unbuttoned” Beethoven and beyond the conservative demeanor of
the elder master. Also beyond Haydn are Beethoven’s rhythmic shifts. In this movement (as, too a degree, in the first) the two instruments often seem in contention for the spotlight. Similar to the first movement, the music near the end of the second slows and quiets, only to burst out in a dynamic, climactic final statement.

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Although the G Minor Sonata is in only two movements, the first movement’s lengthy opening Adagio is almost a movement unto itself. In the graceful main Allegro, the first theme (in the minor mode) is chiefly a conversation between cello and piano with a feeling resembling laughter through tears. The second theme (in major) carries an air of suppressed joy. These muted emotions disappear in the development, which is bursting with energy. The recapitulation continues this high emotional pitch and ends with an extensive coda — Beethoven’s first to become a “post-development” section.

In the spry Rondo finale, the cello fairly bubbles along. Beethoven provides close interplay between the instruments, often in canon. Although this music gives a more challenging part to the cello than most chamber music of the time, Beethoven writes many brilliant passages for the piano, never letting the king forget what a fine pianist he was.

**Sonata No. 3 in A Major, Op. 69**

It was ten years before Beethoven again turned his attention to the cello-sonata medium. This time the dedicatee was Ignaz von Gleichenstein, a cellist friend. Beethoven wrote the sonata while laboring over the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, and in 1808, he turned the sonata over to his publisher with those two famous works.

The sonata opens unusually with the first theme presented in the unaccompanied cello, then answered by the piano. Suddenly, the transition theme in the minor, derived from the first theme, carries us to joyous second and concluding themes. The rugged development ends in a canonic prediction of the first theme, which follows immediately. The recapitulation becomes expansive, with a late reminiscence of the first theme becoming the movement’s pensive coda.
The middle movement is a classic Beethoven quick Scherzo in the minor mode, complete with offset rhythms and perpetual motion. The Trio section (which appears twice) turns to the major, adding sparkle to an already buoyant musical essay. Beethoven places an unusual *pizzicato* effect in the coda.

The third movement’s *Adagio* is so strong thematically as to give the impression that it will be a complete movement. However, the *Allegro vivace* soon intrudes with extraordinary motion and energy. This is a sonata form with a new theme in the development that takes us back to the first material with magical freshness. It is no wonder that some consider the A Major Cello Sonata to be one of Beethoven’s greatest masterworks in any medium.

**Sonata No. 4 in C Major, Op. 102, No. 1, and No. 5 in D Major, Op. 102, No. 2**

Composed in the summer of 1815, the two cello sonatas of Op. 102 were the only major works Beethoven produced that year. These were among the first works of his final period, often called the period of “reflection.” The master has now put aside the heroic style that informs so much of his middle-period music. For the rest of his life he will be concerned with music on an exalted spiritual plane, unconcerned with the accepted limitations of form or playing technique. Writer Melvin Berger remarks,

> In his single-minded quest for pure musical expression, he disregarded all that was trivial or superficial. Curiously enough, scholars note that even Beethoven’s handwriting changed as he came into this new phase! Beethoven subtitled the C Major Sonata “Free Sonata” because it is in two movements instead of the usual three, and each movement begins with a slow section followed by an *Allegro*. The first movement’s *Andante* is a sublime cantilena for the cello. The following *Allegro vivace* is a study in dramatic contrasts sometimes set apart by a pause, as in the separation between first and second themes. In the brief development, Beethoven explores contrapuntal treatment between instruments and some quasi-orchestral tremolos in the piano. A concise recapitulation rounds out the movement.
In the second movement’s opening Adagio, a cello-piano dialogue of filigreed lines leads to a freely introspective mood, then to pure lyricism in a Tempo d’Andante. Beethoven carries this lyrical spirit briefly into the Allegro vivace, only to “rev” it up to an energetic pitch. Between major sections featuring bustling themes, Beethoven again inserts effective dramatic pauses. Brief reminiscences of the Andante return at times, the last coming at the movement’s end just before the sonata’s final flourish.

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The D Major Sonata shows a new classical concision Beethoven was exploring as he now looked toward what would be his final compositional period. The explosive first movement paves the way with its three definitive themes. The first, with its wide leaping melody, dominates the movement, however. Other significant features include the brief but perfectly worked out development section and the mysterious rumbling final coda, which then crashes into its ending.

The Adagio con molto sentimento d’afetto is possibly the quintessential Beethoven Adagio: moving, personal, spiritual, an almost religious expression. The main theme, like many other of Beethoven’s slow-movement themes, is regular and hymn-like. Exploring this theme, both cello and piano take personal roles, decorating it here and there with arabesques and quasi-improvisatory melodic turns. The movement outer sections of the movement are in minor mode enclosing a central major section. Beethoven leaves the ending inconclusive, instructing the performers to “attack” the final Allegro without pause.

Now the energy of the first movement returns, but in a new way: a fugue (or fugato). Its spirited theme becomes the subject of animated exchanges between cello and piano throughout most of the movement. Then, unexpectedly, Beethoven introduces a new theme. In long notes, this is none other than a majorized version of Handel’s “And with His stripes” from the Messiah, a tune that had already been adapted fugally by Bach and Mozart. Combined with the first theme, it becomes the springboard for a new, freer development and an ending full of “fancy.” About this, Beethoven declared, “To make a fugue requires no particular skill. . . . But the fancy wishes
also to assert its privileges, and today a new and really poetical element must be introduced into the traditional form.”

**Beethoven, Variations on a Theme from Handel’s *Judas Maccabaeus***

Beethoven’s fruitful journey to Berlin involving King Frederick William II of Prussia, himself an amateur cellist, was eventful. the composer participated in the premieres of his first two cello sonatas, Op. 5 in 1796, and that year he also composed — perhaps as a companion piece — the Variations on a Theme from Handel’s *Judas Maccabaeus*.

The aria, “See, the Conquering Hero Comes,” from Handel’s oratorio was a favorite of the time. Beethoven’s choice of it stemmed mostly from his own reverence for Handel. However, possibly it was also suggested by Baron van Swieten, the Viennese Handel enthusiast who had commissioned Mozart’s orchestration of *Messiah* and had provided the text to Haydn’s Handel-inspired *Creation*.

On Handel’s march-like theme, Beethoven composes 12 variations. Most of them are of the Classical “figural” type. That is, each follows the harmonic pattern of the theme closely, while employing a new musical motive extensively throughout the texture. In Beethoven’s hands, however, this technique can be very imaginative. In variation 5, for example, the composer writes a dialogue between the instruments. In some variations, an entirely new melody emerges, usually in the cello. Beethoven’s one variation in a minor key (no. 8) is of the fiery “Trout Quintet” type rather than the more usual poignant *Adagio* variety. The obligatory *Adagio* variation (no. 11) is in the major mode, but Beethoven makes it into melancholy musical poetry. The dance-like final variation finishes off the set in a delightfully puckish spirit.
Beethoven, 12 Variations on “Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen”
(from Mozart’s Magic Flute), Op. 66

During the two years after completing the pair of cello sonatas of Op. 5 (1796), Beethoven’s interest in cello-piano composition continued with sets of variations. First came the Variations on a Theme from Handel’s Judas Maccabaeus in 1796. The following year, he composed the 12 Variations on “Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen.” He had chosen a very popular aria of Papageno’s from The Magic Flute. In shaping a concise theme, Beethoven limited himself to the first few phrases, pointing up the folk-like flavor of Mozart’s original. Also, he simplified the rhythm in the second half of the theme to save such variants for his own music.

In the theme, the piano takes the melodic lead while the cello harmonizes. Then, unexpectedly, the cello is entirely silent during the first, agile variation. Variation 2 brings back the cello playing the tune. In some ways, the chromatic shadings of harmony in the piano part make this the most interesting variation of all. Variations 3 to 9 alternate featuring the piano, with the cello taking an equal part.

Variations 10 and 11 are both in the minor mode. The first half of the Variation 10 Adagio is an ornamental piano solo, but the cello takes the spotlight for the second half. Variation 11 is a little faster, with undulating triplet chords in the piano and the cello providing a bass line. The final major-mode Allegro variation follows without a pause. This quasi-Scherzo becomes gradually more energetic, and in its substantial coda syncopated repeated notes in the cello become the foil to an active, heavy piano part. Cascading lines bring the work to a close in an unexpected, last-moment pianissimo.
Beethoven, Seven Variations on "Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen"

(from Mozart's Magic Flute), WoO 46

It is a great tragedy that widespread popular acceptance and enthusiasm for Mozart’s music had to wait until after his death. However, he managed to enjoy a taste of it in the last few months of his life, as The Magic Flute, produced at the end of September 1791, became a hit in Vienna. He died in early December of that year. Various productions followed, and Beethoven, by then a fulltime resident of Mozart’s city, took advantage of the Magic Flute “brand.” In 1798, he composed the 12 Variations on “Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen,” a folksy song, and about 1801, he followed up with Seven Variations on “Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen,” a popular duet from the opera.

In his presentation of the theme, Beethoven exposes the main tactic of the movement: close dialogue between the cello and piano. Following a simple figuration of the melody in Var. 1, the second variation proceeds more rhapsodically with runs in the piano part. The prim rhythms of Var. 3 suggest an 18th-century minuet, while the pathetic minore Var. 4 looks forward to the more emotional 19th century. With the bright return to the major mode in Var. 5, Beethoven gives us a scherzo containing playful interchanges between the instruments. The highly decorated Var. 6 resembles an Italian operatic aria with a melody entirely remote from Mozart’s theme. Yet Beethoven returns to that theme in Var. 7, transforming it through faster triple rhythms that generate a lilting finale.