

ON BEETHOVEN'S PIANO SONATA IN E MAJOR, OP. 109

IGOR KRIZ

Before the pianist can speak to the audience, the composer must speak to the pianist. But what does this piece, full of abrupt mood changes and complex musical constructions, mean? Beethoven, despite frequent misunderstanding, is not a program musician, nor does he seek to express philosophical ideas through his music. While the obvious seriousness of his late piano sonatas always suggests Life and Death, we would be sadly wrong if we looked for musical symbols in his work. Beethoven's music is passionate, but his greatest passion is music itself. He was a great music teacher as much as a great musician. The mood of a Beethoven piece, through which we see tantalizing glimpses of his existence, is secondary to expression of absolute music. For example, by merely listening, the dark blue green purity of the first movement of the *Appassionata* (Op. 57, F minor) seems in complete contrast with the red warmth of the first movement of the 4th piano concerto (Op. 58, G major). Yet, the musical invention and expression techniques of both pieces are so closely related that it suggests that the composer's inner conversation on their hidden similarities may be their main point. Even the differences seem to play a key role: do we stay strictly in triplets or switch between doublets and triplets? If the rhythm switches, the time must be 4/4, but if it is triplets only, 12/8 is more natural...

What is the main musical point of Op. 109, then? Perhaps, ultimately, it is just a simple melody, little more than a harmonic progression, revealed to us in the beginning. The first two short movements are in a sense only preludes to the Variations in the third movement, which are the main point of the piece, but simultaneously all three movements are also, in a sense, variations of the same simple melody. The last Variation is in itself a set of variations. Thus, the whole piece is "variations within variations within variations", a point not uncharacteristic of Beethoven. But the path to simple melody as a unifying theme of the piece is not free for the musician. The passage is hard a thorny, leading through a baffling labyrinth of tension, achieved by the composer through sudden changes of tempos and direction, vicious syncopation and repeated notes, large jumps, and sheer amount of sound

in some places. We must reflect, and share the composer's self-irony, before we can possibly advance to communicating this music to the audience.

In many ways, the tension which we must atone to builds throughout the piece. In the beginning of the first movement, the theme song progresses only for a few measures, to be interrupted by an Adagio espressivo featuring vast dynamical contrasts, only to spill over to arpeggios sweeping through several octaves, testing the resonance ability of the instrument, only to finally return, through an inconspicuous scale, to the melody. Now in development, the melody weaves through voices, inverting playfully the accompanying octaves, until a "temper outburst" returns us to the recapitulation. Again we hear the sweeping arpeggios, (although in reversed rhythm), but this time the scale is replaced by more substantial parallel sixths on the way down, and broken fifths on the way up, to the melody returning one more time, this time turning to a reflective chord passage, and finally seemingly petering out in the higher registers.

The second movement, in E minor, follows immediately. A fortissimo in the beginning is a stunning effect, but is it a mere foil? Immediately we return to a piano passage, reminding us perhaps of the 4th movement of Op. 2 no. 1. The passage is presented twice, the second time in syncopation. Is this a preview of things to come, of the upcoming second theme, which starts off in parallel octaves, and progresses through a heavily syncopated upward sequence, ever more obsessively building up to the downward sequence, jumping between octaves, and finally erupting to riveting scales which bring us to the development? Is this, and not the fortissimo in the beginning, the true nature, the true conflict of the movement? But no, in the development, the melody gradually calms down, and we are presented, in *una corda*, with yet another theme, bringing us (without slowing down), to hovering between the dominant and a suspension. Perhaps, now we have it: the piece is just a little dance, a colossal joke playing on our own moods. Yet, one more surprise is in store. In the recapitulation, the overpowering theme of the beginning of the movement is married smoothly to the meek subject of the development. The sequences and scale runs then return with even greater obsessiveness, and the movement ends in an explosion of chords.

The last movement (E major) consists of an Aria and six variations. The Aria, *Gesangvoll mit innigster Empfindung*, immediately brings

the Goldberg variations to mind by the melody's nature and ornamentation. In 3/4 time and strict AB form, the 8 instead of 16 measures in each part perhaps bring the project down to size, making it feasible as a sonata movement. Now we know that we will only see glimpses of the Goldberg variations, and that other ideas will be introduced. Unlike the Goldberg variations, the Variations of Op. 109 are a "cat's cradle", each variation containing a subtle transition to the next. The very first variation, in fact, restates the melody completely, in a much more romantic, more emotional mood, with a celestial second part. This prepares us for the second variation, which starts with the return of the original theme of the sonata, but now truly as a dialogue. We can hear offers in one voice and responses in another. Is a "mistake" in the repetition of the theme (with one note half-tone sharp) the cause for a "no!" in the other voice in the form of a repeated note? But the moment passes, the dialogue soon changes to an unrelated idea, repeated chords with a trill, and alternating half-tones (perhaps reminiscent to Goldberg variation 29). In the B part, similar two parts emerge, but now the chords take on a different meaning: although we are maybe even in a slight ritardando, an ominous event is about to happen. And suddenly, with essentially no change of rhythm, but in double time, the storm of the third variation begins. Is this a bravura, (like Goldberg variation no. 1), a nursery rhyme (The Noon witch?), or merely a transition to the waves of Variation 4? The imitative Variation 4 (reminiscent of Goldberg variation 2) presents us with another puzzle. Where is this "sea chanty" melody leading? Soon we find out. The pressure returns. The melody turns into another "temper tantrum", but then repeats. In the B part, however, it changes character. A single repeated note increases in intensity, leading up perhaps to the fullest fortissimo of the piece. The huge sound however tears into pieces, and is brought together by an arpeggio in the dominant in contrary motion. And again, a repetition. By the second time around, we are ready for Variation 5. This contrapuntal movement is perhaps the most intense spot of the sonata. Superficially reminiscent of Goldberg variation 10 (the Fughetta), the pressure of the sustained forte, repeated notes, stiff staccatos, jumps and chords, sixths, thirds and other awkward moves, the very mood of this variation bears down on the player. It is close to unplayable. And yet, perhaps all this, too, is only a mask, and all we are just supposed to follow the simple melody? The exact repetition of the last part, but this time in piano, seems to confirm our suspicions: another false alarm, yet another proof of our foolishness. Finally, reappearance of the theme signals that the calm mood of the final variation is here. But things are not over yet. Variation 6 alone is

a musical piece, similar to the second movement of the *Appassionata*, i.e. its own set of variations, but instead of going to double time in each consecutive variation, the progression is even slower, passing every time from doublets through triplets to doublets in double time. When finally we reach the semidemi-quavers, we do not hear the kind of “revelation of a mountain ridge” as in the *Appassionata*, but instead a “cow jumps over the moon” parody, similar to the improbable melodies in some of the later Goldberg variations (e.g. 26, 28). Finally, the main theme returns, and the journey is over.