

ON MOZART'S PIANO SONATAS

Enthusiastically championed by artists like Lily Krauss, derided by others, most notoriously Glenn Gould, Mozart's piano sonatas occupy a special position in his output. Unlike Beethoven's sonatas, these works are not central to their composer's achievement. Nevertheless, they are unique as a polished body of works for a single instrument: and this is especially significant in Mozart's case.

His contributions in all major genres are celebrated. In the great operatic comedies and the Singspiels he revels in the very artificiality of the stage to create real emotional states in his characters, and to portray true relationships. In the great concertos his piano soloist becomes an incandescent Everyman in the 'social' context of the individual wind instruments and the collective body of strings – quite unlike its often heroic, combative role in later concertos. In the late symphonies he finds an epic voice unimagined before in orchestral music, infusing exchanges of material and contrasts of mood with an apparently celebratory logic – a logic the essence of which remains elusive upon examination. The mature quintets and quartets, impassioned in unified sonority and expressive intent, are also exquisitely, graphically contrapuntal in the kaleidoscopic complexity of responses and reactions between and amongst the instruments. Throughout the large body of violin-and-piano sonatas a rapt dialogue between the I and the Other unfolds.

So, Mozart's acute sensitivity to different instrumental and vocal timbres and his virtuosity at juxtaposing and reconciling the most unlikely materials in an apparently effortless and natural way, place him supreme as creator of characters – whether that be in his operas, or when he personifies instruments themselves. That is central to virtually all his greatest achievements. And it is obvious to even the naïve listener that dialogic interaction is crucial to the ebb and flow of the music – never more so than in the dramas, games and discourse of sonata.

Such dialogue can be heard in these piano sonatas too, but since Mozart cannot here characterise the instrument itself in the context of *other* instruments, he makes use of contrasts in dynamics, registers

and textures to enable reference to other instrumental and vocal forces, and genres, enabling make-believe exchanges. By contrast, in the piano concertos, however varied the role of the piano may be, the soloist in that context has a unified identity, inevitably rendering the piano sonority more homogenous than should be the experience when listening to the works for piano alone. Here, then, we find concentrations of symphonic material, or concerto tutti/solo duality and virtuoso passage work, or tender wind serenade exchanges, ardent string quartets: but we do so through musical simile. Simile rather than metaphor, since the paradox is that all this is cast in an eminently 'pianistic' idiom in a way which would resist effective transcription. Of course complex cross-reference like this abounds in Mozart's language in general, but what is special about these works is that a single player has to vivify the implied exchanges between 'instruments' and 'characters' – and all in an unquestionably domestic or, at least intimate, setting. These works may at times refer to public styles of holding forth, or have large-scale implications by virtue of depth of content, but in their *original* instrumentation they demand quiet listening.

This leads to some difficult questions for those who wish to play the Mozart sonatas on a modern concert grand. *Its* identity as the vehicle of the recital and concerto virtuoso, its scale of sound and the way in which that sound is produced mean that every aspect of playing these works has to be re-imagined and re-invented. On the one hand, the pianist may have in mind the fortepiano in its private or concert setting, on the other the chamber, orchestral or vocal forces that are referred to. Thus he has the option to adopt an intimate voice – or not; but given the many contradictory qualities and capabilities of the modern piano, no obligation either way. It is so that even with the best translation much is lost, but if the translator is himself more than an artisan something new will be gained too. The performer might even want to approach these works with a completely anachronistic attitude, irrespective of what he knows about their intended instrumentation and frame of reference. Moreover it is inescapable that the ways in which the concert grand speaks and sings and dances – *its* arts of voicing, pedalling, accentuation, touch, cantabile fully and shrewdly manipulated – were perfected through the *nineteenth century*: i.e. it is inescapable that a

performance practice for these works that engages the instrument's full expressive potential needs to look beyond easy categories of 'authentic', or 'modern' or 'historically-informed'. One might say that, when a pianist immerses himself in this music, 'interpretation' is only one of many tools that he takes in hand, but by no means an accurate description of what he may fashion in the end.

These highly finished works, terse in utterance, even the more extensive amongst them generally only around twenty minutes in length, yet very rich in activity, rich in personality and *topoi* have, particularly in their fast movements, a nervous energy and intensity that is rarely heard in piano performances. Friedrich Gulda's recordings of ten sonatas are a notable exception; the Lily Krauss renditions are more cultured and varied but restless too in their quest for ever more nuances and surprises. But – this kind of wonderful unpredictability has generally not been evident in performances of these works. The development of the modern piano through the nineteenth century and, one has to concede, the impressive legacy of Beethoven's sonatas with their robust treatment of the instrument, largely relegated Mozart's solo piano works to the realm of pedagogy. These days they are still used as a training ground for decoding, and learning reflex responses to the standard figurations of Viennese Classical music. It is not surprising that such treatment has engendered a 'binary' attitude to articulation and pulse in modern piano performances which rarely move beyond received notions. On sonorous concert instruments the relatively sparse textures of these works are so often treated with blanket restraint (presumably as an illustration that the performer is in command of the 'style'), without the built-in tensions that render restraint powerful – producing precious, saccharine sonorities that project the music as no more than 'antique' art objects. Furthermore, the facile stereotype of Mozart as the epitome of elegance provides temptation for the pianist to perform the supposed seductive *beauty* of the music rather than its supposed character or feeling.

Two aspects of the scores are of special interest to pianists: 'articulation' marks, and dynamics markings. One of the pedagogical mores that also render the performance of these works didactic is an unimaginative,

somewhat literalist approach to the slurs ('bowings') and different kinds of staccato marks that are found with unpredictable frequency on each page. The truth is that Mozart is anything but consistent with these markings – even to the extent that in some cases his quotation of the opening phrase of a work in his Thematic Catalogue differs in these details from the autograph score. In any case, the way the modern instrument 'speaks' is so radically different from Mozart's instruments that it is unthinkable that adherence to even a standardised *style* of articulation should ever take priority over the great varieties of touch and stress available to the pianist. Following from this it becomes imperative too to consider the implications for accentuation and emphasis of a fluent piano technique – kinetically very different from a fluent fortepiano technique.

Regarding dynamics one quickly observes that, in the first nine sonatas especially, Mozart somewhat obsessively marks, for the most part, *f* and *p*. Perhaps this is still, relatively early on in his career, a legacy of the less dynamically sensitive instruments he grew up with. Again, a literalist, binary reading can leave a somewhat blunt, unresponsive impression. However, the *placement* of these dynamics is extremely telling in that they very often imply phrasings and groupings that the notes on their own do not: more evidence of Mozart's restless, ludic musical mind – relishing all types of asymmetry – asymmetry that seeks at least the illusion of clarification and balancing, thus propelling the music forward. A far cry from suavity on the one hand or prettiness on the other.

The piano sonatas fascinatingly oscillate between the domestic and the public, not only in their references, but – being by nature playful and thoughtful – also moving between that which includes the audience and that which does not. Vital is the image of the improviser/composer; so too the kind of open experimentation which is a result of abundant facility and an abundance of creativity. Gulda provocatively posits that in the piano sonatas one finds ideas which, more or less a hundred Köchel numbers later, are essayed fully in the operas. Whether or not one chooses to regard these pieces from such a vantage point, it is true that, perhaps because the stakes are not quite as high as they are in the

Olympian, large-scale works, and because Mozart was such a fine clavier-player himself, we sense with these pieces more than any others the touch of the craftsman's hand itself. That is their special place: not central to the Mozart miracle, but revealing of it in a special way. How could they be other than a performer's delight?

Towards a narrative

Viewed as a body of work, the Mozart piano sonatas present a particularly neat picture. A chronological survey is rewarding, since the sonatas represent all the major stylistic and emotional changes in Mozart's mature career. And the earliest of them date from his twentieth year, by which time their composer had already gained tight control of his materials. From the outset each of the sonatas has a clearly defined identity – as always with Mozart the impression being that the choice of key is indeed key. The writing is concentrated, never wasteful, with plenty of contrast in register and texture, the approach to the keyboard is virtuosic but not at the cost of 'expression', and all the significant cadential and thematic junctures in the music are apparently effortlessly in relief.

Those that precede Mozart's handwritten catalogue of his own works (i.e. up to the B-flat sonata K. 333) fall naturally into three distinct groups, markedly different in character from each other whilst boasting an impressive internal variety:

The relatively late appearance of solo sonatas in Mozart's oeuvre (**K. 279-284, Munich, 1775**) is significant both in that they denote a departure from his numerous early works for keyboard with violin accompaniment, and that, for the first time, he sets down on paper a type of work which previously, one presumes, he had only improvised. Mozart often performed these pieces on his tours, and no doubt played some of them on harpsichords too. The frequency of archaic *f* and *p* contrasts can perhaps be read as testimony that Mozart had yet to come to terms with emerging possibilities of shading on new keyboard instruments of the day. In *Deutsche Chronik* of 27 April 1775 the then-celebrated Captain Beecke's playing receives praise over Mozart's for its "agility, grace ... sweetness". By 1777 however, Mozart's

mother could report from Mannheim that her son's playing was regarded as superior in "beauty of tone, quality and execution" even though Beecke had been playing there too.

The first six sonatas, one in C, three in flat keys, and two in sharp ones, immediately illustrate Mozart's brilliant powers of free-association. Quick successions of seemingly independent, sometimes incongruous, ideas are skilfully connected, elided, balanced to leave the impression of cohesive argument. The two tendencies – the one to enjoy each new event in its own right, the other to give each element its due proportion in relation to the whole – with their simultaneous tow, seem less like *opposing* imperatives in later works, especially those from Mozart's Viennese period. Perhaps because there the delicate ambiguities of voice-leading and phrasing, of rhythmic and harmonic polarity, become so dense as to form a web complete in itself. But, in the works from the Salzburg years the experience is still decidedly of unity-in-spite-of-variety.

The last sonata in this set, composed for the Baron von Dürnitz and sometimes bearing his name in programmes, is remarkably sonorous and its finale is one of Mozart's richest variation sets – it is also the longest movement in all the sonatas. This work (the only Mozart sonata Glenn Gould seems to have approved of wholly) stands apart from its five companions; its grandeur appears to look forward to a different manner – and indeed, throughout the next three sonatas (**K. 309 and 311, Mannheim, 1777 and K. 310, Paris, 1778**) it is clear that Mozart was experimenting with new keyboard sounds. The urbane, extroverted nature of the Mannheim works reflects contact with that city's famously impressive orchestra; Leopold Mozart mentions the "rather artificial Mannheim style" in connection with K. 309.

The sense of expansion in scale is continued in the A minor sonata, K. 310, but here the richness and sheer effectiveness of sonority are subjected with complete success to the traumatic emotional content of the work. In fact, the sonata represents the kind of leap of the imagination that can only be partly explained through understanding of the professional influences and personal experiences that accompanied

its conception – it simply is without precedent. Maynard Solomon writes beautifully how its *Andante cantabile con espressione*, which describes the profound disturbance of an idyllic state before it is ecstatically recaptured, becomes the archetype for many of Mozart's greatest slow movements. Its astonishing *Presto* finale strikes a fatalistic tone, stark *forte* chords bleakly arresting its breathless dance in the last bars.

All the subsequent sonatas date from Mozart's Viennese period (roughly the last decade of his life). The first four of these (**K. 330-3, 1783**) significantly do not open with overt rhetorical pronouncements as in the preceding four sonatas, but with ingenuous lyrical ideas, emblematic in a larger sense of the harmoniousness and fluency that pervade throughout. It may be said that by now Mozart maintains the generous, humane *buffo* perspective that is the hallmark of his mature language. The brittleness of some of the keyboard writing in the earlier sonatas is largely absent. Each of these sonatas has its particular, carefully modulated tonal hue, its own balancing of the thoughtful, the affecting and the playful. The F major sonata, K. 332, for instance, boasts a spectacular digital pianistic display across the entire range of the keyboard in its finale to balance the very specific orchestral sonorities and vocal style that are conjured in the opening and second movements respectively. The *Rondo alla Turca* which concludes the A major sonata, K. 331 is both a clever *coup* and the natural fruition of the 'exotic' tendencies of the preceding movements.

Citing the C minor sonata (**K. 457, 1784**) as a work which foreshadows Beethoven's 'C minor mood' is a popular critical misconception: the raw energy and wilfulness that drive Beethoven's allegros are largely absent. In fact, the more vital *forte* sections scattered through the fast movements here act as a kind of frame to uphold a work beset by a sinking sense of doubt. Most typical are the nervous changes of mood and the frequent, enigmatic, often disconcerting, caesuras. The Fantasy (**K. 475, 1785**) was subsequently composed as an elaborate prelude to this sonata. Mozart here indulges in some of the wayward timbral contrasts and harmonic, and enharmonic, manoeuvres of the *Sturm und Drang* keyboard tradition; and at times the heavy brushstrokes and

ceremonial gravity are even reminiscent of his minor key church music. It is evidently a carefully constructed piece, with one of Mozart's most beautifully paced endings, the title referring to the stylistic quirks of a genre rather than to haphazard improvisation.

It was presumably Mozart's haste in preparing a sonata for his new employer, Joseph II that prompted his use of an earlier rondo (**K. 494, 1786**) as finale to a newly composed *Allegro* and *Andante* (**K. 533, 1788**). The first movement is one of Mozart's virtuosic essays in combining the 'grammar' of a sonata allegro with contrapuntal and pseudo-contrapuntal techniques, enabling all sorts of games of expectation. Here the very effortlessness of the dance between the two hands attains the quality of profundity. The slow movement is perhaps the most complex in the sonatas in its changes of moods, its harsh sayings eventually resolved in a state of rapture. The choice of the fairly straightforward rondo is often labelled disappointing after the ripeness and depth of the other two movements. Or one might view it as a master-stroke: a clearing of the palate after some strong contrapuntal and harmonic flavour. Seen in that light, the cadenza-like passage-work and the dramatic sweep of *stretti* on the penultimate page (both insertions from 1788), the wind serenade-like episode in F minor, and the dark colouring in the bass-register at the conclusion of the piece, are just enough to put into question the apparent innocuousness of the rondo-theme.

In the last three sonatas (**K. 545, 1788; K. 570 and K. 576, 1789**) the vivid extremes of K. 533 are rare. Although Mozart composed them in his early thirties they can be described as 'late' in that they are the product of a creativity that has already reached fullest expression and that they are written from a perspective that is in a sense beyond achievement; that is, beyond the need to 'prove' anything. Mozart's later works do not set out to critique his own earlier achievements, turn away from them in radically new directions, or turn inward unconcerned with his audience – for that he died just too early – but a late quality they very clearly exemplify is that they often seem to take economy of writing to an extreme. Here are no ostentatious displays; rather these works unfold within very carefully maintained spectra of possibility, demonstrating an absolutely precise knowledge of what is essential and what is not.

The slow movement of K. 545, for instance, could not possibly but be the work of a past master, showing how apparently the simplest means can be handled to their most acute expressive effect.

These last three sonatas belong to a group of Mozart's instrumental works to which Hermann Hesse's description of the "cheerfulness" of Classical music perhaps applies best. This cheerfulness, characterised by order and lucidity, is "aware of the tragedy of the human condition" but finds higher joy in a purer kind of beauty. Spectacular effects of light and darkness are replaced by more subtle shifts in mood: in the faster movements rich sonorities are generally eschewed in favour of two-part writing which borders (in sometimes very witty ways) on the sketchy; the slow movements now have a retrospective quality – of remembered rather than immediate experience – of experience reflected on, and clarification gained. So, when Mozart died young, with many circumstances in his professional and personal life unresolved, his artistic career had in a sense come full circle – or so it seems to us, since these later instrumental works speak anew with a childlike freshness, directness, and also vulnerability.

Daniel-Ben Pienaar

2010