Peter Bradley-Fulgoni

Beethoven's new order



'the thirty-two piano sonatas encompass Beethoven's creativity'

The facts of thematic life are that every manifestation of a theme tends to divide into two parts. This is irrespective of whatever tonality is employed. In the West, even the simplest diatonic melody (that is one which we perceive to be in a tonality derived from major and minor scales) does this. For example there is a 'natural' tendency to gravitate between one note (the tonic) and another note a fifth higher or a fourth lower (the dominant); but such a modulation is not necessary to qualify part of a theme as a different phrase in the musical sentence; there may simply be a moment where the music pauses, reaching a recognisable point before moving to another independent fragment. Moreover, in sophisticated examples of bipartite form, such as the sonatas of Domenico Scarlatti, the duality is engendered not so much by a single theme as by an ensemble of aspects to the initial material, which in their turn form a group by themselves – a section – and where the borders between such sections are not always clearly definable.

Eighteenth-century music was dominated by the sonata first movement principle, an essentially dramatic and bipartite form in which two thematic ideas are presented in – and held in tension by – contrasting keys and where a subsequent development section is free to modulate in a more far-reaching manner. In work by Haydn and, particularly, Mozart, this first subject structure is clearly defined. But when we look at the way Beethoven treated sonata form we see a composer's creative force developing an aesthetic that could not be contained by this form: he was an iconoclast.

Beethoven's piano sonatas were not written one after the other or in steady sequence, but as a pianist first and foremost, his thirty-two piano sonatas encompass his whole creativity very faithfully and consistently from opus 2, written in his mid-twenties, to opus 111 written in his early fifties, five years before his death in 1827. In this respect they are the best way to monitor his output; his work dominated musical creativity for the next century and these sonatas summarise his creative trajectory.

The analogy may seem appropriate in considering his very first outing in the sonata genre (opus 2, number 1), dating from 1795 and dedicated to Haydn. The opening subject is reminiscent of the last movement of Mozart's G minor 40th Symphony which acquired the nickname of 'Mannheim rocket' on account of the ascending arpeggio that begins its last movement. Nevertheless, the sonata is otherwise Haydnesque with nothing wholly new until you get to the last movement: there you recognise a quality apparent in the 5th Symphony and the greater works, a quality characterised by high drama, sudden dynamic changes, sheer drive, and a conception of melody not only as a succession of notes but also as harmony driven by rhythm.
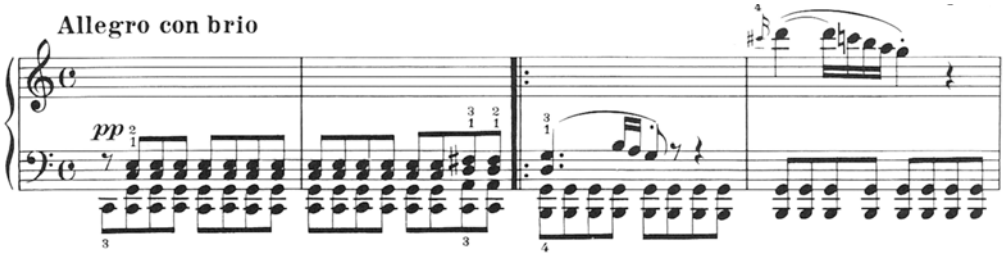
These characteristics are developed in the highlights of Beethoven's 'middle period'. The opus 53 sonata of 1803/4 (the Waldstein) and the opus 57 of

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1804/5 (the Appassionata) are significant because the first exposition of material is not a melody as such but a subject group with material contingent on a rhythmic feature. The Waldstein opening with its repeated chords is a perfect example and clearly visible in the printed music. The opening of the Appassionata is more melodic, but establishes the work's harmonic building blocks: the presentation of material here is not a matter of single notes in any melodic format but something like a complete idea that Beethoven's pupil, Czerny, Romantically described as 'ocean waves on a stormy night with a distant cry for help'. In the Appassionata it is, as the great Russian virtuoso Sviatoslav Richter remarked, 'always night'.

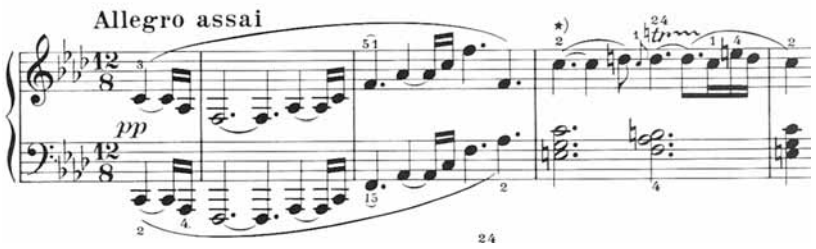
With these two sonatas the scale (in terms of dimension) has changed and, while they follow sonata form, they no longer adhere to the formal strictures devised and exploited in the previous century. The presentation has become more expansive and more audacious with regard to the inter-relationships between first and second subjects. For example the C major Waldstein sonata's second subject is not in the dominant major of G, but in the (for the time) outrageously dislocated mediant major of E. Even two centuries later this modulation has the power to produce a frisson for the listener. It is a point in Beethoven's creativity where he begins to use the format of the sonata principle for a greater and deeper expression, indeed in both works the expressive nature of the material used is so hard-driven that there is a sense of momentousness being close at hand but never achieved: an essentially Romantic idea.

Among the late works, the sonata opus 106 (the Hammerklavier) demonstrates the logical inference of such factors and, in particular, the extension of form: it is the sonata at a very, very grand scale. Everything is Titanic, from the first bars to the very end. Little wonder that in Schulz's *Peanuts* cartoons the pianist, Schroeder, usually makes special preparations to play it; interesting too that the reader of the cartoons is expected to be able to read music – and the massive opening chords as such. In those chords you see the technique that would become associated with Brahms (whose early C major sonata pays obvious homage to this work): less diatonic scale work, more manoeuvring of big block chords. The first movement with its great dimensions is followed by a brief scherzo. It leads us to the adagio, itself in sonata form, and probably the longest slow movement of any sonata in history since it lasts almost twenty minutes. But this is a crucible for much piano writing to come: Chopin, Schumann and Brahms. Then, as if that is not enough, another long, slow



The first bars of the Waldstein sonata, opus 53: composed of a rhythm rather than melody

'the presentation becomes more expansive and audacious'



The beginning of the Appassionata sonata, opus 57, a sequence Czerny described as 'like ocean waves on a stormy night with a distant cry for help' – the latter in the form of the trill in bar 4

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Beethoven Nears the End: a portrait by 'Batt' (Oswald Barrett). Amid the disorder of the composer's room is his piano, wrecked by his efforts to hear his own playing, and an ear-trumpet

'a crucible for much piano writing to come'



In Charles M. Schulz's *Peanuts* comic-strip, Beethoven fanatic Schroeder prepares to tackle the Hammerklavier opus 106, whose opening phrase appears in the end box

introduction in the form of a recitative brings us to a colossal fugue, which is probably the most arduous part of the work. The sheer size, scale and drama of the whole ensemble of the movements are demanding of the listener and a supreme technical challenge for the pianist.

The development in Beethoven's sonatas doesn't continue in that vein. If it had it would have become physically impossible. Instead things take a different turn and the remaining three become more introspective, more spiritual. We hear Beethoven's innermost thoughts through the medium of counterpoint. Perhaps because the melodies are in some sort of tension, one against the other, we hear a questioning and soul-searching. This recourse to counterpoint, the essence of fugue form – and so almost a homage to J. S. Bach – allowed Beethoven to find a vehicle to express his world-weariness and intimations of mortality. The last sonata, in C minor, opus 111, is Beethoven's idea of a glimpse into a world beyond. The second and final movement, which is in the relatively static form of a theme and variations and in the relatively bright tonality of C major, has a serene and spiritual aura: it is *the* sublime moment of this piano sonata odyssey.

Musical diaries, like all diaries, begin and end. They start in the vigour of youth, with a promise of great things to come. Here the promise was fulfilled: even if Beethoven had stopped writing after the Waldstein and Appassionata sonatas, he would have gone down in history as a very great composer indeed. Yet with his final sonata for his own instrument he takes us into what Wilhelm Kempff described as 'regions as yet unknown to us'. The composer, by now completely deaf but with a genius that seems boundless, enables us 'to hear that which the ear cannot perceive'. In this architecture of music – that ability to arrange musical ideas such that they are manifested in their most potent form – the sonata principle is but a remote echo.

Peter Bradley-Fulgoni has made many broadcasts, recorded a number of CDs and performed throughout Europe and beyond. Among these he was invited to give a special recital at the Sviatoslav Richter Memorial Apartment in 2008 followed by a performance at the XVII Sviatoslav Richter International Music Festival at Tarusa in Summer 2009. Recognised as an inspirational teacher, a DVD in which he talks about the music he performs to the journalist and broadcaster Andrew Green launched Sound Technique's Piano Maestros series in 2007. His discussion of J. S. Bach's forty-eight preludes and fugues was published in **arq** *10.3+4; his analysis of the work of the Second Viennese School (Schoenberg, Berg and Webern) will appear in a future issue.*

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