

CANONICAL GAMES: PLAYING BEETHOVEN'S PIANO SONATAS

Alongside Bach's '48', Beethoven's '32' are without doubt the most revered body of works in the pianist's repertory. But whereas much of Bach's writing remains esoteric to the listening public, much of Beethoven's has become *the* universally accessible reference for what 'classical music' sounds like. Together with his cycles of symphonies and string quartets these piano sonatas define that moment in history when the creative musician consciously and unequivocally breaks free from artisanal traditions and proclaims himself as artist – or even as genius.

The canonisation of Beethoven (and did he not, with a keen awareness of the past, deliberately 'write himself into' the canonical music library?) inevitably carries with it certain assumptions and expectations when we listen to the music today, and the performer may find himself in an ambiguous relationship with Oedipal Beethoven! Indeed, a constant fluctuating, vacillating or even teetering, between views that may be pro or contra the canonical opens up far-reaching possibilities for the pianist.

Beethoven in fact wrote 35 solo piano sonatas, three youthful works of mixed accomplishment not traditionally included in 'complete' editions. While such juvenilia are no doubt of great interest to those who study the origins of confounding mastery, these works show that Beethoven was certainly no Mozart at the age of twelve, and it is very difficult to imagine them displacing the astonishing Op. 2 sonatas at the head of such an important corpus in our minds. The two little sonatas Op. 49 suggest a different kind of anomaly. Despite their frequent pedagogical use (on account of the modest technical demands they make) their opus number suggests a significance that could not possibly have been intended: they were written around 1796-8 but only published in 1805 when Beethoven needed money. Placing them between the stunningly original Op. 31 sonatas and the seminal 'Waldstein' as they have been commonly, is of course simply erroneous as chronology; nevertheless it *can* be satisfying to read these small pieces as a pausing for breath, or as a wistful look back at a decorous eighteenth century, before crossing

the Rubicon with the works that define the 'heroic period'. Thinking of Op. 2 as the exciting beginning of a great journey, or imbuing Op. 49 with inklings of a rarefied profundity are misreadings, but from the performer's point of view, rewarding ones .

For better or worse it is the '32' that are the subject of such canonical 'games'. It is upon them that an edifice of 'meaningfulness' has been built, and they that resonate in the public and personal imaginations, often in ways that Beethoven himself could not have foreseen. And even as we try to understand some of Beethoven's original intentions it becomes clear that the performer is by no means necessarily obliged to carry out those intentions when vivifying the music *now* – or indeed when expressing *himself* compellingly. Perhaps the image of Beethoven as Promethean creator is itself too often used to inhibit the autonomy of the performer. The facile portrayal of the great composer as god-like versus the soloist as interpreter of holy writ, suppresses the significance of the fact that the means of playing an instrument and of performing are not the same as the means of writing a piece of music: to compare the creativity of the performer with that of the composer is ultimately limiting. Just as a composer of the eighteenth century did not invent the idea of a regular four-bar phrase or a scale, likewise a twenty-first-century pianist does not invent the idea of legato pedalling or 'bringing out' an inner voice. Both though, may marshal the means of their craft in complex and surprising ways that sometimes suggest, or have the appearance of, something new or even archetypal. Thus all creativity (in this conventional sense) has in common a process of taking stock, and critical engagement with the means of craft. And vitally it involves a transgressive urge: the impulse to go beyond pedagogical models or accepted contemporary norms.

Too often, however, the performer, before he has even set out, subjects himself to the monolithic, mythical image of Beethoven, the sense of the cultural magnitude of the music and, in true modern urtext spirit, of the score as daunting and inviolable. So, while Beethoven's revelations are born of a critical, investigative, individualistic, and indeed defiant mind and personality, the performer's role is assumed to be somehow to 'transmit' those revelations through keeping in check the very same

characteristics in himself, implying that it is somehow indecent not to *convey* a sense of respectfulness at all times in his very readings. Not surprisingly this caters to the tastes of a particular kind of audience who only seek repeated affirmation of the views they already hold of the master Beethoven. Of course this playing of the status of the music rather than of a vital *making* of music inevitably encourages the deployment of pianistic and expressive techniques into a language of stabilities, solidities, certainties and predictabilities.

In the most obvious sense these stabilities can manifest themselves through homogenising rhythm, sonority, and details of articulation: the tempo and pulse as a set form into which the music must be made to fit (maybe to reflect that we must not stray too far from the regular subdivisions of musical notation? – the text is after all sacrosanct), sound production at all times beautiful and fulsome, crucially without any suggestion of effeminacy or flightiness (Beethoven is after all the dominating but noble father-figure) and a literalist reading of staccati, stress marks, accents, slurs and dynamics (perhaps to convey some notion of correct and authoritative 'style').

The alternative – of the player yielding to the instinct to communicate first of all (rather than to present an image of Beethoven-as-creator and himself-as-interpreter first of all) – implies manipulating pulse and tempo actively, on impulse or as if on impulse; of adventurously exploring sonorities to discover the colouristic and atmospheric potential of the material at hand; of harnessing details of touch and enunciation in the service of distinctive diction. In other words, to forge a whole world of human experience in all its unpredictable variety, the performer must collect a whole storehouse of pianistic and expressive tools. Gathering these devices is part of playing the canonical game because it requires, not least, an awareness of, even a confrontation with, performances and performance practices past and present – with the rich and ever-changing history of Beethoven reception and its manifestation in performance.

He may very well look to some of the finer marble-like musical carvings of, say, the later Emil Gilels; but he may also want to explore how

Wilhelm Kempff uses a gently consistent pulse as a backbone for gossamer-like delicacy and playfully improvised, insightful details of phrasing; or how Artur Schnabel's volcanic temperament may impel fast music forward in perilous ways, its very unsteadiness a safeguard against machismo. Thus he may explore how, not only by allowing certain vulnerabilities and volatilities but even by introducing them, greater visceral and emotional tensions can be generated. Again, he may also look to Schnabel's pointed deformations of rhythmic figures for idiomatic characterisation, or to how Annie Fischer's 'swinging' of certain groups of notes gives a naturally pulsating inner life to the rhythm, or to how little ritardandi at certain phrase-ends give shapeliness to some of Samuil Feinberg's penetrating Beethoven readings. Re-learning, re-imagining techniques that have been restrained in pedagogy, that have too easily been labelled over-'romanticised' – such as all the intriguing ways in which the hands may be 'split' or chords 'spread', or imaginative ways of over-pedalling – and remaining open to insights gained from Beethoven performances by artists not conventionally thought of as 'natural' Beethoven players (like Vladimir Horowitz), also form part of the expansion of the expressive glossary. Then, the pianist may well want to take stock of the sonorous possibilities of the Viennese instruments and Broadwoods that Beethoven had access to, to their natural clarity and focus in certain registers, and the strange sound world of their pedals – and to how that could be 'translated' adequately or inadequately on a modern concert grand. He may consider how the visionary aspects of Beethoven's writing in turn reveal insufficiencies in the original instruments, and how the modern instrument can communicate extremes. Thus he may discover that there is never an ideal medium for enlivening what is written – another call on the personality and skills of the performer himself to *make* something that has integrity on its own terms, a life of its own.

In a special manner the idea of a canonical *cycle* of works also lends potency to the principle of variety. However wrongly, we see the cycle, after the event, as 'complete' and therefore, in a sense, closed. We believe that Beethoven's consummate mind essays whatever matter at hand in the most exhaustive and individual way possible and that therefore he

would not 'repeat himself' unwittingly. In comparing things that share a family resemblance throughout the cycle, or parts of it (say, for instance, collections of minuet or minuet-like movements, or song-like slow movements, or toccata-like sections, or fantasias; or places where Beethoven draws on learned or archaic techniques, or recitative-references; or various moments of emphatic climax or of reflective closure) the player can bring to bear the greatest wealth of expressive resources possible on *differentiating* these similar materials from each other – to move as far as reasonably possible from the notion of a predictable generic, and as close as possible towards a sense that each movement and each idea exists in its own right. This may simply mean deliberately distinguishing between the moods or tempi of materials that seem alike, or carefully imposing limits on their respective dynamic ranges. It can also pertain to the 'manner' of holding forth, or the gestural language reserved for certain music, or to a greater clarity of identifying and projecting specific distinctive features. Yet precisely by comparing like with like, limits of possibility start to assert themselves as characterisations are calibrated and modified in relation to each other: not only do they still exist within the individual work or movement to which they belong, but they also now appear in the retrospectively gained perspective of the cycle – not only, for instance, does a scherzo fulfil its role in a particular sonata but it becomes part of a reflection on, and demonstration of, all the things that scherzos can do and be; but any one scherzo cannot be all things... Through frameworks and limits thus imposed internally, that is, by the panoramic cycle itself, and by the performer's own refining of sensibility through it, the quest for variety comes to be not only about quantity but also about quality of expression. Such a method for making expression more precise and subtle relieves some of the pressure normally put on conversations about 'interpretation' or 'style'.

In so choosing the techniques the player wants to exploit, in choosing what he wants to emulate or avoid in admired or not-admired artists past and present, in seeking expressive variety, in forming a personal aesthetics for playing the Beethoven sonatas, the performer inevitably confronts his own physical tendencies and capabilities, and his own mental 'hardwiring'. He cannot but reveal himself through these works,

a music where we have come to believe there is hardly a superfluous note, where everything is seen as manipulable and meaningful, where we want to see everything as related. A music where everything the performer thus does is so exposed to scrutiny, guides us to wonder where, ultimately, that fine dividing line lies between irregularities that are intentional (say, semi-quaver runs that are deliberately melodic and therefore expressively 'uneven') and those that are unintentional (say, semi-quaver runs that are simply allowed not to be quite even, or that the player is incapable of playing evenly) – the unintentional, like the peculiarities of a pair of hands, still deeply imbuing an aesthetic since it forms part of the very fabric from which all is hewn. Thus the canonical with its connotations of significance at the level of even the smallest detail, problematises the idea of exactness of intention.

Juggling so many possibilities naturally redefines the notion of virtuosity for these works. We may simply think of it as involving and using the expressive potential of the instrument in a truly intricate way. Again, we may think afresh of speed and lightness, and how they may be crucial means to achieve sweep and excitement; but also means to achieve a clearer hierarchy of emphases and 'goals', to enable concision; and as a way to put the sober, the less intense and the subdued in relief. In this way we may call for a celebration of virtuosity and of all that it can be rather than re-iterate the simplistic thought that virtuosity must be 'restrained' in the service of a self-fulfilling notion of profundity.

The image of Beethoven's sonatas as canonical, what that status makes us think and do, the language it makes us use, the histories which it makes us contemplate, the image of the cycle itself, all provide us with a treasure trove of materials we can use – but also require constant critical re-evaluation and questioning. It is worth pondering, for instance, to which extent the assumption of structural integrity and argumentative logic in Beethoven is necessary – and how it makes us play: do we set out as if the coherence of the whole is a *fait accompli*, or do we try to forge it all over again? – or is it indeed in some instances not of primary concern, and much more rewarding to devote our energies to re-imagining the 'classicised' in splendid colour rather than in abstract terms? We can ponder how we typify the conventional division of

Beethoven's creative life into 'early', 'middle' and 'late' and how we see certain works as 'transitional' – each of these words with powerful associations that may alter our readings of the works. We may well acknowledge fatigue with the suggestions of ideological questing or with the triumphs of will which define some of the more famous sonatas, or even find their energetic affirmations jarring. Perhaps, in keeping with the spirit of our times, we may be more interested in the struggle itself, mistrusting of big conclusions. Perhaps, momentarily, we may gravitate towards the works which are more suggestive, perhaps even cryptic, certainly less final in their findings, only to later recognise and salute anew the capability of art to complete the circle in ways that life does not often do. Or to exalt in the idea that art is also part of life, and that its epiphanies and catharses may well sometimes feel more true to us than the drab realities! What remains certain is that the Beethoven sonata cycle is a world in which it would never be dull to lose oneself.

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