Notes on the Program, September 20, 2018

Looking back, from a moment in time some two hundred years removed from their creation, we see the nine symphonies, the sixteen string quartets, and the thirty-two piano sonatas of Ludwig van Beethoven as magic mountains sculpted by a Michelangelic master into an expansive range of peaks and valleys of arresting passion and breathtaking beauty. But the apparently premeditative order of the totality—the pairings, the parallels, the progressions—is an illusion. Had the composer lived ten years fewer or ten years more, the larger shape would be different, the overall trajectory, other than what we perceive today.

In describing this music, the historian who wishes to enter the mindset of the creator must therefore distinguish what he knows, now, from what the artist knew, then. In 1795, when Beethoven set down his first mature piano sonatas (he was not quite twenty-five, although at the time and for years thereafter he believed that he was two years younger), he had no notion that he would eventually complete thirty-two of them, the last, when he was fifty-one, in 1822. He had no notion, we may safely presume, that he would revolutionize the very idea of the piano sonata, since, in his early years, his goal was to honor his masters—respectfully, not slavishly—by *imitating* their work. Today, and in a sense ever since Romanticism crowned “originality” as the highest of the aesthetic values, the word “imitation” gives pause. But by dedicating his first three sonatas to Joseph Haydn, at the time of their publication, in March 1796, Beethoven was surely expressing the hope that his world-famous teacher (at the time no composer, certainly not Mozart, was better known than Haydn) would approve of his disciple’s efforts to broaden the repertory to which the older man had by that time contributed at least sixty compositions.

These first three sonatas in F Minor, A Major, and C Major, assigned by the publishers the collective “work” or “opus” number 2, and the sonata in E-flat Major, Op. 7, also from 1796, constitute the first of eight programs in which our distinguished colleague Jiayan Sun, enjoying two-year residency at Smith, will bring to Sage Hall, *in chronological order*, all thirty-two sonatas. As an inhabitant of this building for nearly half a century, I can say with some authority that never before has it witnessed a gigantic achievement of this kind. I say “gigantic” advisedly: for English speakers, Jiayan’s name is best pronounced as “giant”—without the T.
To climb this mountain in chronological order is a feat of a particular kind, first accomplished in 1861 by the German pianist Karl Halle (later known as Sir Charles Hallé) and most recently by Jiayan’s mentor, András Schiff. Most of the explorers of the repertory have done so in such a way as to offer a balance among works early, middle, and late. Indeed, Beethoven’s creative lifespan provides the quintessential model for the now conventional sectioning of all artists’ works into three periods. For our composer, these were early on labeled (by a Frenchman, of all things) “imitation,” “extériorisation,” and “réflexion.” The designations must not be taken as definitive, for some of the late works breathe the naïveté of youth, while some of the early works demonstrate the virtues of old age. We shall arrive at the “period of externalization” in the fifth recital, with the performance of the “Waldstein” Sonata, Op. 53; and we shall arrive at the “period of reflection” in the seventh recital, with the performance of the A-Major Sonata, Op. 101.

At this evening’s concert, we are in the “period of imitation”—but what is it, precisely, that is being imitated? The answer is: not the tunes of Beethoven’s predecessors, although echoes of these can certainly be found (they are composed of scales and arpeggios and traditional ornaments), but rather the textures and the forms that the old masters used in the various movements that constitute the genre of the sonata, and, more specifically, the tonal language that they spoke.

The first sonata, Op. 2 No. 1, is in F Minor. Haydn never used that key for a piano sonata, and it is not inconceivable that by making this choice, Beethoven was saying to his teacher: take that! Because in the classic era (as Vince Lombardi said of winning), key is not everything, it’s the only thing. Well, no, I take that back. But many aspects of classical compositions are key dependent: the choice of the key, for the composer, is tantamount to the choice of the rock—alabaster, granite, marble—for the sculptor; and to the choice of the paint—acrylic, oil, watercolor—for the painter. It determines the lines, the shapes, and the hues. If you have absolute pitch, you know exactly what I mean; if you know the difference between one sharp and six, you’re on the right track; if sharps and flats are Greek to you, you have every right to love every note you hear, but you should probably be advised that there are some who hear more than you.

Beethoven composed the first movement of the F-Minor Sonata in “sonata form”—a technical term he would not have known. What he wrote is a movement that displayed the home key, or “tonic,” in this case F Minor, that moved to a related key, in this case A-flat Major, that traveled with some ambiguity through several keys, and that returned to and confirmed the tonic. The theorists soon named these sections “exposition,” “development,” and “recapitulation”; Beethoven’s term would have been first-movement music. The structure of the second movement, Adagio, in F Major, is ternary: an opening section, a contrasting
middle section, and a final section that is a variation of the first. (Variation is a technique that is as old as the hills; Beethoven practiced it, in every possible way, from the beginning to the end.) The third movement is also ternary: minuet, “trio” (not a piece in three parts but rather a contrasting section), and, again, minuet (unvaried). Minuets were danced as early as the seventeenth century, but such dances, in the minor mode, are not common. (Even as an imitator, Beethoven was a daredevil.) The final movement, \textit{prestissimo}, is unusual in moving in the first section from F Minor to C Minor, and in having a second section, \textit{sempre piano et dolce}, that seems to have little to do with the first. You can apply the words “exposition,” “development,” and “recapitulation” to this music, too, but you must remember that they are imprecisely descriptive, not imperiously prescriptive.

Haydn wrote at least six sonatas in A Major, and I would suppose that Beethoven knew some of them. The third and fourth movements of his own sonata in A Major, Op. 2 No. 2, a scherzo-trio-scherzo and a rondo, emit a charm that one might want to call Haydneshque. (A “scherzo,” for our purposes, is a speeded-up minuet; a “rondo” is a musical structure with a regularly recurring refrain.) But the slow movement here, \textit{Largo appassionato}, is, on the contrary, about something very serious: the noble harmonies, and the walking bass, \textit{staccato sempre}, suggest everything that is the opposite of frivolity. (You will hear this princely walking bass, again, in the slow movement of the E-flat Major Sonata, Op. 7.) The first movement of the A-Major sonata, on the other hand, with its short and contrasting opening motives, its sudden rests, its prolonged preparations, is a game of peekaboo. Listen to the upward arrows that punctuate this music: they answer the question of why, if you wish to be a pianist, you must practice your scales.

The C-Major Sonata, Op. 2 No. 3, requires conspicuously brilliant scales, and a hell of a lot more. It reminds us that Beethoven—the leading pianist of his generation—was a virtuoso. No less a prestidigitator than Carl Czerny (of the \textit{études}) called Beethoven’s playing “brilliant,” “astonishing,” and “magical.” Some of the magic was caused by \textit{improvisation!} We don’t hear enough about this, we probably don’t know enough about it, but it is not inconceivable that, in his prime, Beethoven was in a class with Oscar Peterson, or even Art Tatum.

With the “Hammerklavier” Sonata, Op. 106, which we shall here in Jiayan Sun’s next-to-last recital, the E-flat Sonata, Op. 7, is one of the longest of the lot. It was begun in 1796, completed in the first months of 1797, and published in October of that year. The key of E-flat Major will forever be associated with the “Eroica” Symphony, which was still seven years in the future, but its “heroic” aspects were known earlier to Mozart (whose Piano Concerto in E-flat, K. 271, is sometimes called \textit{his} “Eroica”) and to Haydn (whose E-flat Piano Sonata from 1794 is among that composer’s most grandiose works for the keyboard).
The Beethoven sonata opens with spacious first movement whose individual parts you will perhaps be able to perceive. The “exposition”—which is an exposition of the terms of “drama” that is always the subject of the sonata form, namely the “conflict” between the home key and its predominant tonal rival—is repeated: it is repeated precisely in order to drive home the terms of the conflict of which I speak, in this case, between E-flat Major and B-flat Major. In the following “development,” you will hear motives you have heard before, foreshortened and newly combined, as we wander through the keys of C Minor, A-flat Major, F Minor, B-flat Minor, G Minor, A Minor, and D Minor (you will hear the wandering, not the individual keys), before returning “home” to E-flat and to the opening material of the movement—which, because you have already heard it twice, you are expected to recognize. (This music is “classic” partly because it turns on a modicum of intelligent audience participation. “Romantic” music, on the contrary, pours over you like maple syrup. Or so it has been said.) In this “recapitulation,” Beethoven does what he almost always does: he varies the opening material, shortly after it has begun anew, and he adds a concluding section, or “coda,” to make it perfectly clear that the end is nigh.

Hector Berlioz—if I may interject a not-quite-total non-sequitur—wrote a book about the players in the opera pit (and a rowdy bunch they are) called *Evenings with the Orchestra*. In it, he describes what those players gossip about during the performance of silly operas. When a great opera is on, however, they remain absolutely silent. Well, the second movement of Beethoven’s Op. 7, *Largo, con gran espressione*, is as great as any opera. You must sit absolutely still and hold your breath. And when it comes to the end, you will feel glad for having been alive during its playing. “The rest is silence.”

“The rest is silence”: Hamlet’s last words. The music critic for *The New Yorker*, Alex Ross, turned them around for the title of his first book, *The Rest is Noise*. HaHa. In fact, Hamlet offers us a tautology: the rest (in music) represents silence; it commands silence. Pianists, because they do not have to breathe (unlike oboists, for example, to which fraternity the present bloviator once belonged), must work to sustain the rest. In the *Largo* of Op. 7, as elsewhere, but more so, the silence is essential to the discourse. It is golden.

Then the third movement, a minuet-and-trio; then the fourth movement, a rondo: these tell you that Beethoven was not yet prepared to send you home in a trance, that the earth is still an OK place, that music—while taking us, in the *Largo*, to another planet—is still a worldly entertainment.

It is ironic that in a few days, in this very music department, as Jiayan Sun begins his exploration of the Beethoven sonatas—than which no repertory could conceivably be more canonical—a conference is to be held on the idea of the canon in the twenty-first century. “Canons are ideological”; they are not “value-neutral”; they “exclude important bodies of
work”; they “reproduce existing social orders and replicate their inequalities and biases.” As you listen to this glorious music, you might wish to weigh the implications of these truths, which the conference organizers, declaring their independence, hold as self-evident.

—Peter Bloom

These notes were prepared not for wide circulation but exclusively for Jiayan Sun’s recitals at Smith College.