The heart of a rondo is the refrain itself. It is usually a well-defined and harmonically complete melody, often a double period, and sometimes a rounded binary or ternary form.

The refrain is typically short, lyrical, and major mode. It may involve a two-measure phrase, the second varied only in register. The refrain is an exact restatement of the first eight measures and leads directly into the second episode.

The second episode is usually the longest, the most complex, and the most usually distant digression. It may be thematic or it may develop previous material and explore various tonal regions such as the parallel key, the subdominant, or (especially in Haydn's and Beethoven's rondos) a chromatic-related relationship. It often ends with a substantial preparation to prepare harmonically for the refrain.

The second episode of Beethoven's Adagio is thematic and begins, without transition, in the parallel minor key (Ab). A new rhythmic element—the sixteenth-note triplet—is introduced. An exuberant common chord modulation to E occurs at mm. 41–44. (See page 32 for a detailed discussion of this passage.) A dramatic peak in the movement, these measures contain a dynamic, sectional, and a rise to a melodic high point underscored by emphatic articulation. A three-measure retransition in mm. 46–50 leads smoothly back to Ab by way of a diminished seventh chord.
As with the first return of the refrain, the second return may be shortened or otherwise varied, but it is almost always in the home key.

The second and final return in Beethoven's Adagio is a complete restatement of the refrain, but with a continuation of the triplet accompaniment first introduced in the second episode. By this means, Beethoven has integrated elements from the two sections.

Illustration 8.7: Beethoven: Piano Sonata, Op. 13 (II, mm. 51–66)

Illustration 8.8

Illustration 8.9: Beethoven: Piano Sonata, Op. 13 (II, Coda, mm. 56–end)

In this work, a seven-measure coda follows the final refrain. As with many codas, it is nothing more than an elaborate cadential extension, repeating the formula V-I in the following manner.