

Roger Allen

**“That Is What Music Really Is”. Richard Wagner’s Reception
of Beethoven’s Piano Sonata in A Major Op. 101**

In a diary entry for 14 November 1882, made during the last months of Wagner’s life, Cosima Wagner records Richard as making the following observation: “the first movement of [Beethoven’s] A major Sonata [Op. 101] is an excellent example of what I mean by unending melody. That is what music really is”.¹

It is a received commonplace and hardly necessary to state that Richard Wagner’s reception of and deep level of engagement with the music of Beethoven was one of the motivating forces behind his creative work. In his first extant letter of 6 October 1830, the seventeen-year-old Wagner describes to the publisher Schott how “for some time past I have made Beethoven’s last, glorious symphony the subject of my deepest study”;² ten years later he writes from Paris in the novella *A Pilgrimage to Beethoven* (*Eine Pilgerfahrt zu Beethoven*) how “[t]o this day I scarce can grasp my happiness at thus being helped by Beethoven himself to a full understanding of his titanic Last Symphony”;³ in the essay *Beethoven* of 1870, the mature Wagner, then approaching the height of his powers as he brought the *Ring* towards completion and planned its premiere in Bayreuth, made Beethoven the subject of what was to be the principal aesthetic statement of his later years when he described the composer as having “penetrated the innermost nature of music”.⁴ These three examples from the beginning, middle and towards the end of Wagner’s creative life can be multiplied many times over. There have been several studies devoted to the subject: Klaus Kropfingher’s classic 1975 monograph *Wagner und Beethoven* remains

- 1 “Der erste Satz von dieser A dur Sonate ist so recht ein Beispiel von dem, was ich unter unendlicher Melodie verstehe, das, was eigentlich Musik”. Cosima Wagner: *Die Tagebücher*, Vol. 2: 1878–1883, ed. by Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, München/Zürich 1977, p. 1047; English translation after *Cosima Wagner’s Diaries*, Vol. 2: 1878–1883, ed. by Martin Gregor-Dellin and Dietrich Mack, trans. by Geoffrey Skelton, New York/London 1980, p. 951.
- 2 “Schon lange habe ich mir Beethoven’s letzte herrliche Sinfonie zum Gegenstand meines tiefsten Studium’s gemacht”. Richard Wagner: *Briefe der Jahre 1830–1842*, ed. by Gertrud Strobel and Werner Wolf, Leipzig 1967 (*Sämtliche Briefe*, Vol. 1), p. 117; English translation by the author.
- 3 “Noch heute kann ich das Glück kaum fassen, das mir dadurch zu Theil ward, daß mir Beethoven selbst durch diese Andeutungen zum vollen Verständniß seiner riesenhaften letzten Symphonie verhalf”. Richard Wagner: *Eine Pilgerfahrt zu Beethoven* [1840], in: id.: *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen*, 5th edition, Leipzig [1911–1916], Vol. 1, pp. 90–114, here p. 111; English translation after *Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, trans. by William Ashton Ellis, Vol. 7, London 1898, pp. 42 f.
- 4 “[...] zu dem innersten Wesen der Musik [...] durchgedrungen”. Roger Allen: *Richard Wagner’s “Beethoven” (1870)*. A new translation, Woodbridge 2014, pp. 78 f. There were, of course, wider agendas nourishing this essay which I have written about elsewhere, see *ibid.*, pp. 1–28.

indispensable;⁵ more recently Christopher Alan Reynolds's *Wagner, Schumann and the Lessons of Beethoven's Ninth* offers new perspectives on Wagner's reception of the Ninth Symphony.⁶ This is all well-trodden musicological ground; so what, if anything, remains to be discovered about Wagner's reception of Beethoven?

In this respect, the remark Wagner made towards the end of his life regarding the late Piano Sonata in A major Op. 101 is instructive. Although recorded by Cosima rather than written down by Wagner himself, there seems to be no reason to doubt its authenticity. I therefore propose to unpack this statement by asking two questions. The first has two limbs: what did Wagner mean by "unending or infinite melody", and how might this be evident in the first movement of Op. 101? Secondly, do the form of and musical processes evident in the first movement of Op. 101 inform Wagner's later compositional practices, as evident, for example in the Prelude to Act 1 of *Tristan und Isolde*?

"Unending melody" is one of those Wagnerian mantras which, like the equally problematic concept of the "Total Work of Art" (*Gesamtkunstwerk*), have accrued multiple layers of meaning with repeated usage. Wagner's contemporaneous detractors used it as a stick with which to beat him by equating it with what they regarded as the unmelodic character of his vocal lines and the overall distended proportions of his operas. Wagner himself used the actual term only once. In the 1860 essay *Music of the Future*, written as a simplified exegesis of his theories set out in the Zurich essays of a decade earlier, he writes that "it is the musician who brings the great unsaid to sounding life, and the unmistakable form of this resounding silence is *endless melody*."⁷ In broad terms, this can be taken as a definition of Wagner's ideas of dramatic expression where the musical realisation is always driven by the poetic impulse and never overridden by the demands of formulaic musical syntax. Equally, as Thomas Grey points out, it can be taken as a paradigm of the unbroken linear development and avoidance of strong cadences that can be seen in the later operas, and most especially in *Tristan*.⁸ With these definitions in mind, we might at this point consider how Beethoven's A major Sonata conforms to this portmanteau description of endless melody as linear development and avoidance of cadences.

- 5 Klaus Kropfing: *Wagner und Beethoven. Untersuchungen zur Beethoven-Rezeption Richard Wagners*, Regensburg 1975 (Studien zur Musikgeschichte des 19. Jahrhunderts, Vol. 29); English edition: *Wagner and Beethoven. Richard Wagner's Reception of Beethoven*, trans. by Peter Palmer, Cambridge 1991.
- 6 Christopher Alan Reynolds: *Wagner, Schumann and the Lessons of Beethoven's Ninth*, Oakland, CA, 2015.
- 7 "[...] der Musiker ist es nun, der dieses Verschwiegene zum hellen Ertönen bringt, und die untrügliche Form seines laut erklingenden Schweigens ist die unendliche Melodie". Richard Wagner: *Zukunftsmusik*, in: *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen*, Vol. 7, pp. 87–137, here p. 130; English translation: id.: *Music of the Future*, in: *Three Wagner Essays*, trans. by Robert L. Jacobs, London 1979, pp. 13–44, here p. 40.
- 8 Thomas Grey: *A Wagnerian Glossary*, in: *The Wagner Compendium. A Guide to Wagner's Life*, ed. by Barry Millington, London 1992, pp. 230–241, here pp. 233 f.

The parallels become more evident when comparing the overall structure of the first movement of Op. 101 and the *Tristan* Prelude. As I am sure we are all well aware, the *Tristan* Prelude is probably the most extensively analysed and discussed piece in the entire literature of Western music, closely followed by the late Beethoven piano sonatas. I have no intention whatsoever of adding to the accumulated weight of words on these matters. Rather, given the location of this conference, it seems appropriate to take as our starting point the Analysis of the *Tristan* Prelude by the music theorist Ernst Kurth (1886–1946), sometime Professor of Musicology at the University of Bern. Kurth is a theorist not widely known in the English-speaking world. Alas, unlike his much better known contemporary Heinrich Schenker, not one of his books has been translated in its entirety. This analysis is taken from Kurth's *The Crisis of Romantic Harmony in Wagner's "Tristan"*,⁹ and is helpfully included in English translation in the Norton Critical Score of the *Prelude and Transfiguration*, edited by Robert Bailey.

In order to gain further purchase on Wagner's remarks about Op. 101, I propose to take just four points from Kurth's analysis and retrospectively map them on to the Beethoven sonata movement. First, the matter of the overall musical design. The initial point to notice is the similarity of dimension between Beethoven's sonata movement and Wagner's Prelude.

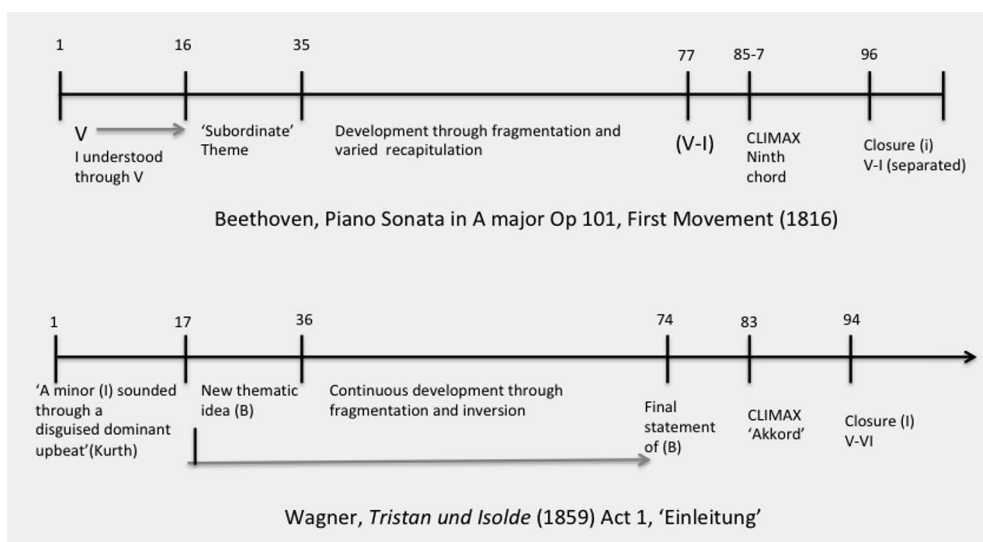


FIGURE 1 Ludwig van Beethoven: Piano Sonata in A major Op. 101 first movement; Richard Wagner: *Tristan und Isolde*, Prelude to Act 1. Linear comparison of primary tonal and thematic events

9 See Ernst Kurth: *Romantische Harmonik und ihre Krise in Wagners "Tristan"*, Bern 1920, pp. 286–296; English translation in: Wagner. *Prelude and Transfiguration from "Tristan und Isolde"*, ed. by Robert Bailey, New York 1985, pp. 196–204.

This line diagram shows how the primary musical events occur at corresponding points in the linear structure. Kurth sees the *Tristan* Prelude as a tonally closed arch form in an implied, though unstated, tonic key of a minor.

“The Prelude to the first act of *Tristan*, taken as a whole, can be regarded as a tonally complete structure, even though in its last measures it turns from the main tonality of A minor to C minor. Apart from this final modulation leading into the first scene with its new key intact, tonal unity is present up to m. 94.”¹⁰

Similarly, in the Beethoven sonata movement the tonal argument could be said to conclude at a corresponding point with the perfect cadence over the bar line between bars 95 and 96, although even here Beethoven weakens the sense of harmonic closure through rhythmic displacement and the insertion of rests.

Secondly, Kurth describes the opening 15 bars of the *Tristan* Prelude as a “disguised and greatly relaxed dominant upbeat”, through which the underlying tonic (a minor) is withheld and understood in its absence (see Figure 2).¹¹

To Kurth these bars “by themselves show a special kind of development and constitute one of the largest-scale ideas in all tonal music”.¹² In the case of Beethoven Op. 101, we have already considered the opening 16 bars as an example of linear development and cadential avoidance. Let’s think about them again in Kurth’s terms as a “broad dominant upbeat” (see Figure 3).

Robert Levin eloquently reminded us in his lecture-recital¹³ that Op. 101 has “no beginning”. As in the *Tristan* Prelude we see from the outset that the tonic is withheld and understood through its dominant. Op. 101 begins in a tonally ambiguous manner over a dominant pedal. The tonic is implied (see for example the internal inverted and rhythmically displaced tonic pedal in bars 3 and 4), but not stated; all the time the tonal pull is towards the dominant of E major through the use of interrupted cadences until a perfect cadence in the dominant is finally achieved at bar 25, and given additional expressive traction through the rarely used marking “semplice”. As in the *Tristan* Pre-

10 “Auch dieses [the prelude to *Tristan*] ist im ganzen noch als ein tonartlich geschlossenes Gebilde zu betrachten, wenn es auch mit seinen letzten Takten aus der Haupttonart a-Moll nach c-Moll wendet; von dieser Schlußmodulation, die in die erste Szene schon mit ihrer ganzen Tonartsstimmung leitet, abgesehen, liegt bis zum 94. Takt im großen Tonartseinheit vor.” Kurth: *Romantische Harmonik*, p. 286; Wagner. *Prelude and Transfiguration* from “*Tristan und Isolde*”, p. 196.

11 “[...] einen verkappten und weit aufgelockerten dominantischen Auftakt”. Kurth: *Romantische Harmonik*, p. 295; Wagner. *Prelude and Transfiguration* from “*Tristan und Isolde*”, p. 203.

12 “Einen besonderen Entwicklungstypus, zugleich eine der großzügigsten Weitungs-ideen aller tonalen Musik, zeigen gleich die ersten fünfzehn Takte für sich.” Kurth: *Romantische Harmonik*, p. 286; Wagner. *Prelude and Transfiguration* from “*Tristan und Isolde*”, p. 196.

13 See Robert Levin’s contribution in this volume, pp. 249–261.

The image shows a musical score for Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, Prelude to Act 1, bars 1-18. The tempo is marked "Langsam und schmachtend." The score is in 6/8 time and begins with a piano (*pp*) dynamic. The music is written for piano and features a complex harmonic structure with chromatic voice leading. Dynamics range from *pp* to *ff*. The score includes fingerings and articulation marks.

FIGURE 2 Wagner: *Tristan und Isolde*, Prelude to Act 1, bars 1–18

lude, avoidance of the tonic is an integral part of Beethoven's compositional process in Op. 101/1. There is no perfect cadence in the tonic key until bar 77; even then the piano dynamic almost seems apologetic and hardly makes it seem like a teleological point of arrival. The climactic point of the movement comes later on the rhythmically displaced dissonance over a tonic pedal at bar 86 (see Figure 5). This is two bars later than the climactic point of the *Tristan* Prelude which occurs on the strong beat of bar 83; but within the overall dimensions of the movement the climax occurs at a corresponding point in the musical design.

Thirdly, in the *Tristan* Prelude continuous development of the musical material begins at bar 17 with the introduction of the so-called "Blickmotiv" in the cello which forms the second main musical idea. If we can identify a subordinate theme, or second subject, at all in the Beethoven sonata movement it can be said to occur at a corresponding point at bar 16. It has always intrigued me that, although beginning on different scale degrees, these two themes have a similar initial melodic contour: rising through a third then falling a seventh. Moreover, in both the Beethoven and the Wagner examples they occur after what, following Kurth, may be identified as an extended dominant preparation in which the tonic is withheld.

Fourthly, we might consider the extent to which chromatic voice leading, so integral to the musical syntax of *Tristan* from the very opening bars, also pervades the texture of

Sonate 211

Der Freiin Dorothea von Ertmann gewidmet
Komponiert 1816

Etwas lebhaft und mit der innigsten Empfindung
Allegretto, ma non troppo Opus 101

28.

5 *poco ritard.* *a tempo* *cresc.* *mf*

11 *dimin.* *cresc.* *dim.*

17 *cresc.* *p* *cresc.* *p*

23 *cresc.* *f* *p* *espressivo e semplice*

29 *pp*

FIGURE 3 Beethoven: Piano Sonata Op. 101, bars 1–34. Compare bars 1–15 with Kurth’s description of “a disguised and greatly relaxed dominant upbeat” and the new theme starting in bar 16 (see *Tristan Prelude*, bar 17)

the first movement of Beethoven Op. 101. In the first two bars the treble and tenor voices are in contrary motion, the tenor part falling through chromatic semitones in an inversion of the rising upper voice of Tristan's opening. In bars 9 and 10 (see Figure 3) we can even see the so-called "Tristan" motif itself (g sharp – a natural – a sharp – b natural) rising in the bass line; and in bars 52–54 it is embedded in octaves in the inner voices.



FIGURE 4 Beethoven: Sonata Op. 101, bars 51–55, showing the "Tristan" motif embedded in octaves within the texture

Towards the end in bar 89 there is even a striking anticipation of the harmonic language of Tristan, especially in the second half of the bar with its progression in semitones through Italian, French and German Sixth chords leading to a delayed resolution of a second inversion tonic chord, with its implied dominant function.

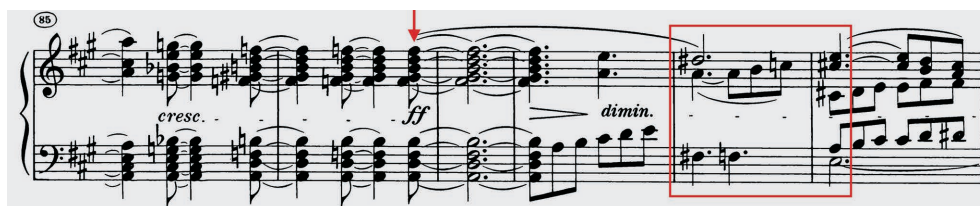


FIGURE 5 Beethoven: Sonata Op. 101, bars 85–90, showing a rhythmically displaced climactic point at bar 86 and augmented sixth chords anticipating the harmonic language of Tristan at bars 89 f.

One final point. It may seem to be a banal statement of the obvious, but Beethoven Op. 101/1 is in 6/8, or compound duple time: that is two dotted crotchet beats in a bar. So, let it be remembered, is the Tristan prelude. We have become so accustomed to portentous readings with six solid quaver beats in a bar, that we can all too easily overlook the underlying hypermetrical pulse as defined by the duple time signature. There is some evidence that earlier performances of Tristan were much more fluid in approach, such as in the 1928 recording of the Prelude with Wagner's concert ending conducted by Richard Strauss.¹⁴ Strauss, let it be remembered, experienced the opera under the direction of its

14 See www.youtube.com/watch?v=RTZKAMxSEUk (accessed 30 January 2019).

first conductor Hans von Bülow, and later commented that his performance of the *Tristan* Prelude was yet another thing he owed to the teaching given by von Bülow.

Conclusion It is important not to make exaggerated claims for any of these observations. The influences on the *Tristan* style were many and various. Just to take two examples: in his book *The Sorcerer of Bayreuth*, Barry Millington makes a convincing case for Bülow's now forgotten orchestral fantasy *Nirwana* as a significant compositional model for *Tristan*;¹⁵ in his novel *Doctor Faustus* (1947) Thomas Mann suggests with reference to Chopin's *Nocturne in c sharp minor Op. 27 No 1*, that "there are quite a few things in Chopin that, not only harmonically but also in a general, psychological sense more than anticipate Wagner, indeed surpass him."¹⁶ What is beyond doubt, however, is that Wagner's assimilation of Beethoven, particularly at the time of *Tristan* when his musical imagination was working at white heat, was a subtle, subliminal and even subconscious process. In short, Beethoven was fundamental to Wagner's musical DNA.

There can be no doubt that, through his close association with such leading piano virtuosi as Liszt and von Bülow, Wagner would have been thoroughly familiar with the later Beethoven piano sonatas. It must remain a matter of conjecture whether or not he consciously used the first movement of Beethoven's *Op. 101* as a template for the *Tristan* Prelude, or took the opening rising semitone motif from Beethoven's chromatic voice leading. But, as we have seen, the direct correspondences between the two movements are striking and there for all to see. What we can say with certainty is that in the treatment of material both the Beethoven sonata movement and the *Tristan* Prelude are paradigms of musical form as process rather than architecture. As the doyen of English writers on Wagner Ernest Newman puts it, "The [*Tristan*] Prelude is a perfect specimen of musical form at its most consummate, not a schematic mould imposed upon 'thematic material' from the outside but a form that has come into being simply as the outcome of the ideas."¹⁷ Or, to paraphrase Adolph Bernhard Marx: form determined by content.¹⁸ Both descriptions could equally well apply to the first movement of Beethoven's *Piano Sonata in A major Op. 101*. Thus a direct comparison between these two movements, each in

15 Barry Millington: *The Sorcerer of Bayreuth. Richard Wagner, his Work and his World*, London 2012, pp. 197f.

16 "Aber nicht ganz Weniges gibt's ja bei Chopin, was Wagner, nicht nur harmonisch, sondern im Allgemein-Seelischen, mehr als antizipiert, nämlich gleich überholt." Thomas Mann: *Doktor Faustus. Das Leben des deutschen Tonsetzers Adrian Leverkühn, erzählt von einem Freunde*, Frankfurt a. M. 42002 (Gesammelte Werke in Einzelbänden, Vol. 1), p. 194; id.: *Doctor Faustus*, trans. H. T. Lowe-Porter, London 1949, p. 143.

17 Ernest Newman: *Wagner Nights*, London 51974 (1949), p. 225.

18 See Adolph Bernhard Marx: *Ludwig van Beethoven. Leben und Schaffen*, Berlin 1859, Vol. 1, esp. pp. 27–30.

themselves part of a greater whole, demonstrates one way in which Richard Wagner, in his own words, “channelled into the bed of music drama the great stream which Beethoven sent pouring into German music”.¹⁹ As Wagner subsequently says in his *Beethoven* essay of 1870:

“It was the achievement of our great *Beethoven*, whom we consequently must regard as the true epitome of the musician, that by means of these forms he penetrated the innermost nature of music in such a way as to cast the inner light of the visionary outwards again and thus once more showed us these forms only in accordance with their inner meaning.”²⁰

To return in conclusion to Wagner's remark with which I began, perhaps we can now see a little more clearly what he might have meant when he described the first movement of Beethoven's Op. 101 as “what music really is”.

Afterword The foregoing argument was initially suggested by the entry in Cosima Wagner's diary cited at the head of the paper and first encountered in the course of researches in preparation for my edition of Wagner's essay *Beethoven* (1870). In the discussion following my presentation at the Symposium, László Stachó pointed out that Theodor W. Adorno had made a similar connection.

“After practising the Piano Sonata op 101. – Is the first movement the model for the prelude to *Tristan*? Quite different in tone, as if the (incomparably condensed) sonata form had become a lyric poem, entirely subjectivized, spiritualized, stripped of the tectonic. And yet, not only on account of the quavers and 6/8 rhythm, but because of the structural importance of the chromatic (derived from the alternating dominant in bar 1) and an element which is difficult to grasp – sequences of longing – especially in the development after the F sharp minor entry [bar 41].”²¹

- 19 “[...] daß der ganze reiche Strom, zu welchem Beethoven die deutsche Musik hatte anschwellen lassen, in das Bett dieses musikalischen Drama's geleitet würde”. Wagner: *Zukunftsmusik*, p. 97; id.: *Music of the Future*, p. 19.
- 20 “Durch diese Formen aber zu dem innersten Wesen der Musik in der Weise durchgedrungen zu sein, dass er von dieser Seite her das innere Licht des hellsehenden wieder nach aussen zu werfen vermochte, um auch diese Formen nur nach ihrer inneren Bedeutung uns wieder zu zeigen, dies war das Werk unseres grossen Beethoven, den wir daher als den wahren Inbegriff des Musikers uns vorzuführen haben.” Allen: Richard Wagner's “Beethoven”, pp. 78 f.
- 21 “Als ich die Sonate op. 101 geübt hatte. – Ist der 1. Satz das Modell zum *Tristan*vorspiel? Ganz anders im Ton, gleichsam die (beispiellos kondensierte) Sonatenform als lyrisches Gedicht, ganz subjektiviert, durchseelt, enttektonisiert. Und doch, nicht nur wegen ♩ und 6/8, sondern wegen der konstruktiven Bedeutung der (aus der Wechseldominante des 1. Taktes abgeleiteten) Chromatik und einem Element das schwer zu fassen ist – Sequenzen der Sehnsucht – vor allem in der Durchführung nach dem fis-moll-Einsatz [T. 41].” Theodor W. Adorno: *Beethoven. Philosophie der Musik. Fragmente und Texte*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, Frankfurt a. M. 1993, pp. 184 f.; English: id.: *Beethoven. The Philosophy of Music. Fragments and Texts*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann, Stanford, CA 1998, p. 126.

In this brief aphorism, Adorno makes no mention of the structural parallels evident in a comparison between Beethoven's sonata movement and Wagner's Prelude, but notes the importance of the 6/8 rhythm, of the "chromatic" as a point of structural definition and the opening on the dominant. The "sequences of longing" identified as beginning at bar 41 may be a case of Adorno retrospectively applying to the Beethoven movement terminology familiar from Wagnerian discourse associated with *Tristan*, but the point is persuasive. Beethoven's dynamic "terracing" and changes of register in the bass have their counterpart in Wagner's antiphonal exchanges between the lower strings and the upper woodwind through what might be termed a process of development through motivic fragmentation in a corresponding passage in the *Tristan* Prelude (bars 36–42).²²

22 I am most grateful to László Stachó for bringing this to my attention.

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RUND UM BEETHOVEN

Interpretationsforschung heute •

Herausgegeben von Thomas

Gartmann und Daniel Allenbach

MUSIKFORSCHUNG DER
HOCHSCHULE DER KÜNSTE BERN

Herausgegeben von Martin Skamletz
und Thomas Gartmann

Band 14



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