Inside Beethoven's *Für Elise*

Ludwig van Beethoven, Bagatelle in A minor, WoO 59 (1810) — one tune that keeps coming home

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) never published this little piece. It was first printed in **1867**, forty years after his death, when the scholar **Ludwig Nohl** included it in a book of Beethoven's letters. Nohl copied it from a manuscript then owned by a lady in Munich, which had come from the estate of **Therese Malfatti**, a pupil Beethoven hoped to marry in **1810**. The heading read "Für Elise am 27 April zur Erinnerung von L. v. Bthvn" ("for Elise on 27 April, as a souvenir"). That manuscript is now lost, so **who "Elise" was is still debated**: perhaps Nohl misread "Therese", perhaps it was the singer Elisabeth Röckel, or someone else. Nobody knows for sure.

THE FORM · A RONDO, A B A C A

A	B	A	C	A
A minor · both halves repeated	F major, then C	no repeats	over a drumming low A	the last time
1	24	39	61	83

The famous tune is the **refrain**, **A**. Between its returns come two **episodes**: **B**, a sunny tune in F major, and **C**, a dark, restless passage over a low A that repeats like a drumroll (its first phrase closes with a cadential 6/4 in bar 67: Handout 383; in bars 72–74 the drumroll moves up to B♭ for the Neapolitan, B♭ major: Handout 386). A refrain with episodes between its returns is a **rondo** (Handout 233). Practice: Exercise 53. Here is the good news: bars 39–59 and 83–103 repeat bars 1–21 note for note, so **learn A and you can play about two-thirds of the bars**. That is why most intermediate students learn the A section first.

A · TWO NOTES, ROCKING



Pickup and bars 1–4 with **suggested** fingering. **E** and **D♯**, the motif. Find its meter with the time signature hidden: Exercise 83, case 8.

The whole piece grows from two notes. A short idea like this is a **motif** (Handout 355). **E** is the home of the motif; **D♯** is its **neighbor**, just one half step below (Handouts 05 and 234). The music rocks E–D♯–E–D♯–E, then turns down B–D–C to land on **A**, the home note of A minor. Keep it quiet (*pp*) and even, like someone humming to themselves; *Poco moto* means "with a little motion", not fast. In bar 4 the rocking starts again, so the tune can begin a second time.

CALLING THE TUNE BACK



At the end of episode B the left hand falls silent and the right hand rocks **E**–**D♯** over and over, as if it can't remember how the tune goes. Then, in bar 39, it does: the motif turns down to A and the refrain is back. Many pianists let these bars slow down slightly and get softer, so the return feels like coming home.

LISTEN

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THE LEFT HAND STARTS, THE RIGHT HAND FINISHES

One broken chord, two hands

In bar 2 the left hand plays **A–E–A** and stops; the right hand carries on upward, **C–E–A**. Together they make one rising wave through the A-minor chord. Bar 3 does the same with E major (the G♯ is the leading tone, Handout 25).



Pedal: down with the bass

Press the damper pedal (Handout 58) **exactly as the low bass note sounds**, the **Ped.** sign. The pedal holds the whole wave, so the six notes ring together as one chord.

Lift it at the end of the bar, the ✱ sign, so the next harmony starts clean (Exercise 80 reads these marks). There is **no pedal in bars 1 and 5**: the E–D♯ rocking would blur into a smudge.

Listen, don't just count: if bar 3 still has bar 2's A in it, you lifted too late.

PRACTICE RECIPE

1. **Learn A first.** Bars 1–23 come back twice, so they cover about two-thirds of the piece. Leave the episodes, B (bars 24–38) and C (61–82), until A is secure.
2. **The motif alone.** Play E–D♯–E–D♯–E with fingers 5–4, very softly, until every note is the same size. No bump on the thumb when you land on A.
3. **The hand-off.** Play bars 2–3 as blocked chords first (Handout 51), then broken. Aim for one smooth wave: the listener should not hear where the hands change.
4. **Add the pedal last**, bar by bar: down with the bass note, up as the bar ends.
5. **Then the episodes.** B is a singing melody over left-hand sixteenths; C is chords over the repeated low A. Practice each one hands separately before you join them to the refrain.

TRY IT Find the three places where A begins in your score (bars 1, 39 and 83) and mark them. Then play bar 2 three times: no pedal, pedal held the whole bar, and pedal lifted at the end of the bar. Which one keeps bar 3 clear?

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