On Jiayan Sun’s previous recital, we heard three sonatas from the year 1809. By 1812 Beethoven had completed the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies. By 1814 he had revised his singular opera, *Fidelio*, whose theme of bravery in the face of tyranny was newly appropriate to the world in which Napoleon had been disastrously defeated in Russia and would soon be decisively defeated at Waterloo. Beethoven was duly celebrated at the Congress of Vienna, in the presence of the most powerful figures on the continent, who, when not feasting on the enjoyments of the capital, were busy organizing the geography of post-Napoleonic Europe. Since 1812, Beethoven’s hearing had notably worsened, and his psychological equilibrium had been visibly upset: 1812 is the year of his famous letter to “the immortal beloved,” a woman (she has not been conclusively identified) to whom he confessed his love, his loneliness, and his intention to withdraw from the world. It has thus become customary to view the period from 1813 to 1817 as “fallow,” and as the line of demarcation between the “period of externalization” and the “period of reflection.” It is certainly true that, during those years, Beethoven ceased performing in public, and slowed the rhythm of his composing. But he did not stop.

The Sonata in E Minor, *Op. 90*, was completed in August 1814. The first movement carries an unusually long heading: “Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck”—“Con brio, with feeling, and expression throughout.” I would have thought that the composer wanted all of his music to be played “with feeling and expression throughout.” Did he mean something special here? Was he urging players to indulge in greater *rubato*? The second movement likewise carries a detailed marking: “Nicht zu geshwind und sehr singbar vorgetragen”—“Not too quickly, and in a very *cantabile* manner.” (The urge to imitate the *voice* is a characteristic of the late style; this, indirectly, is what led to the Ninth Symphony.)

The first movement is notable for an exposition in E Minor and B Minor, with a full stop at the end of both the first and second theme groups. In the recapitulation, what was heard in B Minor is heard, as expected, in E Minor. The minor mode seems to generate in Beethoven an almost “romantic” display of dissonance, but structurally speaking, he adheres to the classical style. This is true of the second movement as well, which is a gentle *rondo* with two episodes surrounded by three refrains, the last with a brief coda. There is a word for the restrained lyricism of this extraordinary movement, a word that is anachronistic but apt:
Schubertian. (Beethoven was not quite forty-four when he completed the work; Franz Schubert was only seventeen.) Beethoven here sets out a long melody that is so lyrical, so fluent, so flowing, so cantabile, that even he, the greatest motivic chopper-upper in the history of western music, can do only what Schubert would do soon thereafter: repeat the melody, and luxuriate in its loveliness. The ending of the sonata is conspicuously understated; it will come to you as something of a surprise.

With the A-Major Sonata, Op. 101, we arrive at the classification of “Late Beethoven” and enter the strange and wonderful world that, with the exception of such exceptional musicians as Berlioz and Wagner and a few other wayward souls, remained mysterious and mystifying to countless listeners throughout much of the nineteenth century. Indeed, taking the relationship between biography and criticism to the limit, the mystified attributed the mystery to Beethoven’s encroaching deafness. But what did we just hear if not some of the most alluring sounds ever assigned to the piano? Beethoven’s hearing was imperfect; his sonic imagination was forever intact.

We hear at the opening of the first movement something of the lyricism of the second movement of Op. 90, but there, for the first one hundred bars, the phrase structure is almost entirely regular (4 + 4 + 4 + 4, etc.); here, after the first six bars (2+2+2), the phraseology—as we glide surreptitiously into the dominant, as we slide seamlessly from one area to another—is ambiguous: in this regard, Beethoven, a guide and teacher to all composers who followed in his wake, gave a lesson not so much to Schubert as to Brahms. The sonata form movement (no ruckus, no repeats) is marked “mit der innigsten Empfindung”—“with innermost feeling,” apparently implying, again, something more than what normal interpreters would take it to be their duty to convey.

The second movement, serving the function of a scherzo, is a march (with a trio) in the distant key of F Major. These could be toy soldiers marching, but as the harmony and counterpoint become knotty and hard-hitting, the boytoys seem to become men. The feeling is one captured by the marking in the slow movement of the A-Minor String Quartet, Op. 132: “Neue Kraft fühldend”—“Feeling new strength.”

What follows sounds at first like a slow movement, “sehnsuchtsvoll”—“yearningly,” but it is rather a slow introduction: it begins with a little cadence to move us from F Major to A Minor, and to the dominant of A, at which point we have—a different sort of surprise—a diminutive recurrence of the opening of… the first movement. Then: a full-fledged sonata form finale, with the exposition repeated, the development full of contrapuntal cogitation, the recapitulation grounding us in the home key of A, the coda giving us A-plus.
These, then, are some of the formal maneuvers of the late style: not the teleological process of combative development and triumphant conclusion of Beethoven’s “heroic phase,” but beginnings *in medias res*, subdivisions that turn out to be fragmentary, fugue (as you heard in the finale), reminiscences and returns that relate the parts and round out the form.

In the “mountain chain” that I mentioned in the notes for Jiayan Sun’s first concert, in September, and that is a common metaphor for the Beethoven sonatas in their entirety, it is generally agreed that the “Hammerklavier” Sonata, the Sonata in B-flat Major, **Op. 106**, begun in 1817 and completed in 1818, is the highest peak—if not in value (a Pandora’s box if ever there was one), then surely in length, and certainly in difficulty. The opening gesture alone, if played by only the left hand, as Beethoven’s notation implies, is a reckless daredevil’s challenge. The finale is a reckless daredevil’s dream.

The sonata’s nickname, “Hammerklavier,” is derived from the title page of the first edition, *Große Sonate für das Hammerklavier*. The word simply means *piano*, but in Beethoven’s day it was used in contradistinction to the harpsichord and referred, in an intentionally patriotic German, to what we now call the *fortepiano*, that is, an early version of the modern instrument. The word also appears on the title page of Op. 101 and on the autographs of Opp. 109 and 110, but—because the word “Hammer” seems to carry intimations of power—it has stuck only to Op. 106. This is the first four-movement sonata that Beethoven had written since Op. 31 No. 3, from 1802. Indeed, its proportions, like its import, are symphonic.

Beethoven is said to have characterized the sonatas of Op. 14 as “a dialogue between a man and a woman.” Now, of course, we know that gender is a social construct, just as we know that “the suffocating maleness of music history is at an end,” as *The New Yorker’s* Alex Ross wrote not long ago, “even if the news has yet to reach most big-league orchestras and opera houses.” But at the outset of the “Hammerklavier,” some antediluvian music critic might have constructed the opening eight-note rhythmic figure, *fortissimo*, as [male], and the following lyrical theme, which spreads over bars 5-17, as [female]. Obviously, it is the contrast that is important, and that serves to animate the grand sonata-form first movement, which takes us from B-flat (apparently the favorite key of the dedicatee, the Archduke Rudolph) not to the usual destination—in the later years in particular Beethoven found colorful substitutes for the dominant—but to the submediant, G Major. He takes us there not by a smooth progression, but by a “wrench”: he hammers on D, the third note of the scale of B-flat, and turns it into the dominant of G. And, at the repeat of the exposition, he takes us back to the home key by the same process: he hammers on B-flat, which sounds like
the minor third degree of the scale of G, and turns it into the new, that is, the old tonic. (That may be confusing, but suffice it to say, Hammerklavier oblige, that hammering on a particular note can indeed change its function.)

The development section of the first movement demonstrates Beethoven’s increasing preoccupation with counterpoint and fugue as well as his daring harmonic imagination, as he lingers in the distant key of B Major (five sharps), seven accidentals away from the home key of B-flat (two flats). And after the recapitulation has begun (it is more a revision than a recapitulation), those “wrenches” are replaced by newly inventive harmonic shenanigans that allow Beethoven to present what was earlier in G in the home key of B-flat. A coda features some of the double trills that challenge performers of the late sonatas, and rounds off the movement with reminiscences of the rhythmic figure that opened the movement. The final sonority is composed not of a B-flat chord but of four octaves’ worth of the single note B-flat: this—less conclusive that the full chord—signals that we should move with alacrity to what follows.

What follows is one of the shortest and most charming movements of all, a scherzo that lives up to its name: levity, humor, charm, impishness, everything that is the opposite of anxiety and angst. The dotted figure that is the upbeat here soon sounds like the downbeat (speaking of changing functions): the metrical ambiguity is part of the fun.

The slow movement, by contrast, reminds us of the gloom that characterized the composer’s later years. It is a sonata movement with a twist: the “development” is only a “retransition”; the coda is notably long. The exposition explores the keys of F-sharp Minor and D Major (the latter a demonstration that the major mode can be as heart-breaking as the minor); the recapitulation gives us the earlier F-sharp Minor material, now disguised by melodic variation, and the D-Major material transposed to the parallel home key of F-sharp Major. The final chord of the movement is arpeggiated, as is the opening of the finale—another sign of the composer’s desire to meld the four movements into one. For financial reasons, Beethoven was perfectly willing to have the movements published separately. (Organicism schmorganicism.) And yet he added the first two notes of the slow movement—upbeats that link it with the rest—when it was already in proof. (Ducats be damned?)

The finale, preceded by an introduction that seems to ask should I or should I not, is a fugue—and a very strange fugue it is. A few minutes into the movement, just when it seems clear to you that Beethoven has gone off the deep end, a second subject is introduced that is as melodious as the spring. This, too, soon gets wrapped up in the fugal texture, in the inversions, in the augmentations, in the transformations, in the wild trills at the top, at the
bottom, and in the middle. If anyone can convince you that there is method to Beethoven’s madness (and light at the end of the tunnel), it is Jiayan… Sun.

—Peter Bloom

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