

Timbre/Instrumentation

An aspect of this movement that is particularly notable instrumentally is the solo-tutti rivalry between the piano and the orchestra (the piano, of course, being the solo instrument, and the orchestra the “tutti”). This is particularly observable starting at bar 172 onwards, where the orchestra plays the second theme, and the piano responds with powerful chords and scalic runs, as well as some heavily ornamented bars at around 184. ①

The excerpt below is from bars 179-183. Note that the piano part uses semi-quavers, creating the illusion of a faster tempo. This is one way that Beethoven ensures that the piano always wins the ‘rivalry’ and also engages the audience.

The piano always ‘wins’ as solo-tutti rivalry is all about showing off the musical virtuoso who is the soloist. It is a competition to see if the soloist can provide a more impressive and skilful performance than the entire orchestra – more or less an intellectual game of tag. ⑤

Bars 249-268 are an example of where the piano part is able to focus on precision and skill (arpeggios and semiquaver passages up and down the keyboard) while the orchestral part tries to interject with punchy thematic material.

The piano part in the rivalry will always be faster and more complex, as it does not have the benefit of a range of timbre that the whole orchestra has, seeing as it is only one instrument, and so it musically compensates for this by creating grandeur in speed and dexterity. By using extended, fast scalic passages in response to the orchestra’s simple phrases, Beethoven ensures that though only being a solo instrument, the piano always wins the solo-tutti rivalry. ②
⑥

The piano cadenza further emphasises the instrument's musical potential, playing quick and technically challenging runs in both hands – written to impress and energise the audience. For example, bars 466-468, where there are rapid chromatic passages. These bars sound dramatic and maintain the soloist's *virtuoso*. The use of embellishment is also an effective tool in the cadenza, used primarily to create rhythmic variation and dramatic tension, e.g. the long rising trills leading up to the recapitulation.

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As Beethoven featured as soloist and conductor in the premier of the concerto, he would have improvised most of the cadenza. This would have had the effect of impressing the audience and helping to seal his reputation as one of the greatest pianists in Europe at the time.

The solo-tutti rivalry is well established in the concerto form by this time and although the work is absolute (i.e. not programmatic), it is hard to imagine that any of Beethoven's contemporaries could have put as much emotion and passion into the well-established sonata/concerto form. And alongside his musical passion he writes technically challenging music for the soloist while also exploring timbral interest from the orchestra.

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