

Justice, Isaiah, and Beethoven's Sonata Op. 57, "Appassionata"

CHARLES M. RIX

charles.rix@oc.edu

Oklahoma Christian University

The prophet Isaiah and the composer Ludwig van Beethoven portray an outward facing display of fist-in-the-air emotion in portraying the struggle for justice. This essay creates a conversation between the two contrasting themes in the first movement of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 57, "Appassionata," and the thematic material in Isaiah 1-6 in an effort to explore the affective side of the prophetic voice in Isaiah. This conversation is rooted in Mikhail Bakhtin's literary theory that the intonation of an utterance (*how* something is said) is as important to the meaning of the utterance as the words themselves (*what* is said). Thus, this essay experiments with the ways in which the music of Beethoven provides a means of imagining the affective side of Isaiah's prophetic messages. The essay explores the affective side of three themes in the early chapters of Isaiah: hope for justice arising out of a dark world of disappointment, the divine heartbeat that pounds unrelentingly for justice, and the presence of the Holy One's ardent love for the people even though outraged by their unjust behavior.

Keywords: Isaiah, justice, Beethoven, Appassionata, Bakhtin, utterance, polyphony

Introduction

As a classical pianist and professor of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, my love for both subjects compels me to explore conversations between them. These conversations activate our imagination to explore many expressions of God's love, mercy, grace, and justice.¹ My work with the Book of Isaiah and Beethoven's "Appassionata" sonata

¹ Glenn Gould and Alfred Brendel understand music as a means of unlocking the imagination to make connections between the physical and spiritual realms; see Elizabeth Angliette, *Glenn Gould: Philosopher at the Keyboard* (London: Scarecrow Press, 1992), 125–30; Alfred Brendel, *Music Sounded Out: Essays Lectures, Interview, Afterthoughts* (New York: Noonday Press [Farrar, Straus and Giroux], 1990), 61, 65. Makoto Fujimura asserts that art strengthens faith through igniting our imagination to *how* the myriad facets of God's character such as love, mercy, grace, and justice may be felt and experienced; see Makoto Fujimura, *Art+Faith: A Theology of Making* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2020), 87; cf. Daniel Levitin's discussion in which the honesty of musical language provides deeper knowledge about subjects through its association with emotions and feelings in Daniel J. Levitin, *The World in Six Songs: How the Musical Brain Created Human Nature* (New York: Dutton, 2008), 141–42, 145. Jeremy Begbie discusses that music's emotional portrayal of a subject not only promotes shared feelings between listeners

impresses upon me their shared visceral call to justice. Just as the Book of Isaiah portrays the human-divine struggle for justice, the music of a sonata evokes struggle through a progression of two contrasting themes in conversation with each other. I acknowledge that the project of listening to Beethoven is culturally specific to the Western ear. However, this particular sonata arouses emotions of a sufficiently elemental and universal nature to be a worthy starting place to undertake the experiment I propose in this essay.² I suggest that listening to the first movement of Beethoven's "Appassionata" with Isaiah's prophetic utterances in mind helps us imagine the human-divine struggle for justice³ in three ways. First, via the sonata's first theme, we gain a sense of hope for justice arising out of a dark world of disappointment. Second, through an underlying four-note tattoo developing from a quiet rumble to a vortex of rage to a final exhaustion, we feel the divine heartbeat that pounds unrelentingly for justice. Finally, through the contrasting second theme we may imagine the presence of the Holy One's ardent love for Israel even though outraged by her unjust behavior. I proceed through a brief discussion of the intersectionality of Beethoven and Isaiah; Mikhail Bakhtin's literary theory that provides a foundation for how music may be a means to explore the affective side of a text; and then a discussion of how the musical elements of "Appassionata" described above provide a means to imagine or experience the struggle for justice as penned by Isaiah.⁴

Isaiah and Beethoven

The Book of Isaiah portrays the Holy One as lifted up and exalted in justice but disappointed with the failure of Daughter Zion (Judah/Israel) to do justice. She languishes with sickness and injustice. The Holy One demands a hearing—"Hear the word of the LORD, you rulers of Sodom!"⁵—and broods with contempt over her many injustices, vacuous prayers, false fasts, empty feast days, trampled sabbaths, and profound disorientation, calling good evil and evil good. In Isaiah 5, the Holy One planted a vineyard that was meant for good grapes but has produced sour grapes. The love of the Holy One gives way to expressions of outrage and expressions of judgment. Yet, out of

(sympathetic vibrations) but also motivates action. See Jeremy S. Begbie, *Theology, Music and Time* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 12–17.

² The application of Beethoven to imagining the affective side of Isaiah's utterances is limited to the ways in which Western music expresses feelings and emotions. However, as pianist and Beethoven specialist Alfred Brendel notes, Beethoven is the one composer who mastered musical portrayals of the human experience with all of its complexity and contradictions. See David Dubal, *Reflections from the Keyboard*, 2nd ed. (New York: Schirmer Books, 1997), 94.

³ "The Lord of Hosts is exalted by justice, and the Holy God shows himself holy by righteousness" (Isa. 5:16). All references in this paper are taken from the New Revised Standard Version.

⁴ I provide my audio performance of the first movement of the "Appassionata" sonata at <https://bit.ly/RixAppassionata>.

⁵ Isa. 1:2, 10–15.

this despair arises a divine hope of salvation. The Holy One will redeem, renew, and raise them up if the people will only respond. Yet the divine voice of anger and judgment coexists with divine expressions of compassion, steadfast love, salvation, and hope. We hear the prophetic words of Isaiah, but can we get closer to *experience* the heart and plight of the human-divine struggle?

Beethoven provides the musical grist for holding these complex emotions. Beethoven's music, especially in the "Appassionata," interlocks major and minor keys, suddenly shifting tonality and dynamics in unexpected and jolting ways. In this sonata, Beethoven omits expected repetitions of themes so that they may continually morph and travel up and down the keyboard in search of tonal resolutions. In so doing, the music produces the effect of a struggle where one is asked to continually wrestle with contrasting emotions.⁶ In ways that only music can do, we hear and feel multiple emotions simultaneously in a chord progression: protest against injustice that is at the same time determination to bring about justice; a heartbeat which at once beats for love and justice while at the same time protesting injustice; a motif which holds trouble and anxiety but at the same time contains the seeds of hope and redemption.

Jewish religious influences and a quest for a spiritual union with the Divine appear in Beethoven's middle and late works:⁷ the lyrics of Jewish poet Alois Jeitteles appear in Beethoven's song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte*;⁸ the *Kol Nidre* thematically underlies a movement in Beethoven's Quartet for Strings in C-sharp Minor, Op. 131;⁹ and his *Missa solemnis*, Piano Sonata Op. 111, and Quartet in C-sharp Minor form a type of musical spiritual cathedral. The spiritual focus¹⁰ for his work may also be found in his

⁶ The celebrated nineteenth-century first lady of the piano Clara Schumann (wife of composer Robert Schumann) remarked that one needed one's entire soul; Lenin once remarked that the sonata was so powerful that were he to listen to it too much, he would forget to finish the revolution. Dubal, 36.

⁷ For a description of Beethoven's Jewish circle of acquaintances and professional colleagues as well as his ambivalent relationship with the Jewish community and anti-Semitism writ broadly, see Cecil Bloom, "Beethoven's Jewish Connections," *Jewish Quarterly* 38 no. 1 (1991): 26–28.

⁸ In April 2020, the Institute for Jewish Research in New York featured Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte* in a program entitled "Beethoven in the Yiddish Imagination." To view these performances, see "Beethoven in the Yiddish Imagination," YIVO Institute for Jewish Research, accessed March 3, 2020, <https://summerprogram.yivo.org/Beethoven>.

⁹ The *Kol Nidre* is a declaration recited in the synagogue before the beginning of the evening service on Yom Kippur.

¹⁰ In May of 1810, a cultured young woman, Elizabeth Brentano, wrote to the poet Goethe about her encounter with Beethoven. She reported that Beethoven described his music as a mediator between the intellectual and spiritual life, thereby associating his music with the Divine. This followed the period in which Beethoven wrote the "Appassionata" and the Fifth Symphony. Historians align the volcanic nature of Beethoven's compositions to his seeking a closer alliance with the Divine. See Jan Swafford, *Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014), 549–51.

“Appassionata” which gives a full-throated, fist-in-the-air cry for justice.¹¹ We hear a heroic figure who emerges bloodied but not defeated. Indeed, the “Appassionata” holds the spiritual complexity of human struggle.¹² As a musical prophet, Beethoven prompts a quest for connection with the Divine, who is beyond the self.¹³

Music as Exegesis

Music as a means of imagining the affective dimensions of a literary text aligns with the work of Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin. Bakhtin derives two interpretive concepts from the field of music: utterance and polyphony. An utterance, or unit of speech, comprises two components that convey its meaning: content (what is said) and intonation (how the words may be transmitted and received tonally and thus emotionally). An utterance may have multiple meanings depending upon the way the content is sounded or voiced.¹⁴ Polyphony arises through the presence of multiple musical voices sounding together either in harmony or dissonance. When applied to literature, polyphony occurs when multiple characters sound together in some form of dialog. The movement of musical or literary voices either in parallel (together) or in counterpoint (in opposite directions) creates musical or literary harmony, vitality, and meaning.¹⁵

A musical phrase is a type of utterance where the notes themselves convey the content (the “musical idea”), and the way the notes are played—the tempo, dynamics, and intonation—conveys the meaning of that content. When a musical phrase develops in combination with other phrases, polyphony arises (as in a multivoiced fugue). Phrases moving in counterpoint create a dialog as musical phrases or voices speak and answer each other. Thus, music makes meaning for the listener in much the same way a piece of literature makes meaning. Just as a text may contain several meanings depending on how the reader imagines the intonation of the content, a musical composition may have a range of meanings depending on the interpretation of the performer.

¹¹ Alfred Brendel regards the “Appassionata” as the most representative of Beethoven’s extroverted expression of denouncing injustice. Dubal, 90.

¹² With the outbreak of World War II, London concert halls closed for fear of being easy targets for German bombings. British pianist Dame Myra Hess believed such times required public performances of great music that elevated the human spirit. She convinced the director of the National Gallery in London to open the cathedral-like, glass-domed Room 36 for free public lunchtime concerts. For the first concert on September 10, 1939, Hess performed Beethoven’s “Appassionata,” Sonata Op. 57.

¹³ Dubal, 94.

¹⁴ Just as personalities (speakers of utterances) are multiple and unfinalizable, so are the meanings of their utterances. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. M. Holquist, trans. C. Emerson and M. Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), 263, 270–74, 478.

¹⁵ Bakhtin draws on the musical notion of polyphony and counterpoint only as a graphic analogy of what is meant when literary voices are put into conversation with each other. See Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky’s Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas, 1981), 22.

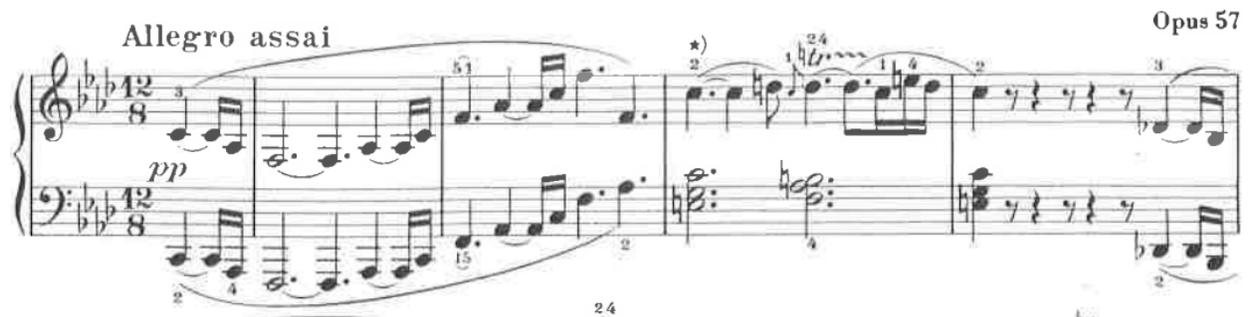
Thus, music may be employed as an exegetical tool as it activates the imagination towards how ideas in literary phrases might sound and thus be felt, heard, and internalized. For example, how do we imagine the sound of the Holy One's voice, how it sounds and how it feels? Given the intensity of Isaiah's literary prophecy and the opening command to *hear* and therefore experience the judgment of the Holy One, Beethoven's music provides one type of musical vocabulary to experience the affective dimension of Isaiah's words.

Imagining the Divine Voice through Beethoven

Hope emerges out of disappointment

The book of Isaiah opens with the LORD expressing hatred of the people's worship: "Your new moons and your appointed festivals my soul hates; they have become a burden to me, I am weary of bearing them" (Isa. 1:14). However, out of the LORD's hatred and disappointment comes a hopeful call for justice: "Cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow" (Isa. 1:17). Hope for justice arises out of disappointment. How might an utterance expressing such profound disappointment sound as it resolves into something hopeful?¹⁶ The entire first movement grows organically out of the first few notes, the first theme of the "Appassionata,"¹⁷ that provides a musical vocabulary for imagining hope rising from an abyss of despair.¹⁸

Figure 1.



¹⁶ Conductor, musicologist, and Beethoven biographer Jan Caeyers understands the compelling drama in the "Appassionata" as between powerlessness and optimism. Jan Caeyers, *Beethoven: A Life* (Oakland: University of California, 2020), 242–44.

¹⁷ Ludwig van Beethoven, *Klaviersonate Nr. 23 F–minor Op. 57* (Appassionata), ed. Bertha Antonia Wallner, fingering by Conrad Hansen (Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 1981), 3–17.

¹⁸ Swafford understands the Appassionata's opening downward figure announcing a story of dashed hopes. The first four bars contain the meaning of the entire first movement in an astonishing economy of notes. Swafford, 410–411.

The opening pianissimo F minor octaves plunge downward into the abyss of a forbidding darkness and contain the thematic center of the entire first movement.¹⁹ They seethe with all the emotional tension yet to be expressed. We can hear in these spare, dark, parallel, pianissimo octaves Yhwh's despair, disappointment, and anger lurking just beneath the surface. In the world of Isaiah, the worship and practice of Yhwh's people are corrupt: they call good evil. But unexpectedly, out of this darkness rises a shoot of hope as the arpeggios push upward and lift us into the brighter dominant key of C major.²⁰ The sequence repeats in the key of F-sharp major to underscore this hope. For Isaiah, sins that are scarlet may become white as snow.

Figure 2.



Similarly, in the development of the sonata, the descending parallel octaves reappear after the exposition of the major themes (bars 65–67). The ominous A-flat minor arpeggio suddenly shifts to an E major that ascends and resumes the opening dialog of question and answer that provides calm and temporary reassurance. Yet, even this reassurance is interrupted by another downward motif in E minor that turns upward seeing a positive resolution (bars 79–93). This motif of a downward minor chord transforming itself into a major recurs until the end of the first movement (bars 134–150, 151–161, 162–171, 216–234, 256–252).

The divine heartbeat for justice

The ascending octaves (bars 8–16) that signaled hope in the opening bars are suddenly interrupted by a protesting four-note tattoo, three D-flats followed by a C. The tension breaks as the right hand takes up the tattoo from which flows a crashing single arpeggio covering the breadth of the keyboard and resolving into a pianissimo C major chord. The despair of justice may contain seeds of hope, but the injustice is far from resolved. The intrusion of the thematic four-note tattoo signals the heartbeat of the

¹⁹ F minor is generally regarded as the brooding and tragic key.

²⁰ Daniel Levitin, *This is Your Brain on Music* (New York: Dutton, 2016), 104-105.

Figure 3.

Figure 3 shows a musical score with two staves. The top staff features a melodic line with a trill and a fermata. The bottom staff features a bass line with a triplet and a fermata. Dynamics include *pp*, *poco ritard*, and *f*. The text "dan - do a tempo" is written below the bottom staff.

primary musical theme: both protest against injustice and determination that justice must be realized. One feels the rage of the divine outcry (such as is expressed in Isa. 1:21, “How the faithful city has become a whore!”) through a single-handed arpeggio that plummets like a hammer down the length of the keyboard.

Figure 4.

Figure 4 shows a musical score with two staves. The top staff features a melodic line with a trill and a fermata. The bottom staff features a bass line with a triplet and a fermata. Dynamics include *p* and *pp*.

Following the crashing arpeggio, an alternating fistful of F minor chords ascends majestically up the keyboard.

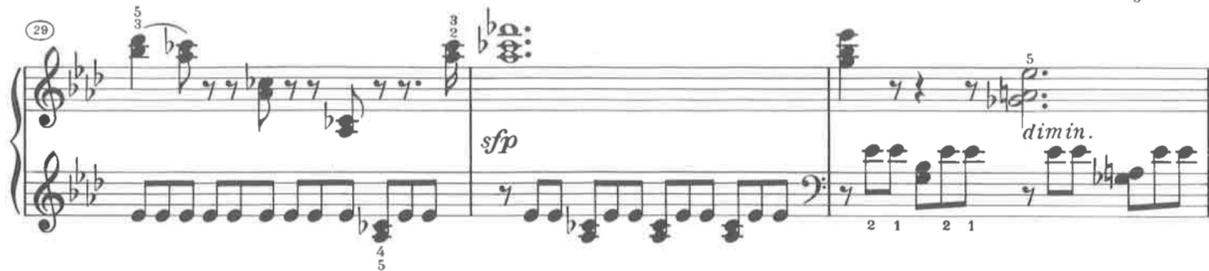
Figure 5.

Figure 5 shows a musical score with two staves. The top staff features a melodic line with a trill and a fermata. The bottom staff features a bass line with a triplet and a fermata. Dynamics include *ff* and *p*.

In full throttle, the presence of the deity comes into full view: ominous, serious, uncompromising, determined to announce that injustice must be done away with and justice must reign. Here we may imagine Isaiah’s vision of Yhwh high and lifted up (Isa. 6:1, “I saw the LORD sitting on a throne, high and lofty”). The interplay quickly gives way to the heartbeat of the tattoo that dominates the remainder of the exposition. The rapid-

fire tattoo representing a passion for doing justice provides a way to imagine the pulse of justice that runs through the divine voice.

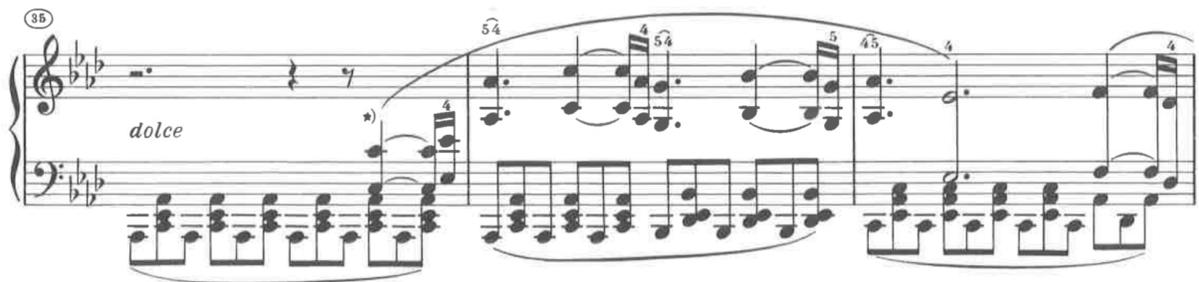
Figure 6.



Divine love amid outrage against injustice

The second theme in the lower register emerges deeply resonant with pastoral care and parental love. One imagines the opening lines of God’s love song in Isaiah 5:1–7, “Let me sing for my beloved my love song concerning his vineyard” (Isa. 5:1a). Evoking the emotions of a caretaker tending his/her vineyard, a pastoral, melodic theme plays in the right hand. This theme is a variation on the opening theme and lays gently over alternating major chords of A-flat. The alternating triplets create a feeling of unease, a love song with storm clouds, or perhaps recalling divine love that is disappointed. As the undulating base of triplets shifts to ascending trills, a shift from major to minor harmonies signals an ominous mood.

Figure 7.



The trills rise like the thread of a faint prayer only to turn downward in an ambiguous chromatic descent into darkness. Then suddenly, a raging whirlwind of fortissimo arpeggios in countermotion along with the four-note tattoo bursts in as a cauldron of fire and brimstone against injustice.

Figure 8.

Figure 8 displays three systems of musical notation, likely from a piano or organ score, in a minor key. The notation includes treble and bass clefs, a key signature of two flats, and various musical symbols such as dynamics (*f*, *ff*), articulation (accents, fermatas), and fingering numbers (1-5). System 48 shows a melodic line in the treble clef and a bass line with a fermata. System 51 features a piano (*f*) dynamic and complex rhythmic patterns in both staves. System 53 features a fortissimo (*ff*) dynamic and includes a fermata in the bass line and a star symbol in the treble line.

Through this musical turbulence, we might imagine the Holy One's denouncement of injustice in the Song of the Vineyard (Isa. 5:8–23). The music evokes images of terror that cohere with Isaiah's expression of Yhwh's outrage that the vineyard yielded only wild grapes. Like a tornado whipping through the vineyard, the Holy One rips up hedges and breaks down walls (Isa. 5:5) and calls out materialistic greed (Isa. 5:8–10), drunkenness and indulgences (Isa. 5:11–17, 21), calling evil good and good evil (Isa. 5:18–20), pride (Isa. 5:21), and bribery (Isa. 5:23). Throughout the first movement, these turbulent passages repeat and create tension and anticipation of a resolution. However, each time, these figures rise to the height of the keyboard and then down again with ever-increasing fury signaling yet more divine disappointment.

Reflections on Beethoven, Isaiah, and the Divine Voice

Listening to Isaiah through the music of Beethoven's "Appassionata" provides a means to evaluate the affective side of the prophetic voice. The organizing theme of Beethoven's "Appassionata" evokes the feeling of hope rising out of a frightening abyss. Isaiah's opening affirmation confirms that no matter how grave the people's injustice the Holy One of Israel is mighty to save. Even though the people's sins are as scarlet, they will

be white as snow. Beethoven's simple but powerful protest theme ingeniously creates for us a means to imagine the continual heartbeat of God for justice. Thus, calling out the people and the nations at every turn does not aim to condemn but to expose and heal the injustices. Inherent in the Holy One's judgements lies God's love for the people and the Holy One's desire to see his people *do* justice.²¹ The alternating accompaniment figures underlying Beethoven's melodies bring us face to face with the volatility in the human-divine relationship. The people's many injustices ignite the Holy One's anger and frustration prompting the prophet to call them to account. Yet the Holy One's love for his people remains throughout. Through the music of Beethoven, we move closer to experiencing the depth of the passion the Holy One has for the people as we journey with the Holy One on this side to the New Heaven and the New Earth.

²¹ For more on themes of justice in Isaiah, see Thomas L. Leclerc, *Yahweh is Exalted in Justice: Solidarity and Conflict in Isaiah* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001).

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