

Master the Sonata

The sonata form became popular in the ~~c~~lassical period and is perhaps most famous because of Beethoven, though many gifted and well-known composers have penned sonatas. Learning to play one is very often a staple of any piano education. Sonatas take careful practice and fine articulation to play well, but once mastered, they are a joy both to listen to and play.

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Sonatas ~~very~~vary as to how many forms they have, but the traditional sonata-allegro form has three different variations. These are the exposition, ~~the~~ development, ~~and~~ the recapitulation. Composers think of these different sections as a way to tell a story through music—even without words. Briefly, the exposition introduces the piece's theme and is usually played at a moderate tempo. The development progresses and expands the theme. Usually, this part is slower and has some key changes. ~~Finally, t~~The recapitulation ~~recapitulation~~ ~~finally~~ ties everything together and concludes the piece. It is usually played quickly and is the showier part of the music. Practice and master each movement separately before you combine them.

It is essential to keep precise timing. Practicing with a metronome at first will help you be consistent. Oftentimes, the left hand keeps the beat.

Just because the timing is exact doesn't mean sonatas are to be played rigidly. They include many emotional musical elements, such as slurs, staccatos, and accent marks. The slurs group together the phrases and are played as musical sighs. A musical sigh is when you make the notes in a slurred phrase sound like a human sigh—rise at the beginning with a smooth drop to the end. There will often be staccato notes or accent notes following a phrase ~~which~~that are in direct contrast to the previous sigh. Just as composers thought of their sonatas as stories put to music, you can create one yourself to go along with the music to help you inject passion into your playing.

Be articulate! Sonatas have no room for sloppy or half-heard notes. Use the finger preps you have practiced in your Hanon exercises. (Hanon is a wonderful way to warm up before practicing sonatas.) The pedal should be used sparingly. It should enhance your playing, not cover it up.

It is very helpful to listen to a professional recording of the sonata you are learning. Find a ~~cd~~CD or look online for a recording. Hearing how the sonata is meant to be played will provide you with a guideline for what you need to work on in your practice time.