Inside Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata*

Ludwig van Beethoven, Piano Sonata in C♯ minor, Op. 27 No. 2, first movement (Adagio sostenuto) — a melody floating on triplets

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) wrote this sonata in **1801**, when he was 30. It was printed in Vienna in **1802** as a *Sonata quasi una fantasia* ("a sonata like a fantasy"), dedicated to his young pupil, Countess **Giulietta Guicciardi**. The name "Moonlight" is not Beethoven's: in 1824 the poet and critic **Ludwig Rellstab** compared this movement to moonlight on a lake, and after Beethoven's death the nickname stuck. Part of what makes it "like a fantasy": it opens with a slow, quiet movement instead of the usual fast one.

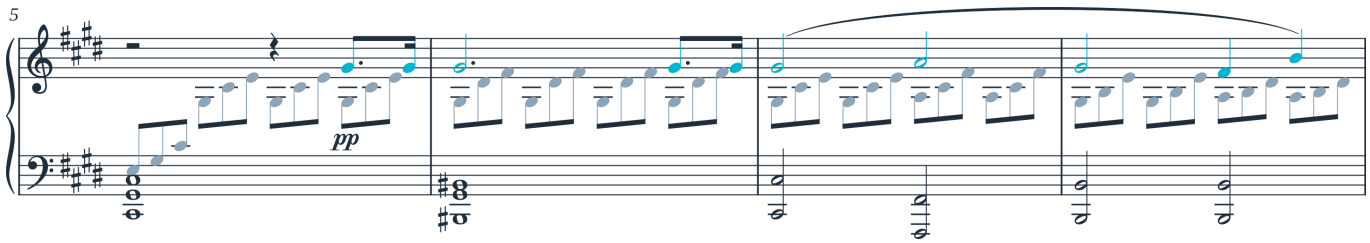
THE OPENING · TRIPLETS FROM THE FIRST BAR



Bars 1–3, with Beethoven's two instructions.

Triplets (Handout 46) run through the whole movement: three eighths in the time of two, four groups to a bar, mostly in the right hand. The time signature is cut time, two half-note beats per bar (Handout 359). The little **3** is printed over the first group only; after that you keep counting in threes. (The first edition of 1802 did not print it even there.) Above the music Beethoven wrote *Si deve suonare tutto questo pezzo delicatissimamente e senza sordino*: "play this whole piece very delicately and without dampers" (page 2). At the bass: *sempre pianissimo e senza sordino*, always very soft and without dampers.

THREE LAYERS · ONE HAND PLAYS TWO OF THEM



Bars 5–8. Melody **deep cyan**, triplets **pale**, bass ink.

Listen for three layers. At the bottom, the **bass**: deep octaves and chords, each held for a whole or half bar. In the middle, the **triplets**, soft and even, never more than a murmur. On top, from the last beat of bar 5, the **melody**: a G♯ repeated in a dotted rhythm, then long notes that move mostly by step. The right hand plays both the melody and the triplets, so its outer fingers must **sing** while the rest of the hand stays light (Handout 334).

THE PLAN · ONE LONG, SLOW ARCH

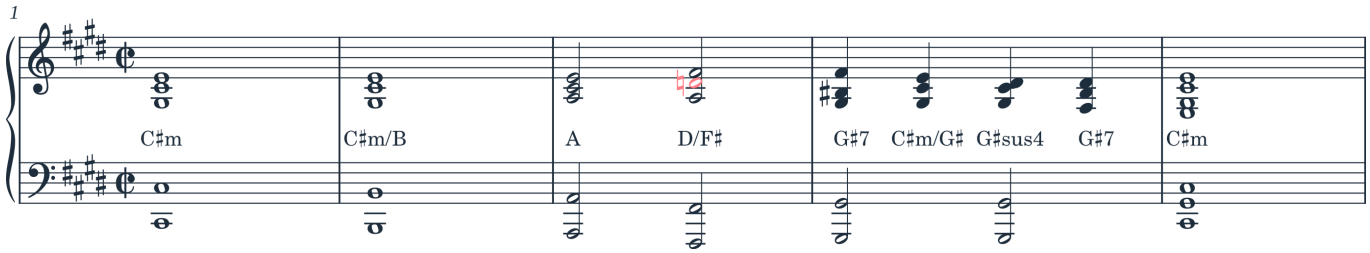
intro	The melody	climb	Over G♯, the dominant	The melody returns	Coda
	C♯ minor, then other keys	cresc.	G♯ held in the bass 28–39	bars 42–45 = 5–8	its rhythm in the bass
1	5	23	28	42	60 69

The melody starts in C♯ minor and drifts into other keys. From bar 23 it climbs, and in bar 28 the bass settles on **G♯**, the dominant (Handout 10), for twelve bars while the triplets wander over the keyboard; two more bars lead back. In bar 42 the melody returns: bars 42–45 repeat bars 5–8 note for note. In the coda its dotted rhythm sinks into the bass (bars 60–65), and the music fades away.

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UNDER THE TRIPLETS · ONE CHORD AT A TIME

Bars 1–5 as held chords



Each run of equal triplet groups merged into one chord (bar 5 joins its two voicings of C♯ minor into one); the bass as written. **Coral** = D natural.

With the pedal down, the triplets blend into chords, usually one per bar or half bar. The bass steps down, C♯, B, A, F♯, then G♯ leads home to C♯ minor in bar 5. The second chord of bar 3 is the surprise: **D major** (D–F♯–A) with F♯ in the bass. The key signature says D♯, but Beethoven writes **D natural**: a major chord on the lowered second step of the scale, with its third in the bass. That chord is the **Neapolitan sixth** (Handout 386). It darkens the music for a moment, then leans on **G♯7**, the dominant seventh (Handout 212), which brings C♯ minor back.

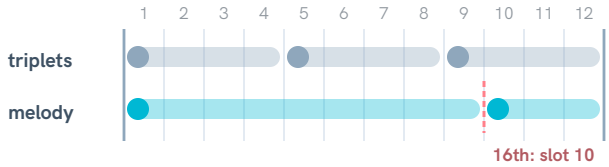
Senza sordino · keep the dampers off

A *sordino* is a mute. Inside the piano the mutes are the **dampers**, the felt pads that stop the strings (Handout 341). *Senza sordino*, "without dampers," means the dampers stay lifted and the strings keep ringing: **hold the damper pedal down** (Handout 58). It has nothing to do with the soft pedal.

The pianos Beethoven played in 1801 were softer and faded faster than a modern grand, so the open dampers made a gentle haze. On a modern piano the same haze turns to blur, so most pianists keep the pedal down but **change it with each new chord** (mostly when the bass moves), catching the chord just after it sounds.

A dotted rhythm against triplets

Slice one quarter note into 12. The triplets land on slots 1, 5 and 9. The melody's dotted eighth starts on 1 and its sixteenth on **10**: **after** the third triplet note, not with it.



Play the sixteenth together with the third triplet note and the dotted rhythm turns into a lazy triplet rhythm. Keep it crisp, but soft.

PRACTICE RECIPE

1. **Chords first.** Play bars 1–5 as the held chords above, with the bass, and say each bass note aloud as it steps down.
2. **Triplets alone,** *pianissimo* and even, from the surface of the keys. Then add the bass octaves.
3. **Melody alone,** singing a little louder than everything else. Place each sixteenth after the third triplet note, as in the grid.
4. **The right hand together:** melody on top, triplets softer underneath. Go slowly; the melody must still sound like one line.
5. **Hands together with pedal,** changing it with each new chord. Listen: no old chord should hang over the new one; then shape the arch: a little more sound where Beethoven writes *cresc.* (bar 25), soft again from bar 28, and *pianissimo* for the return in bar 42.

TRY IT With the pedal down, play the held chords of bars 1–5 above, changing the pedal with each new chord. Stop on the chord with the coral D: that is the Neapolitan. Then find the same chord (F♯, A, D) in bar 50 of your score.

LISTEN
Scan to hear these bars and the whole movement
tissimo.co/worksheets/moonlight-sonata
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