

The Piano Unlocked

Welcome to the preview of The Piano Unlocked!

The following selection consists of:

- The Contents page of The Piano Unlocked
- Composer description and background for Beethoven
- First few pages of the tutorial on the Beethoven piece
- First page of the Beethoven sheet music
- First page of the composer description and background for Debussy
- One of the pages of the tutorial on the Liszt piece
- Last page of the tutorial on the Liszt piece
- First page of the Chopin sheet music



CONTENTS

| | |
|---|----|
| Preface | i |
| 1. Beethoven Sonata in G, Op. 49 no. 2, 2nd movement | 1 |
| 2. Debussy Première Arabesque | 12 |
| 3. Liszt Consolation No. 3 in D flat | 25 |
| 4. Chopin Waltz No. 6 in D flat | 42 |
| Appendix | 55 |

1. Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827)

Sonata in G, Op. 49 No. 2 – Second Movement

This is an early composition. It was written in about 1795 to 1796 when Beethoven was in his mid twenties. It was deliberately written in a reasonably easy form. But don't be deceived! Oh yes, it may be one of his easier compositions but it is a rich little gem! This is music of Beethoven's so-called "early period", well before he began composing his famous symphonies and before the onset of deafness which very gradually began to afflict him from perhaps about 1797 onwards. Musically, he was still under the influence of Mozart and Haydn but he was already breaking free. The influence of them is obvious in this piece and Beethoven had known them both. Haydn had been his teacher and Beethoven had played for Mozart in 1787. Mozart knew quality when he heard it and he commented "Keep your eyes on him. Someday he will give the world something to talk about."

Now here's the thing – Beethoven never intended to publish this Sonata. He intended it to be a teaching piece. It was only published in 1805 after either Beethoven's brother or his accountant had submitted it for publication, possibly to raise funds at a tight time and probably against the composer's wishes. So you are getting a piano lesson direct from Beethoven – a lesson you were never intended to have. But here it is and if you don't make the most of it, I might have to slam the piano lid on your fingers!

When Beethoven wrote this piece, he was young. He had already only composed the first 2 or 3 piano sonatas, a string quintet and some piano trios, not to mention various earlier compositions, and his symphonies were yet to come. This was the work of a passionate youth – passionate about music and also about women as we know from the records of one of his closest friends from that time, Franz Gerhard Wegeler. We are told that Beethoven was no slouch when it came to the ladies, despite the fact that he was short, scruffy and almost entirely without polish in his manners. As in his music, so in his life – he made his own rules. He must have had tremendous force of personality. At the time he composed this piece, Beethoven was enjoying the generous patronage of Prince Carl von Lichnowsky, a connoisseur of music and a big fan of Beethoven. The Prince took Beethoven into his house (or rather, palace) for several years and once even commanded a servant that should he and Beethoven ring at the same time, the servant should attend to Beethoven first. The Prince, incidentally, is also the person to whom the famous Sonata "Pathétique" is dedicated.

An interesting aside: Beethoven wrote a Septet (Op. 38) in 1799 for string quartet plus horn, bassoon and clarinet. The main theme of the third movement of the Septet is the main theme of this piece. Get hold of a recording and listen!

You should know that Beethoven's piano playing had "tremendous power, character, unheard-of bravura and facility". That's what Carl Czerny said. Czerny was one of Beethoven's most famous pupils and went on to teach Liszt. Anton Schindler, Beethoven's first biographer, has left detailed accounts of how Beethoven played two of his own Sonatas and it is clear that he used plenty of *ritardando* and *accelerando* and many different shades of *piano* and *forte*. He also injected his playing with character and vitality – he made it sing!

Discussion and Practice Points

What is the mood this piece? Is there more than one mood? Let's begin by observing the marking at the start: "Tempo di Menuetto" – "Minuet time". A minuet is a rather stately dance. Think of a royal court, think of a glittering, gold ballroom, think of men in powdered wigs and colourful silk coats and leggings dancing gracefully and formally with ladies in even bigger wigs and elaborate dresses with enormous skirts. This piece needs to be dance-able in a courtly way. It's no good playing it at a hundred miles per hour - slower is better.

Play through the piece once now, slowly. By the way, always (ALWAYS!!) try to make the piano sing whenever you practise. Never play mechanically or without feeling! NEVER! Or I will hunt you down!

Do you notice that the first theme is repeated several times throughout the piece? This is a rondo. That's what we call a piece where there is a main melody or theme that reappears again and again. Let's call this melody "A". Let's call other melodies in the piece "B" and "C" and so on. Using this lettering, we can say that in a rondo the basic plan of the piece is A – B – A – C – A – D – A.

There's something graceful and elegant about the question and answer nature of the initial theme in the right hand. The left hand is interesting because it can be played in two ways. You could play it in a sort of clockwork way with strict rhythm and *staccato*. There is something appealing about this. It emphasises the formal nature of the dance. The other way is to play it very gently and quietly, which would give the theme a placid, intimate nature. There are suggestions at the end of this section of recordings which you could listen to and which reflect these different approaches. It's for you to decide which way you like. You may in fact come up with another way of playing this which you prefer – that's great! For my part, I like the gentle, placid approach. It suggests to me two people dancing together in a quietly happy mood, full of love for each other. What does the piece suggest to you?

From bar 21 onwards we get a slight change of emphasis. There is a sense of flowing and of movement. It is less sedate. It's easy to see that this is caused by the appearance of a lot of semiquavers in succession and from bar 28 this really takes off with a faster, more fluent left hand accompaniment and a rhythm in the right hand which seems to be pushing the piece forwards, each little phrase giving new impetus. It is as if Beethoven could contain his ebullient spirits no longer! By the way, note how the left and right hands swap roles in bars 25 to 27 as compared to bars 21 to 23. I'd suggest not over-emphasising this more exciting section however, because then it could make the piece feel rather disjointed. Bear in mind the overall placid nature of the piece.

The real contrast comes at bar 68 where a jolly melody appears. But even here we can't erupt into free joy because the rather wooden octaves in the left hand remind us of the formality of the courtly dance. But let's have a bit of life here! It's deliberately jolly, almost as if this is the part where the king says to the dancers "Come on then! Show us your moves!"

Play through the piece again, slowly. What do the notes say to you? Try out different ways of playing it. What feels natural to you? Don't be afraid to exaggerate. Search for that way of playing a note or a phrase that makes you feel like you have hit the nail on the head.

Now let's give you a few technical tips and tricks.

Let's get the right hand melody to sing. Sing the melody in the first 20 bars out loud. I insist! It's such a lovely theme. Sing it! Notice how the volume decreases ever so slightly when you move down to the F sharp, then how it increases slightly when you sing the G minim, then increases again when you sing up to the D in bar 3, then falls again. Notice this ebb and flow throughout. Sing it again and make it beautiful and graceful.

Practice point 1: play the first 20 bars slowly trying to replicate the way you sang the melody.

A key trick to playing a melody is to make the accompaniment quieter than the tune. So here's a good lesson from Beethoven – keep the left hand *piano* in the first 20 bars and instead bring out the melody. The accompaniment is like the background in a painting, the melody is the subject of the painting.

Practice point 2: practice the first 20 bars slowly and get used to the feeling of playing one hand softer than the other. Make the melody sing again though!

Now how do we get a really nice, controlled *piano* in the left hand? A big problem can be that we simply fail to sound all the notes. This happens when we are trying desperately to play softly and we are almost afraid of the notes – we don't push the key down firmly enough and the hammer in the piano gently brushes the strings without sounding them or simply fails to make contact with the strings at all. So remember, you need to bed the keys. That means that you need to press the keys down all the way. It's not how far you press the key that determines the volume, it's how fast.

Practice point 3: practice the first 20 bars slowly, concentrating on achieving a lovely *piano* in the left hand with all keys bedded gently and all notes sounded. But make the right hand melody sing!

Good. Well done. Now, have a quick breather if necessary because you've done some good work on the key theme of the piece. When you are ready, we are going to work some more on making the melody sing.

You can use the right sustaining pedal to help you. This is not a big romantic piece with lots of crashing sonorities so if you flood this piece with pedal then you're going to get blurred sounds and too much volume. This will ruin the feeling of intimacy. You wouldn't use 300 watt spotlights at a candlelit dinner! Beware of using much pedal in this kind of Mozartian piece also because you will just get a build-up of accompaniment which will drown out the melody. All your good finger-work would be ruined - a bit like smearing water all over a delicate painting. And when you do depress the right pedal, you do not have to depress it all the way to the floor. In this piece, I recommend that you experiment with depressing the right pedal only partially and thinking carefully about which parts would be helped by some pedal and which parts perhaps do not need it. Let your ears be your guide. Pedalling is a massive subject. Some basic hints and tips are given in the Appendix to this book.

Practice point 4: practice the first 20 bars slowly, experimenting with the different sounds you get according to how far down you press the right pedal and how long you keep it down. Think of the subtle shading of painting by Botticelli rather than the bright colours of a Van Gogh. Think of the sound of gentle strings rather than bold brass. Think of whatever image helps you achieve your goal. But guess what make the melody sing!

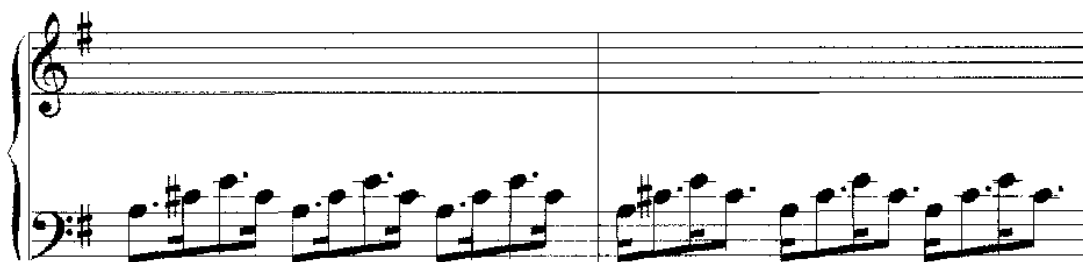
Very good! Well done! Let's move on now.

The piece is now going to modulate briefly into D major, the dominant of G major. How? Simplicity itself! We get the G major scale twice in bars 21 and 22 followed by the D major scale twice in bars 24 and 25. It is a lesson about how to create a very simple modulation. And although we seem to move into A major in bar 28, we are really still in D as bars 31 and 34 to 35 make clear. Make the scale passages light and bring out the melody in thirds. Then in bar 28 onwards, use a nice crisp *staccato* on the right hand quavers and remember to play the left hand accompaniment softer than the right hand.

Practice point 5: apply practice points 1 to 4 to bars 20 to 36. Sing these bars out loud then play them slowly, concentrating on replicating your singing and on bringing out the melody in each hand. Think about balance. Then add some pedal.

The flowing semiquaver accompaniment in bars 28 to 34 needs to be played evenly and with spirit. It is like the rippling of a stream. But beware! Don't speed up here (which is the natural temptation). Play once or twice with a metronome to help you feel the constant tempo, if you like.

Practice point 6: play the left hand part of bars 28 to 34 alone. Try playing it slowly in dotted rhythms such as:



Then play it evenly as written and note the contrast. By playing around with dotted rhythms, you train your ear to understand how the even semiquavers should sound.

Bars 36 to 47 take us back to the original theme. Notice how bars 36 and 37 are echoed in bars 39 and 40. Make 39 and 40 much softer and deliberately play bars 36 and 37 loudly to emphasise the contrast. Don't slow down in bars 43 to 47 or else the piece sounds like an engine that is running out of steam.

Sonate Opus 49 No.2 - Part 2

Ludwig van Beethoven

Tempo di Menuetto

Musical notation for measures 1-4. The piece is in 3/4 time with a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first system shows the beginning of the piece. The right hand starts with a melody of quarter notes, and the left hand provides a bass line of eighth notes. A dynamic marking of *p* (piano) is present at the start.

Musical notation for measures 5-8. Measure 5 is marked with a '5'. Fingerings are indicated above the notes in measures 6, 7, and 8: 3 2 1 2 4 3. The right hand continues its melodic line, and the left hand maintains the eighth-note accompaniment.

Musical notation for measures 9-14. Measure 9 is marked with a '10'. Fingerings are indicated above the notes in measure 9: 2 1. The right hand features a melodic phrase with a slur, and the left hand continues with eighth notes.

Musical notation for measures 15-18. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs, and the left hand continues with eighth notes. The dynamics remain consistent.

Musical notation for measures 19-22. Measure 19 is marked with a '19'. The right hand has a melodic line with slurs. The left hand has a dynamic marking of *f* (forte) at the start of measure 19, which changes to *p* (piano) in measure 20. The piece concludes with a final melodic flourish in the right hand.

2. Claude Debussy (1862 – 1918)

1^{ère} Arabesque

This is one of the first significant piano pieces that Debussy wrote. Composed (together with a second Arabesque) at some point between 1888 and 1891, it preceded almost all of Debussy's well-known piano works. Debussy had the most astonishingly original musical mind. At the time he wrote this piece, he had not quite yet broken free from traditional forms and harmonies. But break free he did, not long after this and Debussy went on to introduce breath-taking new ideas about harmony, melody and piano technique. Everyone calls his music "Impressionistic". Debussy himself loathed the term. Let's be honest though and not split hairs over words: it *is* Impressionistic, by which I mean it does capture a mood or a thought or an image, it does provide a wash of gentle colour like a Monet painting. As Debussy himself said "I am trying to do something different, an effect of reality..." Was this not Monet's aim in another medium? Monet too was trying to capture an effect of reality. He cared more about the general effect than about the detail and he was fascinated by effects of light and colour yet there were still discernible forms in his paintings. Substitute the word "music" for "paintings" in the previous sentence and you have a statement about Debussy.

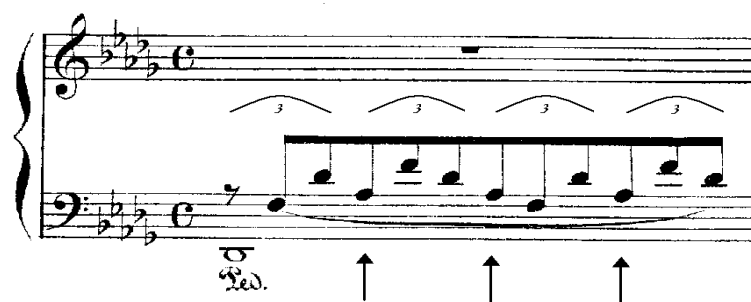
Two things stand out about Debussy – he was in his own way a fabulous pianist and he had a stubborn determination to go his own way. He was admitted to the Paris Conservatory at the age of ten and studied under some of the great French masters. He rebelled against all the so-called "rules". "Why should I modulate?" he famously demanded to know when Cesar Franck told him to "Modulez, modulez!" When asked by someone what rules exactly he followed, his answer was short and to the point: "My own pleasure!" He had an undeniable talent and in 1884 he won the Prix de Rome, an incredibly prestigious national French award. His insistence on doing things his own way eventually led him to change the accepted laws of music and piano playing. George Bernard Shaw's famous saying comes to mind: "The reasonable man adapts himself to the world. The unreasonable man persists in trying to adapt the world to himself. All progress, therefore, depends upon the unreasonable man."

Debussy was not a "reasonable man". He was not particularly communicative or affable as a person and from childhood had tastes only for the very best. He let very few people into his private life and what an extraordinary private life it was. During his life he caused not one, but two women to shoot themselves (non-fatally) by leaving them and eventually settled down with a woman who was already married and who then bore him a daughter Chouchou whom he adored. He fell out of love with the music of almost all other composers, with the exception of Bach, Chopin and Mussorgsky. The music of Mozart, Beethoven, Brahms, Schumann and Wagner (to name but a few) elicited reactions from him ranging from boredom to hatred! Long-winded debates about musical forms didn't interest him – "humbug" he called it.

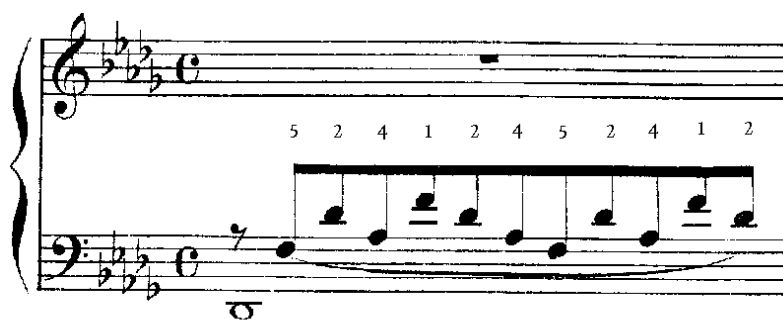
Debussy's piano playing was utterly original, sensitive and delicate. He pressed the keys and manipulated the pedals to create a floating, singing sound, and he won a complete victory over the notion that the piano is a percussive instrument. Some of his later pieces are

Let's start by getting the left hand accompaniment up and running. You should feel at liberty to take the bassline D flats in your right hand in bars 1 to 3 by stretching across and playing them with your right hand third finger. Now, remember what we noticed about the different registers. The bass notes provide a firm foundation and ring distinctly like low chimes. The left hand quavers are different in quality and provide a wash of harmonic background. If you articulate each quaver separately and distinctly, the background will become the foreground and it will sound intrusive. So the trick is to play these quavers very softly (they are marked *ppp*!!), very evenly and with pedal to provide a slight blurring of the sound (they are marked "*sempre legatissimo*"). Another quality to note in these quavers is the gentle rocking they suggest, a sort of easy give and take.

Observe that there are 12 quavers in each bar, made up of 1 quaver rest and 11 quavers. The time signature is C or 4/4, so there are only four beats in a bar. This means that the quavers must be triplets, even though they are not marked expressly as triplets. The point is understood simply because of the time signature and the number of quavers. So the beats fall on the A flats in the first 3 bars:



Now to play it. Rest your left hand fingers on the notes that make up the first bar, using the finger indicated below (although if you have big hands, you could try "3" in place of "4"):



Now play the bar slowly, feeling the weight of each key under your fingers, testing the speed with which you have to press the keys to get a gentle sound. If you like, try to press each key slowly so as to make no sound at all. Then try playing each note *forte*. Then try as many gradations in between as you can find. Notice the uneven strength of each of your fingers and the different ways in which each finger works to produce an even sound throughout. Try to keep the palm relatively still and play these notes with the fingers only. Try also to add a touch of finger *legato* by overlapping the notes slightly. Remember what Casella said about Debussy – that he “gave the impression that he was playing directly on the strings of the instrument”. This is what you are aiming for here. Glue your fingers to the keys and

star. Then practice the final bars, concentrating on your touch, so that you can gradually fade away. “Perdendosi” means “losing itself”, a bit like succumbing to sleep.

Good! We got there! Let’s just remind ourselves of some of the things we have learned:

- Observing the different registers in a piece
- Balance between two parts in the left hand alone
- Very gentle and controlled left hand touch
- Sensitivity to the piano mechanism
- Use of the middle pedal
- “Half-peddalling” with the right pedal
- Making a melody sing in the manner of *bel canto* vocalists
- Right hand and arm weight and touch in octaves
- Differentiation of touch and volume within a phrase to create expression
- Control of *smorzando*
- More work on togetherness of chords
- Thinking throughout what a piece means and what individual phrases mean
- Awareness of harmonies and their progression

Now, play the whole piece through again trying to put all of this into practice. Listen, always listen!

Recordings to enjoy:

Horowitz in Vienna (VHS)
Vladimir Horowitz
Deutsche Grammophon, ASIN B00004R6DX

Liszt
Artur Schnabel
RCA, ASIN B000003FL3

Liszt: Favourite Piano Works
Jorge Bolet
Decca, ASIN B00000427O

A Romantic Collection
Van Cliburn
RCA Gold Seal, ASIN B001BIL180

Waltz No. 6

Frédéric Chopin

Molto Vivace

Musical notation for the first system (measures 1-5). The piece is in 3/4 time with a key signature of three flats (B-flat, E-flat, A-flat). The tempo is *Molto Vivace*. The first staff (treble clef) contains a melodic line starting with a forte (>) dynamic and the instruction *leggiere*. The second staff (bass clef) provides harmonic accompaniment. A first ending bracket spans measures 4 and 5. A rehearsal mark "Red" with a star symbol is located below measure 5.

Musical notation for the second system (measures 6-11). The first staff continues the melodic line. The second staff features a rhythmic accompaniment of chords. A rehearsal mark "Red" with a star symbol is located below measure 6.

Musical notation for the third system (measures 12-17). The first staff continues the melodic line. The second staff features a rhythmic accompaniment of chords. A rehearsal mark "Red" with a star symbol is located below measure 12.

Musical notation for the fourth system (measures 18-23). The first staff continues the melodic line. The second staff features a rhythmic accompaniment of chords. A rehearsal mark "Red" with a star symbol is located below measure 18.

Musical notation for the fifth system (measures 24-29). The first staff continues the melodic line. The second staff features a rhythmic accompaniment of chords. A rehearsal mark "Red" with a star symbol is located below measure 24.

Red * Red * Red * Red * Red * Red *