



# Beethoven's Piano Sonatas: A Short Companion

By Charles Rosen

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Beethoven's piano sonatas form one of the most important collections of works in the whole history of music. Spanning several decades of his life as a composer, the sonatas soon came to be seen as the first body of substantial serious works for piano suited to performance in large concert halls seating hundreds of people.

In this comprehensive and authoritative guide, Charles Rosen places the works in context and provides an understanding of the formal principles involved in interpreting and performing this unique repertoire, covering such aspects as sonata form, phrasing, and tempo, as well as the use of pedal and trills. In the second part of his book, he looks at the sonatas individually, from the earliest works of the 1790s through the sonatas of Beethoven's youthful popularity of the early 1800s, the subsequent years of mastery, the years of stress (1812–1817), and the last three sonatas of the 1820s.

Composed as much for private music-making as public recital, Beethoven's sonatas have long formed a bridge between the worlds of the salon and the concert hall. For today's audience, Rosen has written a guide that brings out the gravity, passion, and humor of these works and will enrich the appreciation of a wide range of readers, whether listeners, amateur musicians, or professional pianists.

The book includes a CD of Rosen performing extracts from several of the sonatas, illustrating points made in the text.

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## Beethoven`s Piano Sonatas: A Short Companion By Charles Rosen Bibliography

- Sales Rank: #707527 in Books
- Published on: 2001-11-01
- Original language: English
- Number of items: 1
- Dimensions: 9.40" h x 1.00" w x 6.30" l, 1.43 pounds
- Binding: Hardcover
- 288 pages



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### Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

Rosen's prize-winning study *The Classical Style* was a wide-ranging look at music history. His latest book originated in seminars given to piano students at an Italian festival, and is divided into two sections, "Formal Principles" (considerations of phrasing and tempo, for example) and "The Sonatas" (analyses of the 18th- and early-19th-century sonatas). Rosen points out that though Beethoven wrote his sonatas at a time when such works were meant for amateur performances at home, he consistently made them too difficult for this purpose. He also observes that Beethoven rarely used simple indications of tempo, such as allegro (quickly) or lento (slowly); instead, he saddled his interpreters with complex and debatable instructions like allegro vivace e con brio (quickly, lively, and with gusto). How fast should the opening of the famous Moonlight sonata, which is "often taken at too slow a pace," be played? And what about the knuckle-busting Hammerklavier sonata, about which Rosen notes, "high-minded pianists consider the very fast tempo vulgar... [but] more than anything else, it is an explosion of energy"? Rosen addresses many such practical questions, and, in the accompanying CD, he plays excerpts from some of the sonatas to illustrate his points. Mostly steering clear of the kind of catty comments about performers and fellow critics that pepper his journalism, Rosen keeps his eye on the subject, and the result is measured and sane. A nice complement to, if not a substitute for, earlier books by Timothy Jones, Kenneth Drake and Robert Taub, this book's musical examples and occasional technical language should not turn off Ludwig-o-maniacs. (Mar.) Forecast: Sure to get endless plugs in the tony lit-crit rags where Rosen is omnipresent, like the *New York Review of Books*, this book will no doubt also benefit from Rosen's penchant for radio appearances as both interviewee and performer.

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From Library Journal

Rosen, whose legendary books of music criticism (e.g., *Critical Entertainments*, LJ 4/1/00) are among the most lucid and valuable in print, has produced yet another outstanding work: a performer's guide to Beethoven's piano sonatas. Rosen divides the book into two equal parts. In the first, "Formal Principles," he discusses the musical elements of phrasing, tempo, and articulation as they pertain to all 32 sonatas. This is an enormously useful section, accompanied by copious musical examples, which the author himself illustrates on the companion CD. The second part deals with the sonatas individually. Here, Rosen departs from the traditional practice of dividing Beethoven's output into three large stylistic divisions: an early, a middle, and a late period. He argues as does pianist/author Robert Taub in his recent *Playing the Beethoven Piano Sonatas* and in the liner notes to his five-volume set of the complete piano sonatas for a more precise delineation of five categories, though his differs markedly from Taub's. Rosen labels his divisions "18th Century Sonatas" (Op. 2-22), "Youthful Popularity" (Op. 26-28), "The Years of Mastery" (Op. 31-81a), "The Years of Stress" (Op. 90-106), and "The Last Sonatas" (Op. 109-111). The text is rich in detail, and Rosen's prose is typically graceful and embracing. All admirers of this repertory will gain much from this book.

Highly recommended for all collections. Larry Lipkis, Moravian Coll., PA

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Review

An] indispensable book. -- *Andrew Patner, Chicago Sun-Times*

[R]ich in detail. . . graceful and embracing. All admirers of this repertory will gain much from this book.

Highly recommended. . . -- *Library Journal*

[W]ritten in clear, logical prose, suited to serious readers with basic training in music theory. -- *Michael Kimmelman, New York Review of Books*

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