

Interpreting Music Semiotics: A Performance Study of Beethoven's 'Waldstein' Sonata Op.53

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Abstract

In the past two decades, the field of semiotics has increasingly been applied to musicology and piano performance, with particular attention paid to the area of narrative theory. The purpose of this performance study is to study the music semiotics in Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata. While many studies of Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata, for instance, those of Heinrich Schenker, Donald Francis Tovey, Jürgen Uhde, Charles Rosen, and many others concentrate specifically on analytical aspects such as form and harmony, this study will provide an introduction to the essential concepts of music semiotics and narrative theory, the development of a methodology of music semiotics analysis in Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata. Specifically, this study discusses the direct or indirect implications of certain musical motives (ascending thirds vs. descending thirds, C Major key vs C Minor key, repeated notes, pastoral style, continuous dotted rhythm, polyphonic texture, and slow harmonic motion) Beethoven had provided in his *Waldstein* sonata. It is hoped that this performance study will be of value in future interpretive efforts in the performance of Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata from the perspective of musical narrativity generally.

Keywords: Music Semiotics, Beethoven's *Waldstein* Sonata, Musical Narrativity, Musical Motives, Piano Performance

Introduction

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), as the predominant figure in the transitional period between the Classical and Romantic eras, is important in the development of Western music. Musicians have a sense of awe over the magnitude of Beethoven's creativity. Beethoven composed works in all the main genres of classical music including symphonies, concertos, sonatas, variations, cantatas, overtures, operas and string quartets and his compositions consist of 722 works. Some essential compositions are *Fidelio*, *Moonlight* sonata, *Pathétique* sonata, *Appassionata* sonata, *Emperor* piano concerto, *Eroica* symphony and *Choral* symphony.

Beethoven's legacy in piano literature includes his 32 piano sonatas, 5 piano concertos, and numerous solo piano works. The *Waldstein* sonata, composed during 1803/4, was dedicated to his patronage Count Ferdinand Ernst von Waldstein. The *Waldstein* sonata marks the point at which Beethoven's style grew finally incompatible with that of his "first period." In the *Waldstein* sonata, Beethoven crossed the Rubicon and entered his "heroic period" in which Beethoven shifted his style from homage to Haydn and Mozart to expression of his individualism.

Music Semiotics Theory

Semiotics, derived from the Greek *semesion*, means sign, In Greek, *semainon* means signifier and *semainomenon* means signified or indication. Generally, semiotics is the study of signs and sign-using behaviors (Saussure, 1916). The development of semiotic theory has its origins in the foundational work in the field of semiology by two leading scholars: Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913) and Charles Sanders Peirce (1839-1914). Ferdinand de Saussure is the founding figure of modern linguistics. His theory consists of two elements: the "signifier" and the "signified" (Lagopoulos & Boklund-Lagopoulos, 2020). Charles Sanders Peirce is an American philosopher, mathematician, logician and scientist. His theory is a three-dimensional system that consists of three elements: the 'sign', the 'object', and the 'interpretant' (Liszka, 1990). Many pioneers, researchers, practitioners and authors study the course of the semiotic. Among them, major semioticians are Kofi Agawu (1856-), Roland Barthes (1915-1980), Umberto Eco (1932-2016), Algirdas Julien Greimas (1917-1992), David Lidov (1941-), Leonard B. Meyer (1918-2007), Jean-Jacques Nattiez (1945-), Charles Sanders Peirce, Leonard Rather (1916-2011), Ferdinand de Saussure, Michael J. Shapiro (1940-), and Eero Tarasti (1948-).

Influenced and inspired by linguistic semiotics in the last century, music scholars began to apply semiotic theory to analyzing music. Throughout the centuries, there have been excellent individual musical analyses of certain Beethoven piano sonata, for instance, Douglass Seaton's narratological analysis of Beethoven's 'Tempest' sonata; Gregory Karl's narratological analysis of the first movement of Beethoven's 'Appassionata' sonata; and Márta Grabócz's semantic analysis of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op.2.3. However, music semiotics in Beethoven's piano sonatas has rarely been studied directly. Moreover, there has been relative lack of attempts to analyze Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata from the perspective of music semiotics. Therefore, the lack of analyses of music semiotics in Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata inspires the author to study the direct and implied meaning of musical motives in this sonata and discuss how the performer might utilize the analysis of music semiotics in and through the performance.

There are numerous music semiotics in Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata. Some music semiotics that Beethoven gave direct definition, for instance: ascending and descending thirds, C Major and C Minor keys, pastoral style, and repeated notes. Also, there are implied meanings of some music semiotics that need to be understood through cultural convention and Western history, for instance: continuous dotted rhythm, slow harmonic progression, and polyphonic texture.

In Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata, the music semiotics in the first movement includes C Major key and C Minor key, ascending and descending thirds, repeated-note motive, and slow harmonic progression. The music semiotics in the second movement includes the continuous dotted rhythm and repeated-note motive. The music semiotics in the third movement

includes ascending and descending thirds, repeated-note motive, polyphonic texture (cannon), and pastoral style.

Repeated-note motive

Beethoven used repeated notes to express his against fate and destiny. One of the most famous musical examples of repeated-note motive is the beginning of Beethoven's Symphony No.5 in C minor "Fate", Op.67. In this symphony, a series of repeated notes is characterized as "fate knocking on the door" (Rosen, 1973). In his *Waldstein* sonata, the music semiotics of repeated-note motive appears in every movement (see Excerpt 1, Excerpt 2, and Excerpt 3).

The music semiotics of repeated-note motive in the first movement of the *Waldstein* sonata

370

SONATE
Dem Grafen von Waldstein gewidmet

L. van Beethoven, Op.53

Allegro con brio

21

Excerpt 1. Music semiotics of repeated-note motive in the first movement of the *Waldstein* sonata

The music semiotics of repeated-note motive in the second movement of the *Waldstein* sonata

384 Introduzione
Adagio molto

Excerpt 2. Music semiotics of repeated-note motive in the second movement of the *Waldstein* sonata

The music semiotics of repeated-note motive in the third movement of the *Waldstein* sonata

Rondo
Allegretto moderato

Attacca subito il sonno:

Excerpt 3. Music semiotics of repeated-note motive in the third movement of the *Waldstein* sonata

Ascending thirds & descending thirds

Many of Beethoven's vocal compositions influenced his orchestral and solo compositions and musical motives used in his art songs sometimes can refer to his compositions in another genre (Rosen, 1973). The meaning of ascending and descending thirds in Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata can refer to his art songs: *Sehnsucht* WoO 146 and *Resignation* WoO 149. Beethoven defined ascending thirds as desire, whereas descending thirds as resignation (see Excerpt 4 and Excerpt 5).

The meaning of ascending thirds & descending thirds in Beethoven's *Sehnsucht* WoO 146 & *Resignation* WoO 149

The image shows two pages of musical notation. The left page is titled 'Sehnsucht' and includes the instruction 'Mit Empfindung, aber nicht zu langsam'. The right page is titled 'Resignation' and includes the instruction 'In gehender Bewegung'. Both pages contain vocal lines with German lyrics and piano accompaniment.

Excerpt 4. The meaning of ascending thirds in Beethoven's *Sehnsucht* WoO 146

Excerpt 5. The meaning of descending thirds in Beethoven's *Resignation* WoO 149

At the beginning of the *Waldstein* sonata, Beethoven used the music semiotics of ascending thirds & descending thirds to express desire and compromise (see Excerpt 6).

The music semiotics of ascending thirds & descending thirds in the first movement of the *Waldstein* sonata

The image shows the beginning of the first movement of the *Waldstein* sonata, marked 'Allegro con brio (M.M. J. circa 176)'. Red boxes highlight specific intervals: an ascending third in the first measure and a descending third in the second measure. The score includes piano and forte dynamics and a tempo marking of 'J. = 100'.

Excerpt 6. Music semiotics of ascending thirds & descending thirds at the beginning of the *Waldstein* sonata

C Major & C Minor keys

Beethoven composed Bagatelle in C Major *Lustig-Traurig* WoO 54 for piano in 1802. In this composition, he gave specific definitions of C Major and C Minor keys by defining C Major as *Lustig* (Happy) and C Minor as *Traurig* (Sad) (see Excerpt 7).

The meaning of C Major & C Minor keys in Beethoven's *Lustig-Traurig* WoO 54

Happy-Sad
(Bagatelle)
in C minor
WoO 54

923

Excerpt 7. The meaning of the C Major & C Minor keys in Beethoven's *Lustig-Traurig* WoO 54

Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata was composed around the time when Beethoven finished his Bagatelle *Lustig-Traurig* and interestingly in Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata, there is an alternation between C Major and C Minor keys at the beginning of this sonata (see Excerpt 8).

The music semiotics of C Major & C Minor keys at the beginning of the *Waldstein* sonata

Op. 53

Excerpt 8. Music semiotics of the C Major & C Minor keys at the beginning of the *Waldstein* sonata

Continuous dotted rhythm

The music semiotics of the continuous dotted rhythm is inherited from the Baroque period. Continuous dotted rhythm expresses the French overture style which is a kind of music used to welcome the presence of royal nobles in the ceremony or the ritual. The second movement of the *Waldstein* sonata begins with an upward motive in a continuous dotted rhythm (Greenberg, 2015) (see Excerpt 9). Music intends to express a sense of ritual and solemnity through the continuous dotted rhythm.

The music semiotics of the continuous dotted rhythm in the second movement of the *Waldstein* sonata

INTRODUZIONE.
Adagio molto.

Excerpt 9. Music semiotics of the continuous dotted rhythm in the second movement of the *Waldstein* sonata

Slow harmonic progression

The music semiotics of the slow harmonic progression texture generally represents the hymn choral style of German religious music. In performance, pianists need to feel a peaceful and pious state when performing a musical motive of slow harmonic progression. Music semiotics of slow harmonic progression appears in the first movement of the *Waldstein* sonata (see Excerpt 10).

The music semiotics of the slow harmonic progression in the first movement of the *Waldstein* sonata



Excerpt 10. Music semiotics of the slow harmonic progression in the first movement of the *Waldstein* sonata

Polyphonic texture (canon)

Different from homophonic style of his early period, Beethoven shifted his style to composing polyphonic music, especially in his middle and late periods. In his piano sonatas, Beethoven usually implemented two kinds of polyphonic texture: fugue and canon. Beethoven used these polyphonic techniques to reflect the leaned style which included not only the imitative counterpoint characteristic of the fugue and the species counterpoint associated with the canon but also a range of other styles such as strict style and church style transmitted through many decades and even centuries (Keith, 2014). For instance, in the third movement of his *Waldstein* sonata, Beethoven used the compositional technique of canon to express the majesty and authoritative style of the movement and highlight the noble status of Count Ferdinand Ernst von Waldstein (1762-1823) (see Excerpt11).

The music semiotics of the canon in the third movement of the *Waldstein* sonata

This image shows a musical score excerpt for the canon in the third movement of the Waldstein sonata. It consists of seven systems of staves, each with a treble and bass clef staff. The music is in a 3/4 time signature and features a complex polyphonic texture. The canon is characterized by imitative counterpoint, where the same melodic motif is repeated in different voices. The score is written in a key signature of three sharps (F#, C#, G#). The music is marked with a 'p' (piano) dynamic and includes various rhythmic patterns and articulations.

Excerpt 11. Music semiotics of the canon in the third movement of the *Waldstein* sonata

Pastoral Style

Beethoven was known for his pastoral style. He had composed Symphony No.6 in F major, Op. 68 “Pastoral” and piano sonata No. 15 in D major, Op.28 “Pastoral”. The characteristics of the pastoral style include major key, repeated bass line, slow harmonic progression, sustained pedal, and pianissimo dynamic (Rosen, 1973).

The third movement of the *Waldstein* sonata indicates the music semiotics of the pastoral style. As a pupil of Beethoven, Carl Czerny emphasized the use of the impressionistic pedaling method in the third movement of Beethoven's “*Waldstein*” by stating that “this *rondo* has a pastoral style that relies entirely on the use of the sustained pedal” (Huizing, 2012, p.171). Harmonies intermingle to be found at the *pianissimo* beginning of the last movement of the “*Waldstein*” sonata, where the tonic and dominant need to be sustained through here to achieve an intangible and mysterious (see Excerpt 12).

The music semiotics of the pastoral style in the third movement of the *Waldstein* sonata



Excerpt 12. Music semiotics of the pastoral style in the third movement of the *Waldstein* sonata

Different from the music of Haydn and Mozart, Beethoven's music impressed listeners since his music universally expresses personal feelings and emotions and Beethoven regarded music as a way to suggest universal emotions and concepts. Although the function of communication is attributed to music and acknowledged in cultures around the world, it is nonetheless difficult to express exact meanings or emotions apart from generalizations that are often described in broad terms such as “happy” or “sad”, “serious” or “light” in music. Beethoven's genius was such that he was able to create musical ideas that express universal human emotions and concepts, from the heroic and victorious to the desolate and tragic, from the extroversion of gruff good-natured humor to the introversion of deep inner contemplation (Tovey, 1931, p.51). There are three levels of the meaning of pastoral style in Beethoven's music. The first level is to bring the listeners back to nature by mimicking the singing echoing in the valley and creating the echoing effect, which explains why Beethoven used a sustained pedal for a long time without changing it. The second level is to arouse and elicit the peaceful and calm state of humans through the return to nature. The third level is to regard nature as the main source of music composition and the essential source of inspiration since Beethoven was influenced by pantheism which is a belief that nature is God. Therefore, the pastoral style is a way for Beethoven to express the state of sublimation and peace in the third level of its meaning (Geck, 1976).

Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata was composed during 1803/04. It was the time when Beethoven retained his will from his deaf in Heiligenstadt. In May 1802, on the advice of

Johann Adam Schmidt, Beethoven went to Heiligenstadt to rest. Depressed and unable to hide his increasing infirmity, Beethoven wrote, on October 6th, 1802 a document "The Heiligenstadt Testament" to express his feeling about the miserable life:

O ye men who think or say that I am malevolent, stubborn or misanthropic, how greatly do ye wrong me, you do not know the secret causes of my seeming, from childhood my heart and mind were disposed to the gentle feelings of good will, I was even ever eager to accomplish great deeds, but reflect now that for six years I have been a hopeless case, aggravated by senseless physicians, cheated year after year in the hope of improvement, finally compelled to face the prospect of a lasting malady (whose cure will take years or, perhaps, be impossible), ... what a humiliation when one stood beside me and heard a flute in the distance and I heard nothing, or someone heard the shepherd singing and again I heard nothing, such incidents brought me to the verge of despair, but little more and I would have put an end to my life - only art it was that withheld me, ah it seemed impossible to leave the world until I had produced all that I felt called upon me to produce. and so I endured this wretched existence - truly wretched, an excitable body which a sudden change can throw from the best into the worst state - Patience - it is said that I must now choose for my guide, I have done so, I hope my determination will remain firm to endure until it please the inexorable parcae to braid the thread, perhaps I shall get better, perhaps not, I am prepared. (Geck, 1976, p.116-17)

It was obvious that Beethoven felt that fate was unfair to him but he would not surrender through reading "The Heiligenstadt Testament". Actually, when Beethoven wrote these sentences in the famous "The Heiligenstadt Testament", Beethoven had overcome the greatest spiritual crisis in his life and decided to live and endure.

After going through this tragedy in life, Beethoven created the style of heroic and pastoral in his music in around 1803 and it was the time when he composed the *Waldstein* sonata.

Beethoven began working on his *Waldstein* sonata sometime around December of 1803 or January of 1804. Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata was composed during the beginning of his "heroic period". It is generally believed that Beethoven's life has two major periods: one is before 1800 and another one is shortly after 1800. Wilfrid Dunwell stated that "Beethoven in his turn brought a new freedom, not by discarding an artistic convention, but by bringing within its scope a new range of human experiences" (Dunwell, 1972, p.297-98) and Czerny stated that just months before writing the Heiligenstadt Testament, Beethoven remarked to his friend Wenzel Krumpholz, "I am far from satisfied with my past works: from today on I shall take a new way." (Downs, 1970, p.585). Beethoven embarked on a creative route which he called "the new way" after 1800. Dunwell's statement suggests that Beethoven himself recognized a departure from his early style. From then on, he made innovations to his musical compositions from the perspective of musical structure and musical content. Piano sonatas in Beethoven's middle period became independent works of narrative art and they make the contribution to the evolution and innovation of the classical piano sonatas. Since musical compositions of Beethoven's middle period show the influence of the heroic narrative on his compositional planning, and thus and music scholars call this creative period the "heroic period" (Rosen, 1973).

One of the musical characteristics of Beethoven's "heroic period" is his pastoral style. In Beethoven's portraits in 1804, the contents of the picture indicate Beethoven's preference for nature. It is a portrait painted by German painter Joseph Willibrord Mähler. In this portrait,

Beethoven raised his right hand and held the lyre, which symbolizes Apollo, in his left hand. One side of the background of the picture is a temple of Apollo (the god of literature and art), and the other side is a forest (a symbol of nature). This portrait is one of Beethoven's most favorite portraits and it includes elements of music, literature, art, and Enlightenment philosophies (see Image 1).

The portrait of Beethoven in 1804



Image 1. The portrait of Beethoven in 1804

The current study analyzes and summarizes music semiotics in the *Waldstein* sonata.

Summary of music semiotics in the *Waldstein* sonata

Music Semiotics	Measures
Ascending thirds vs. Descending thirds	<p>First movement:</p> <p>Ascending thirds: mm.1-3 right hand; mm.14-6 right hand; mm.18-20 left hand; mm.35-6 right hand; m.38 right hand; mm.39-40 right hand; m.41 left hand; mm.90-3 right hand; m.136 right hand; m.138 right hand; mm.155-57 right hand; mm.174-75 right hand; mm.178-79 right hand; m.210 left hand; mm.249-250 right hand; mm.262-63 right hand; mm.267-274 left hand; mm.295-96 right hand</p> <p>Descending thirds: m.12 both right hand and left hand; mm.29-30 right hand; mm.35-6 both right hand and left hand; mm.39-40 both right hand and left hand; mm.43-4 left hand; m.46 left hand; mm.47-8 left hand; mm.64-5 right hand; mm.76-7 both right hand and left hand; mm.80-1 both right hand and left hand; mm.82-5 both right hand and left hand; mm.86-9 both right hand and left hand; m.167 both right hand and left hand; m.169 both right hand and left hand; mm.200-02 right hand; mm.208-09 left hand; mm.241-8 right hand; mm.284-5 right hand; mm.288-89 right hand</p>
C major vs. C minor	<p>First movement:</p> <p>C major: mm.1-13; m.12; mm.14-34; mm.74-86; mm.295-302;</p> <p>C minor: m.8</p>
Slow harmonic progression	<p>First movement:</p> <p>mm.36-41; mm.76-8; mm.81-9; mm.196-202; mm.241-49; mm.284-294</p>

	Third movement: mm.251-268
Continuous dotted rhythm	Second movement: mm.1-24
Repeated notes	First movement: mm.1-2 right hand; mm.5-6 right hand; mm.1-10 left hand; mm.14-5 right hand; mm.18-9 right hand; mm.14-22 left hand; mm.90-2 right hand; mm.90-102 left hand; mm.156-57 right hand; mm.160-61 right hand; mm.156-165 left hand; mm.174-75 right hand; mm.178-79 right hand; mm.174-183 left hand; mm.249-258 left hand; mm.259-260 right hand; mm.261-62 right hand; mm.265-66 right hand; mm.295-96 right hand; mm.295-98 left hand Second movement: mm.1-9; mm.17-28 Third movement: mm.1-23; mm.114-136; mm.209-312; mm.378-385 right hand; mm. 403-410 left hand; mm.507-528 left hand; mm.538-543 both right hand and left hand
Polyphonic texture (canon)	Third movement: mm.183-216
Pastoral style	First movement: m.248 Third movement: mm.1-54

Table 1. Summary of music semiotics in the *Waldstein* sonata

Conclusion

Existing music semiotics studies of Beethoven's piano sonatas are not many and the analysis of music semiotics has many important purposes in performance studies of Beethoven's piano sonatas. There are many implied music semiotics in Beethoven's sonatas and the music semiotics approach to analyzing Beethoven's piano sonatas will show a compelling connection between music and semiotics. Through the analysis of music semiotics, pianists may understand implied musical ideas in Beethoven's piano sonatas. In doing so, pianists will have an additional perspective upon which to base their interpretive decisions.

Pianists can discern the inspiration and the idea of the musical composition through the analysis of music semiotics. A good music semiotics analysis can point out the origin of where music retrieves from and develops and its musical plot. Some music semiotics come from Beethoven's other music genres, for instance, art songs and symphonies, and may point out the intertextuality between musical compositions and provide opportunities for future studies. One of the most fascinating aspects of the analysis of music semiotics for most pianists is that such an analysis can be perfectly integrated with practice and performance and therefore provide numerous insightful inspirations for performances.

The combination of possibilities for detailed analysis and varied interpretation is one of the great strengths of theories of music semiotics, and a feature of particular interest to performers, who may see it as a way of articulating their interpretations and deepening their understanding of works over time. Future musical scholars may study Beethoven's innovations in piano sonatas from the perspective of music semiotics or intertextuality.

Pianists and musical scholars may study the way Beethoven wrote the transition, when did he start using pianissimo, hairpin notation, crescendos and decrescendos. These are the characteristics that distinguish Beethoven from his predecessors, and if these characteristics can be found and studied in the score and applied to the performance, pianists will have a better understanding of the piano sonata they are going to practice and perform.

In conclusion, Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata is considered one of the masterworks of Beethoven's musical compositions. As one of Beethoven's most influential piano sonata, the *Waldstein* sonata marked the landmark in Beethoven's "heroic period". Nowadays, the *Waldstein* sonata has been popular among pianists all over the world. As the standard piano repertoire, this sonata is often performed by many pianists as a competition piece or jury piece. There are many existing performance studies of the *Waldstein* sonata; however, there are relative lack of studies discussing the assimilation of music semiotics into the performance of this sonata to which pianists may refer. Since piano performance is a traditional Western culture performing art, it is essential and beneficial for pianists to understand the underlying meaning of music semiotics (which directly or indirectly convey the meaning of composers) and integrate the understanding of music semiotics into performance to disclose narrative features of the studied work. It is beneficial for pianists to understand if the composer has a certain direct or indirect meaning or intent of a certain motif or phrase. Therefore the current study discusses the practical application of the music semiotics in Beethoven's *Waldstein* sonata by sharing the theoretical and practical music semiotics findings of performing this sonata. The current study may provide further analysis upon which pianists may grasp in a logical way the core of this sonata and therefore have a more thorough understanding and provide more vivid interpretations of this piano sonata.

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