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VOLUME THREE

Ludwig van Beethoven

Piano Sonatas, Volume Two

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Garrick Ohlsson, piano

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Sonata No. 2 in A Major, Op. 2, No. 2

The three sonatas of Opus 2 were published in 1796 and, like the three trios of Op. 1, were dedicated to Josef Haydn, then Beethoven's teacher. The works were probably composed between the autumn of 1795 and the spring of 1796, although much of their material harks from an early set of piano quartets written in Bonn at least a decade earlier. That circumstance serves as a convenient launching pad with which to refute the ridiculous contention that "Early" Beethoven is also immature. Opus 2, even taking cognizance of the reworked ideas, can hardly be dismissed as mere juvenilia: Beethoven, like most other serious artists, had built up a large stockpile of "trial" efforts and the designation "Opus 1" merely indicated that even by his own (rather high!) standards, he now considered himself worthy of publication.

The first movement of Op. 2, No. 2 – its opening in particular – can be superficially likened to that of the F Major Sonata, Op. 10, No. 2. But Op. 2, No. 2, for all its sportive tone, is a much larger work than the other composition. Thus, the first subject group of this A major sonata has three ideas rather than the two in Op. 10, No. 2's *Allegro*: two staccato notes followed by plunging sixteenths; a group of octaves arranged as a downward dominant seventh chord; and finally, a highly imitative lyrical theme prefaced by a figuration of triplet sixteenth notes and upward staccato eights. A "fourth" idea – auspiciously bounding sixteenths followed by downward eighths – is actually an extension of the third motif.

Beethoven approaches the second theme group in much the same method used by him in his later Op. 22 Sonata: He arrives at the intended dominant too early for proper psychological effect; doubles back in his tracks and then reaches his proper and timely destination by a different unexpected route. The second sub-

ject moves to the accompaniment of broken chords and the exposition is brought to a close by re-workings of the components of the first theme group.

As often happens in a Beethoven development section, all the ingredients are violently thrown together. The course of action begins with the movement's opening statement in the key of C major. After eight bars we are smack in the world of A-flat Major and the working out of the first idea continues with the broken chord accompaniment of the second theme. Development "Stage 3" (there is something missile-like about this energetic movement!) is solely devoted to the third part of the first theme, transformed into dramatic *stretto* imitations. There is one further detail I'd like to mention in this engaging movement: A passage in broken triplet octaves – especially awkward to play – tells something about the lighter action and possibly smaller reach of the piano of Beethoven's day. Conventional piano teachers of the "Emily Post School" are forever up in arms over Beethoven's controversial directions to hold the pedal through certain passages (e.g. in the "*Tempest*" and "*Waldstein*" Sonatas). These prim pedagogues are in favor of flouting the resultant magical haze and are forever admonishing pupils that such pedaling will not work on today's modern instruments. But the cited passage in this Op. 2, No. 2 first movement is the exception which proves the rule: These bars (83-89 in the exposition; 303-308 in the recapitulation) *are* virtually impossible to play on the modern grand piano using the fingering Beethoven gives in his manuscript!

The *Largo appassionato* second movement is a grandly conceived vocal aria. This movement's bass line moves with an *ostinato* much the same as the one still to come in the counterpart movement of the "*Pastorale*" Sonata, Op. 28. The mood of the *Largo* is introspective and, at certain junctures, searingly dramatic.

The *Scherzo*, a rollicking affair although it is marked *Allegretto* rather than *Presto*, has great similarity to the corresponding third movement of the *String Quartet in G Major*, Op. 18, No. 2.

The *Grazioso* Rondo commences with a re-working of idea No. 3 in the first movement. Structurally, it follows a fairly benign temperamental persona, except that the somber "C" section returns to the coda to create a minor disturbance.

Sonata No. 26 in E-flat Major, Op. 81A ("Lebewohl")

The popular Sonata, Op. 81A was to have been a musical memento of the emotions Beethoven felt when his pupil and loyal friend, Archduke Rudolphe, was forced to flee Austria with his family in May 1809 when the French besieged Vienna. Not only did Beethoven greatly prefer the German "*Lebewohl*" to the French "*Les Adieux*": The Sonata's first three notes fit the trisyllabic *le-be-wohl* (and admittedly, *les-ad-ieux* as well). But, for obvious reasons, a substitution of the French would be adding insult to injury.

Once again, Beethoven's use of the introduction transcends its usual function in Classical procedure. Beethoven scholars have already observed in the "*Pathetique*" Sonata, Op. 13 how its *Grave* introduction recurs repeatedly in the first movement – in the development section; again in the coda; and that elements from it are subtly transformed in both the Sonata's slow movement and Rondo. You guessed it – much the same sort of thing happens again in Op. 81A. For one thing, one finds the three-note motto at many points in the opening movement (most graphically in the coda), but one can argue that other things (like the melodic notes of bars 21 and 22) are in fact derived from the same idea (here in ascending inversion). This compact opening movement (*Adagio-Allegro*) has many extraordinary details compressed into its taut structure. Note how prescient the

bars of this introduction are to the slow movement of the *Sonata in A Major*, Op. 101 still to come from Beethoven's pen. And observe too, how Op. 81A's introductory bars flow from the home tonality, E-flat Major, through G Major, landing unexpectedly—in its eighth measure—in the unlikely terrain of C-flat Major. Something about this movement resembles the corresponding one in Beethoven's *String Quartet*, Op. 74 in the same key (subtitled "*Harp*").

Although Beethoven began work on the Sonata at the same time of Archduke Rudolphe's departure, he delayed finishing the composition until the following October, when the Royal Family had returned. The *Andante espressivo* (or "*Abwesenheit*") is a slow movement of sorts, but a trifle restless in mood. It has a poignant mobile quality that ideally sums up the pangs of separation the composer felt in those months while his friend and patron was away. Like so many of the central movements from this period of Beethoven's creativity, this one evolves directly into the *Vivacissimente* reunion of the two protagonists.

Beethoven, naturally, has subtitled this final sonata-rondo "*Wiedersehen*". The materials used here are pretty elemental, the harmonic sequences behind all the scurrying passagework being rather sparse. Beethoven's boundless puppy-dog-like enthusiasm and pleasure at being reunited with his devoted friend is expressed by way of twisting, turning pianistic somersaults, scampering two-note phrases, broken sixths, and racing scales. Also to be found here are *fortissimo* cadences of arpeggios, steadily hammered left hand chords that accompany jumping phrases preceded by grace notes; and one (resembling the coda of the "*Waldstein*" Sonata) in which a primary right hand melody and secondary left hand one are accompanied by written-out trills in the middle voice (also played by the right hand). In the coda, the impetuous theme is given a slow motion treatment, only to give way to a final startling burst of energy in plummeting broken octaves.

Sonata No. 32 in C Minor, Op. 111

The Sonata No. 32 in C Minor, Op. 111, Beethoven's last, was composed in 1822. Although stone deaf and famously cantankerous, he had, by now, evidently made peace with his piano, finding, after all, this "unsatisfactory instrument" tolerable. He managed creditably enough with this composition—and also in his still later *Diabelli Variations*, Op. 120 and *Bagatelles* Op. 119 and Op. 126!

Perhaps it is hindsight, but the Op. 111 Sonata does seem to have a certain valedictory characteristic. Whereas the E Major (Op. 109) and A-flat Major (Op. 110) are largely introspective, Op. 111 presents, if you will, more of an overlook than an outlook: In this first movement, Beethoven has a final fling at writing a sonata structure full of C Minor *stürm und drang*. These stormy elements, however, are now tempered by an Olympian reserve, and thoroughly permeated by the fugal texture increasingly prominent in late Beethoven. The work begins with a masterful introduction; its opening titanic gesture built around a diminished seventh chord which is immediately repeated in another tonality. The balance of this pacesetter leads the listener through a whole series of eventful modulations, all the while making it plain that the eventual tonality of C Minor is (as Herbert Hoover used to say) "right around the corner".

The first movement proper, *Allegro con brio ed appassionato*, is arrived at by way of a long, rumbling trill in the bass. Its first subject makes use of a twisting, winding idea similar to the passagework found in the "*Hammerklavier*" Sonata's final fugue—and it is punctuated by jabbing *sforzando* accents. Another

interesting facet is Beethoven's frequent – and specific – use of directives to modify the basic tempo (rather unusual for a composer so classically oriented as he). After a bridge section derived from the first subject material, Beethoven arrives – by way of an eagle high E-flat – at the lofty second subject in A-flat Major. This second idea may be lofty, but it is also thematically incomplete: Following an embroidered repetition of the single phrase (barely more than two measures long), the music plunges downward into a closing theme based on the first subject, and the exposition comes to a close with a series of convulsive four-note gestures (some musicians, like Schnabel and Schenker, favor the purposely – and purposefully – uncomfortable practice of placing the thumb on each of these grouplets, thus emphasizing their desperate, snatched-at quality).

The development is rather short and concentrated, turning the first subject idea into a fugato ended with a trill. The recapitulation may on first scrutiny seem quite orthodox, but turns the conventional sonata form a bit haywire: Usually, a sonata movement with a first subject in a minor mode would move to the relative major to close the exposition section and then would return to the original "home" minor key for its recapitulation. But not here: The first movement of Op. 111 travels to its mediant A-flat Major (as already noted), but the reprise of the second theme is first heard in the parallel C Major and then wends its way to F minor for the embellished re-statement of its first phrase before revisiting the first-subject derived closing theme to conclude the recapitulation. There is a short summary coda that interestingly avoids either of the movement's main ideas.

The *Arietta* (*Adagio molto semplice e cantabile*) is one of Beethoven's typically organic essays in Variation form; similar to those in the Op. 109 Sonata and in the Op. 127 and Op. 131 String Quartets. The Tema itself leads directly into Variation I and the whole structure gives the impression of one continuous sequence. As in the "*Appassionata*" Sonata's variations (composed some 15 years earlier), Beethoven produces a snowballing of impetus finally unleashed to its fullest in the oddly "Boogie Woogie"-like vehemence of Variation III. Starting with Variation IV, the music changes direction, becoming both more menacing and introspective, and then slowly regaining its cumulative momentum before subsiding in quietly resigned manner. The final three measures are based upon the very dotted figuration with which the *Arietta* began.

Two extraordinary features in this movement deserve special comment: 1) The frequent use of trills creating a sense of transformation (Claudio Arrau poetically referred to trills in late Beethoven as "a trembling of the soul"); and 2) the often approximate way Beethoven fills up his bars – the 6/16 measures of Variation II, for instance, contain the equivalent of nine rather than six 16th notes and yet there is no indication of triplets. The conclusion here is that Beethoven was apparently reaching out for something beyond simple notation.

–Harris Goldsmith

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