Think of a flower: Rose. Think of a color: Red. Think of a composer: Beethoven. You would suppose, occupying as he does that preeminent place in the pantheon of most people’s “general knowledge,” that almost everything about the old boy has been known forever, audited by the experts for almost that long, and put on perennial display by the masters and mistresses of the keyboard of yesteryear and yesterday. But the three early sonatas that open this evening’s recital, WoO 47, are rarities on the concert stage: many of you will be hearing them for the first (and last) time.

“WoO” has nothing to do with the “pseudoscientific” (the president’s “woo-woo” beliefs) or the cocktail (vodka and schnapps): it is an abbreviation for “Werke ohne Opuszahl” or “works without opus number,” of which, in Beethoven’s catalogue, there are over two hundred. Most are these are occasional pieces, dances, light-hearted songs; the three sonatas, in E-flat Major, F Minor, and D Major, composed in mid-1783 and published in the autumn of that year, are among the more substantial numbers in the group. They require little analysis because they are constructed of the basic building blocks of musical composition that the young Beethoven would not long thereafter begin to bend into shapes and patterns of his own devising. The left-hand accompaniments are often simple, repeated chords (a harpsichord-like pattern), or simple “Alberti” basses—the kinds of basses you know if you played that sonata in C Major, by Mozart, that swims into the ken of all piano-playing youngsters, and that gives them the horribly absurd idea that C Major is a “simple” key. (Beethoven’s final utterance in the world of the sonata, the utterance you will hear in the last of these eight recitals, is the C-Major hymn that closes Op. 111: this represents the apotheosis of C Major; it is not simple, it is sublime.)

One of the things we observe in the piano sonatas, as the composer ripens, is quite precisely the increasing variety of pianistic textures he invents in order to give the allusion of sustained sonorities. The piano can do a lot of things, but it cannot do what the voice can do, and what a wind or sting instrument can do, which is to sustain a note and to increase its volume and intensity. The difficulty of performing these three sonatas, then, which will be played, appropriately, by the students of their teacher, is to articulate their clearly articulated textures, and to attempt to make them sing.
The two sonatas of Beethoven’s Op. 14, No. 1 in E Major, No. 2 in G Major, from 1798, the same year as the “Pathétique,” which we heard on Jiayan Sun’s second recital, provide ample evidence of the maturing of Beethoven’s notions of pianistic textures. The first movement of Op. 14 No. 1 opens with a four-bar phrase whose texture of melody-plus-accompaniment could not be more conventional. But immediately thereafter the texture becomes contrapuntal, imitative, and otherwise complex. The structure of this movement conforms to the tonal model of the opposition of “tonic” and “dominant” that Beethoven almost always follows, in major-mode first movements, but here, the melody that articulates the contrasting tonal area (the so-called “second theme group”) includes an openly exposed, rising chromatic scale that leads—precisely because of those chromatic notes—to some surprising if momentary dissonances: C-double-sharp against B-sharp, for example! (which in writing looks weirder than it sounds). These suggest to me that Beethoven was at the time looking at some of the mature music by Mozart, with whom he had earlier wanted to study, but in vain (when Beethoven moved from Bonn to Vienna, in 1792, Mozart had been dead for a year). The composer of the “Jupiter” Symphony had enjoyed this very kind of chromatic play.

The second movement of Op. 14 No. 1, marked Allegretto, is a dance-like yet meditative movement, in E Minor, in ternary meter, with a C-Major trio and a tiny coda that—like the first movement—ends gently, seeming to encourage the player to press on without pause. The finale, too, a rondo whose principal tune plays with metrical ambiguity (one wonders whether the first two notes are down-beats or up-beats, and near the end one is disoriented by octaves hammered out off the beat), concludes without ceremony. It is as though Beethoven were telling us that the two sonatas of Op. 14 are related, and composed of the same genetic material.

This leads me to take note of the fact that these two sonatas played a role in the development of the widely adopted terminology for the so-called “sonata form” that has the first principal thematic elements characterized as “masculine,” and the second principal thematic elements characterized as “feminine.” At Smith College, it has been appropriate, I have always thought, to look into the origins of this sexualized if not sexist terminology, of which an early instance occurs in Vincent d’Indy’s Cours de composition musicale (1909): d’Indy, the composer-critic who first used imitation, extériorisation, and réflexion to describe the three phrases of Beethoven’s creative life, dubs the opening gestures of the typical Beethoven sonata as “forceful,” “energetic,” and “masculine”; the secondary gestures as “supple,” “elegant,” and “feminine.” He justifies this dichotomy with reference to a remark of Beethoven’s as reported by his famously untrustworthy amanuensis, Anton Schindler: “The two sonatas, Op. 14,” Beethoven is alleged to have said, “represent […] a dialogue between a
man and a woman, or between a lover and his beloved.” Was Beethoven talking about the inner workings of the individual sonatas? Or about differences in their characters as a whole? *Das können wir nicht sagen!*

Be this as it may, it turns out that the fellow who actually introduced the masculine-feminine dichotomy into official sonata-form parlance was a mid-nineteenth-century theorist named Adolf Bernhard Marx. Political opponents and advocates of the gendered nomenclature have surely been spurred on by knowing it came from a Marx, and, gadszooks, an Adolf.

The metrical ambiguity that floats over the finale of Op. 14 No. 1 is found again at the opening of **Op. 14 No. 2**, where the first five short notes sound like upbeats to the first long note—as though one were saying, rapidly: I think this is a *trick!* We learn only in the fifth bar that what we have been hearing is, rather: I think this *is* a trick! Such musical ambiguity, whether metric (where is the downbeat?) or tonal (where is the tonic?), is the stuff of sophistication; when resolved, it is the stuff of satisfaction. (At the end of the movement, Beethoven will *tell us* that he was making a joke—by altering the phrase to say simply, in four syllables rather than six: *this is a trick!*)

Tonally speaking, what Beethoven does in this movement is characteristic: after establishing the home key of G Major by means of an opening eight-bar sentence, in gestures more motivic than melodic, he begins immediately to head for the hills, or, rather, for the contrasting key area, in this case the “dominant,” D Major. This means that of the sixty-three measures that constitute what we call the “exposition” (because in it, the principal materials are *exposed*), we are solidly in the home key for only eight of them. Why, then, do we say that G Major is “home”? Because, when we come back, we will linger, and find “home” vibrant, and fresh.

The second movement, impish and playful, is cast as a theme and variations. Usually we think of “variations” as transmutations of *melodies*. But what Beethoven respects, as he fiddles with the “theme,” is the *periodic structure* of eight bars plus twelve. If you count bars while listening, you will hear where is he faithful, and where he strays. It’s all only a joke, he tells us at the end, by saying: BOO!

The finale gives us the earlier kind of pleasantry, based on metrical ambiguity. Where is the downbeat, we ask again, as a tiny three-note motive is thrice repeated on the three different beats of the 3/8 meter to form a kind of “hemiola” or superimposition of one metric pattern upon another. Sudden pauses, sudden *fortes*, and sudden *pianos*, such as at the very end, remind us that Beethoven, in 1798, was a pretty happy fellow: he could utter profound thoughts, in some of the slow movements of the earlier sonatas, and throughout, in the “Pathétique,” but he was still some years away from feeling upon his shoulders the dark weight of the world.
This evening’s program closes with Sonata in B-flat Major, Op. 22, designated by Beethoven a “grand” sonata because of its composition in four movements rather than three. Only one other Beethoven sonata is in B-flat Major, the monstrous “Hammerklavier,” Op. 106, of 1818, and the commentariat has found similarities between that one and this one, namely, the structural use of chains of descending thirds. In Op. 22, we hear cuckoo-bird gestures in the first and second measures of the “first-theme group,” and full-throttled falling thirds in the “second-theme group,” as it announces the contrasting key, i.e., the dominant, F Major. The “groups” I enclose in quotation marks are so-named because in fact, like his predecessors and his contemporaries, Beethoven usually articulated the main tonalities not by a single theme, but by several. (Haydn was notably proud of himself when he completed a sonata movement that required only one: we call this monothematic; perhaps Beethoven called it monotonous.) In the “Hammerklavier,” there are falling thirds everywhere, nowhere more prominently than in the grandiose opening pronouncement, which is, for the pianist, one of the most treacherous pronouncements of them all.

I dwell on the falling thirds to make the point that, when composing in certain keys, like artists painting in certain media, Beethoven tended to behave in the same ways.

The second movement of Op. 22, marked Adagio con molta espressione, would seem to be a kind of meditation: the texture, spacious, sometimes conspicuously transparent, suggests to me that, in this very slow tempo, Beethoven perhaps found himself improvising the complex ornaments and accompaniments of the sort he set down elsewhere. The movement, in the key of E-flat Major, makes the expected modulation to the dominant, B-flat, and comes to a halt. A second section begins in the suddenly distant key of G Major, then works its way back, via traditional paths, to the home key of E-flat. By “traditional paths” I mean something slightly technical—the “circle of fifths”—which is too important not to try to explain. G is “dominant” to, and a fifth above, C; we go to C. C is “dominant” to F; we go to F. F is “dominant” to B-flat; we go to B-flat. B-flat is “dominant” to E-flat; we go to E-flat; E-flat is “dominant” to A-flat; we go to A-flat. And so on round a “circle” of keys a “fifth” apart. Get it? “Dominant” means “expectant of,” “prefatory,” “wishing to lead to.” That is all you need to know. In his great middle period, sometimes called “the heroic decade,” Beethoven did expectancy as no one before him ever imagined it could or should be done.

The third movement is a gentle, almost Chopin-like minuet (B-flat Major), with a contrasting trio, furioso, in G Minor. In this section, a brilliant, international prize-winning pianist, whose performance of this piece is available on YouTube, gets lost. (I have forgotten
his name.) Have you ever thought about how amazing it is that the great pianists play this music without scores? Opera singers have to memorize tens of thousands of words. (In the libretto of *Tristan und Isolde*, for example, there is a total of about ten thousand words.) But pianists have to memorize millions of notes.

The finale of the B-flat Sonata is a *rondo* in which we hear the peaceful principal thematic material, or “refrain,” on four separate occasions. In between, three “episodes” offer a kind of diversity (of materials) that we as an institution can only dream about: they are serious and sad, they are frisky and funny; they are musical creeds and colors joined by virtuous, vertiginous virtuosity.

—Peter Bloom

These notes were prepared not for wide circulation but exclusively for Jiayan Sun’s recitals at Smith College.