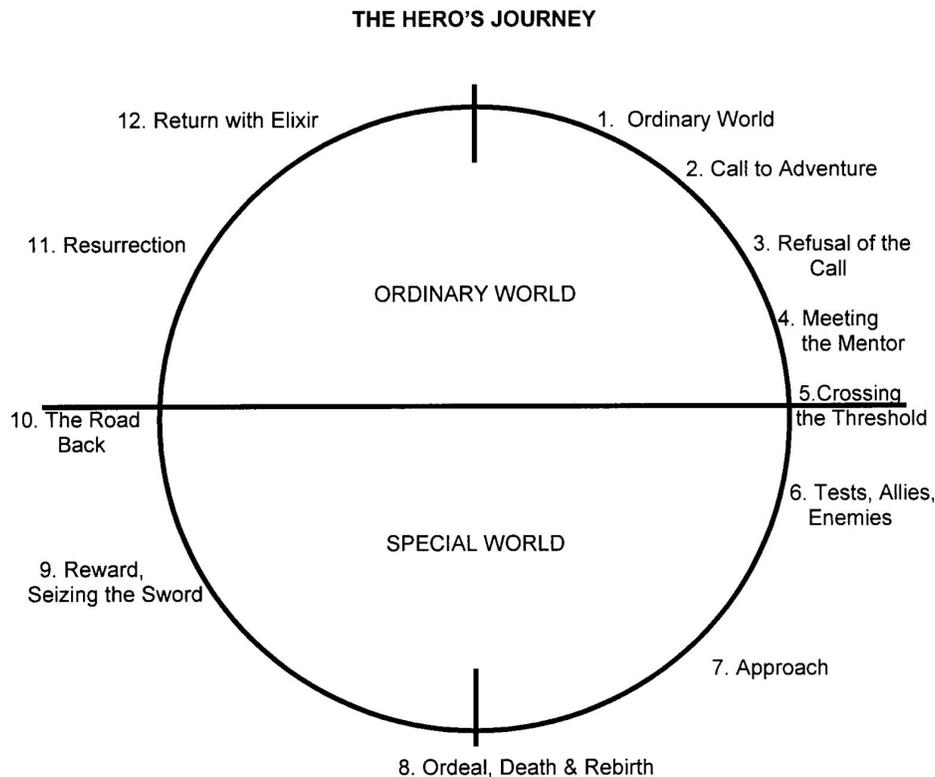


The Hero's Journey Applied to Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 31, No. 3, II



In *The Hero With A Thousand Faces* (1949), author Joseph Campbell describes the monomyth or “hero’s journey” as the archetypal structure that all great narratives throughout time and cultures possess. The journey can be understood as a circular path depicting a protagonist’s departure from his home world into the unknown and back. In Lewis Carroll’s *Alice In Wonderland*, Alice follows the hero’s journey when she enters and overcomes Wonderland. In George Lucas’ *Star Wars*, Luke Skywalker adheres to this template when he leaves his home planet, Tatooine, to rescue Princess Leia. Truly, the Hero’s Journey is a useful model for understanding almost all stories. Here we will see how the second movement of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata No. 18 can be understood according to the Hero’s Journey template.

The ordinary world is a safe place of fulfilled expectations. It is the home key of this sonata, Ab major, and the promise that the sonata should adhere to classical form. The first

17 18 19

The downward arpeggiation in m. 18 indicates we may be in the vicinity of the white rabbit (E natural). However, with the landing of Eb in m. 19 we know the arpeggio is of an Eb dominant chord.

At this point, Alice is tempted with the idea of slipping into the rabbit hole. Should the next note in the arpeggiation be the white rabbit, the E natural, we feel she would have taken the dive as this would have spelled an E fully diminished seventh chord, vii^{o7} of F. But no, Alice sees no rabbit and is thusly not on the hunt, throwing herself into Wonderland. She refuses the call (step 3). The landing of the arpeggiation in measure 19 is Eb, not E, resulting in an Eb dominant chord and a return to our first theme in measure 20.

Unlike Lewis Carrol's great novel, in which Alice explores Wonderland in a single act of departure, our hero needs some convincing and so the first theme is repeated again. However, upon our second spotting of the white rabbit (measure 30), we are unable to resist temptation. The sputtering of C in measures 32-34 is now the dominant shove we needed to fully commit to the rabbit hole and sure enough, in measure 35, the beginning of the transition, our journey into the unknown is met with a fortissimo F major landing. We are now in Wonderland, a distant place a chromatic mediant away.

35

8 (96)

ritard. **a tempo.** **ff** **p**

Measure 35 represents the first entry into the foreign world. F major is a chromatic mediant away from the home key of Ab major.

The transition that starts at measure 35 can be understood as a sort of grappling with this new world. This is Alice applying the logic of the real world to the absurd realm she finds herself trapped in. The listener tries to make sense of this F major by following the circle of fifths. F becomes dominant, a V^7 of IV, which takes us to Bb in another fortissimo landing on measure 39. Here the path back to Ab becomes visible; the light at the end of the tunnel. Bb becomes dominant in measure 41, which implies direction to Eb, the dominant of our home key and the destination a proper sonata needs to assert its second theme. Measures 42-48 tonicize Eb through use of a D diminished seventh chord. Measure 49 is IV to V in Eb, which Beethoven asserts in measure 50.

It is now that we feel our hero may have escaped the special world. After all, we find ourselves back on track in measure 50. We are in the dominant key (Eb major) and ready to begin our second theme. But here we are like Tom Sawyer in Mark Twain's book by the same name. We are coming home for supper despite possessing the knowledge of Injun Joe's treasure hideaway in the cavern. We simply cannot wait for the next opportunity to explore the caves, to get back to F major.

Thusly, the second theme feels perfunctory; perhaps even an obligatory nuisance. Whereas the first theme dared to wander into the unknown, to risk getting lost, the second theme is direct, not particularly lyrical and comically short. We imagine Beethoven a young boy, hurriedly completing his required homework while his mind is preoccupied with the forbidden land he ventured into earlier; that of F major. The eight bars of the second theme should be performed mechanically, as if an obligation.

Similarly, a performer would be wise to treat the repetition of this material after the first ending as another and perhaps his final chance to explore the unusual world. Every misstep that got him to that forbidden F major should be more familiar to him now, like the path through the woods that led Alice to Wonderland. Like a dog who knows a trail by scent, the performer

should tread this territory with a sense of newfound expertise, eager to relocate the mystery that piqued his interest.

The Eb augmented chord (mm. 60-61) that preceded the first ending is a pivot chord, used first to get back to Ab. When it is used secondly it is interpreted enharmonically as a G augmented chord to propel us to the C harmony in the second ending, which is the dominant launching point for our hero's exploration into F major at measure 66, the start of the development section.

60 61

1. *cresc.* *p*

2. *decresc.* *p*

B.141.

The Eb augmented chord at 60-61 is enharmonically equivalent to a G augmented chord.

It is now in measure 66 that we have fully crossed the threshold (step 5 in the hero's journey diagram). The theme that once represented our home is now truncated to six measures and is in F major, mockingly thrown in our face only to abruptly morph into transition material at measure 72. These aberrations are not unusual in the special world. The visitor is often fooled, lulled into what at first seems familiar, but turns grotesque. Similarly, in *Alice In Wonderland* Alice believes she is taking care of the Duchess's mistreated baby only to discover it is actually a pig in a bonnet. We have been deceived.

In measures 72-75 we explore Bb minor. Then in 76-82 we venture into C minor. It is at this point that we are meeting unusual characters, allies and foes, in the dark world. The

diminished chords used in the development section evoke turmoil, struggle to overcome enemies. There is a sense we don't know whom to trust as we battle through different tonal centers.

Measures 83 and 84 imply a G dominant tonality even though heavy chromaticism is used. This launches us into the false recapitulation at measure 85 in C major. This is a mutant distortion of our first theme, which is painfully revealed in measures 89-92. What we thought was the melody from the first theme is actually the white rabbit returning to outline an E fully diminished seventh chord across all four measures in the upper voice.

E natural at measure 89 is the start of a melodically outlined E fully diminished seventh chord ending with the Db in measure 92.

Measures 92-95 are a prolongation of E^{07} . This marks the beginning of the hardest ordeal, the greatest test of our hero's resolve (step 8). This is the Jabberwocky, Darth Vader, Voldemort. Alice must come face to face with her greatest fear and the most distant thing to her ordinary world. But the tide starts to turn in our hero's favor in measure 95 where we reinterpret the E^{07} as its enharmonic equivalent, G^{07} . This is achieved by Beethoven dropping the E natural (Fb in the G^{07}) to Eb. This is a rejection of the white rabbit and a desire to return home.

The prolonged dominant (Eb) in measures 99-107 describes overcoming the perils of the dark world, capturing the reward, and returning back to home, which is announced at the recapitulation in measure 108 (step 10).

When we hear the E natural in measure 118 and again in measure 137 it takes the form, not of a white rabbit, but of a rabbit's foot; a token of our triumph over the dark side and a symbol of our familiarity with a previously unknown world. This is the reward, the sword from step 9 of the hero's journey.

At measure 142, where before we fell into the rabbit hole, Beethoven now goes to Db major, the subdominant of Ab. The Gb chords interspersed in these next four measures, one half step higher than F, feel like a conquest over F major.

140 141 142 143 144

(99)11

The musical score shows measures 140 to 144. Measure 140 is marked 'ritardando.' Measure 141 is marked 'ff' and 'a tempo.' Measure 142 is marked 'p'. The score shows a piano part with a treble and bass clef, featuring a sequence of chords and melodic lines in a key with three flats (Ab major).

Rather than stuttering on Db at measure 142, Beethoven asserts his previous transition material proudly in the key of Db. The Gb chords in 142-145 can be heard as an overcoming of the F major world that once occupied this space.

Measures 146-155 tonicize Ab with G⁰⁷. We get an emphatic IV to V to I in our home key in measures 156 and 157 and it is here where the short second theme (only 8 measures) is announced in Ab major. If this second theme is an announcement of victory, it is noticeably underspoken. We expect fanfare after this epic journey, but what we hear is quiet and modest. The hero has perhaps kept his journey to himself. Perhaps, like Alice, the journey took place only in the mind; a dream before tea time. Perhaps boasting of such a journey is not necessary. This second theme in Ab is a quiet, personal victory and the dynamics and articulation of these eight measures reflect that.

Upon completion of his quest, the hero is meant to be stronger than before. Through his rebirth he has gained some reward and returns home with an elixir. It is a symbol of an inner power or insight the hero has gained. The coda which begins at 165 is representative of this gained wisdom. The chromaticism used here tonicizes important areas our hero overcame in his quest (B to C, G to Ab, E to F, C to Db, A to Bb, D to Eb). Yes, we have returned home, but we have not forgotten the lessons learned on our journey nor the characters we faced.

164 165 166 167

The image shows a musical score for four measures, numbered 164 to 167. The score is written for piano in a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat). Measure 164 shows a sequence of chords: B-flat major, G major, E-flat major, C major, and A-flat major. Measure 165 shows a sequence of chords: D major, B-flat major, G major, E-flat major, C major, and A-flat major. Measure 166 shows a sequence of chords: F major, D major, B-flat major, G major, E-flat major, and C major. Measure 167 shows a sequence of chords: A-flat major, F major, D major, B-flat major, G major, and E-flat major. The score includes a *cresc.* marking in measure 167. The notation includes treble and bass clefs, a key signature of two flats, and various musical symbols such as notes, rests, and accidentals.

Chromatic tonicizations at 165 highlight tonal areas overcome in the ordeals of the special world.

Applying Conrad's Hero's Journey to musical works is a useful way to contextualize the music, to give it narrative structure. In turn, this informs performance practice when internalized by performers and appreciation when recognized by audiences. As humans we understand our world through stories. We should embrace this fact even when performing and writing music that is not necessarily programmatic. Absolute music does not need to represent a specific story to possess narrative. As Joseph Conrad insightfully summarized, almost all stories from human culture are versions of the hero's journey. Is it any wonder that interpreting music in this way is a compelling way to perform and understand it?

Beethoven, Piano Sonata, Op. 31 No. 3, II (mm. 1-173)

1. Exposition mm. 1-65

- 1.1. First Tonal Area mm. 1-34
 - 1.1.1. First Section mm. 1-19
 - 1.1.1.1. First Theme mm. 1-8 (parallel period)
 - 1.1.1.2. Link mm. 9-19
 - 1.1.2. Second Section mm. 20-34
 - 1.1.2.1. First Theme mm. 20-27 (parallel period)
 - 1.1.2.2. Link mm. 28-34
- 1.2. Transition mm. 35-49
 - 1.2.1. mm. 35-38 - F major turning into F dominant
 - 1.2.2. mm. 39-40 - Alternating Bb major and A fully diminished seventh
 - 1.2.3. mm. 43-48 - Tonicizing Eb (dominant key of entire piece) with D fully diminished seventh chord
 - 1.2.4. mm. 49 - IV to V in Eb
- 1.3. Second Theme mm. 50-61 (mm. 50-65 on second ending)
 - 1.3.1. First Object mm. 50-57
 - 1.3.2. Tail mm. 58-61 (mm. 58-65 on second ending)

2. Development mm. 66-107

- 2.1. mm. 66-71 - First Theme, but now in F
- 2.2. mm. 72-75 - Transition material from mm. 43-46, but now tonicizing Bb minor
- 2.3. mm. 76-77 - Transition material from mm. 47-48, but now tonicizing C minor
- 2.4. mm. 78-82 - Assertion of C minor
- 2.5. mm. 83 - G dominant scale with inclusion of F# (major and minor seventh)
- 2.6. mm. 84 - Chromatic ascension to scale degree three (the first note of the First Object) now in C major (E natural)
- 2.7. mm. 85-90 - First Object now in C major
- 2.8. mm. 89-92 - Morphing of First Object melody into E fully diminished seventh chord arpeggiation
- 2.9. mm. 92-95 - Prolongation of E fully diminished chord
- 2.10. mm. 96-97 - Alternating from E fully diminished to Eb dominant seventh chords
- 2.11. mm. 98-107 - Prolongation of Eb dominant chord, but obscuring function of Eb dominant with inclusion of major seventh (D natural), a recurring device throughout the piece
- 2.12. Mm. 106-107 - Chromatic descension to Ab

3. Recapitulation mm. 108-173

- 3.1. First Theme mm. 108-141
 - 3.1.1. First Period mm. 108-127
 - 3.1.1.1. First Object mm. 108-115
 - 3.1.1.2. Tail mm. 116-126
 - 3.1.2. Second Period mm. 127-141
 - 3.1.2.1. First Object mm. 127-134

- 3.1.2.2. Tail mm. 135-141
- 3.2. Transition mm. 142-156
 - 3.2.1. mm. 142-145 - subdominant Db (and IV of Db, Gb)
 - 3.2.2. mm. 146-147 - dominant Eb tonicized by D fully diminished seventh chord
 - 3.2.3. mm. 148-149 - dominant Eb transformed to E fully diminished seventh chord
 - 3.2.4. mm. 149-150 - E fully diminished seventh chord enharmonically spelled as G fully diminished seventh chord
 - 3.2.5. mm. 150-155 - tonicization of Ab using G fully diminished seventh chord (just like measures 43-48 in the exposition transition)
 - 3.2.6. m. 156 - IV to V in Ab (just like m. 49 in the exposition transition)
- 3.3. Second Theme mm. 157-164 (now in Ab)
- 3.4. Coda mm. 165-173