LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Sonata in C minor, Op. 111

Maestoso–Allegro con brio ed appassionato
Arietta: Adagio molto semplice cantabile

Born: December 16, 1770, in Bonn
Died: March 26, 1827, in Vienna
Work composed: 1821–22

Beethoven’s early works show a young genius absorbing the lessons of Haydn and Mozart while exploring nascent Romanticism. His middle works express a fully emergent personality and attending need/desire to share it with the world, while his late works aspire to transcend the boundaries of earthly strife. It is as if he were addressing a “higher” audience, be it his own refined consciousness or that level of communication many call spiritual. At age 51 Beethoven was not “old” in years, but life had exacted a great toll on his physical and psychic energy and in his final piano sonatas and string quartets, he experimented with new modes of expression that would better serve his hard-fought insights and revelations. Such a work is his ultimate piano sonata, the great C minor, Op. 111.

The opening Maestoso–Allegro con brio ed appassionato starts — or startles — with an aggressive dissonant gesture. The two descending notes that launch the piece in an atmosphere of stormy pessimistic defiance, rendered increasingly so by the subterranean rumbling trills in the keyboards deep, dark regions as well as by the hard-edged dotted rhythm. The electric charge is accentuated by the preparation and final eruption of the upward and downward lurching primary theme. It is as if Beethoven were distilling decades of strife and pain into this assaulitative statement. Still more, the use of octave doubling adds even more power to the music, only slightly mollified by fugal writing later in the movement.

A brief coda leads to an entirely different emotional world in the far longer concluding movement, marked Arietta: Adagio molto semplice cantabile. The menace of the first movement recedes into the background with the gentle announcement of the Arietta (“theme”). To be sure, this seemingly benign triplet-laden theme undergoes radical transformation during the following six variations, where Beethoven invests the music with wild syncopated passages that all but predict the rhythmic world of the 20th century — jazz and boogie-woogie are not infrequently mentioned by later commentators. Yet from the fourth variation onwards, the music grows increasingly peaceful, as if Beethoven has finally transcended his earthly cares. The much-used but entirely appropriate term “sublime” comes to mind. A long series of multiple trills — “the quaking of Beethoven’s soul” according to the great Chilean pianist Claudio Arrau — adds considerably to the otherworldly serenity of the Sonata’s closing pages.