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Beethoven's Hearing Loss and His Late Sonatas

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) was one of the most influential composers for Classical piano. The other most notable two are W.A. Mozart (1756-1791) and F.J. Haydn (1732-1809).

Unlike Haydn and Mozart, Beethoven directly integrated emotional expression and conceptual communication in his music and turned away from reason and logic as in the Enlightenment movement. He believed that music was a means through which to illustrate feelings and ideas to the listener. The three main principles Beethoven lived by were “those associated with the French Revolution, *liberté, égalité, and fraternité*” (Kirby 115) (liberty, equality, and fraternity). He also believed that listening to music was to be an aesthetic and purifying experience, and that it was not to be objectified. Beethoven was diagnosed with deafness in 1798. In 1802 he wrote that, because of his condition, he would have taken his own life if it were not for his duty to the world as a creator of music. There exists a controversy over the era to which we should designate Beethoven's music: Classical or Romantic? It seems he had one foot in each.

It is not known exactly when Beethoven began to experience symptoms of deafness, but it is believed to be between 1796 and 1798. A possibility is that he was unable to diagnose himself as its course was gradual, or that he ignored the symptoms because he was used to experiencing episodes of other unrelated illnesses and simply did not expect to start losing his

hearing at such a young age. He kept this discovery a secret until 29 June 1801 when he wrote a letter to his friend Wegeler describing his impairment and the depression he experienced due to it:

“I must confess that I am living a miserable life. For almost two years I have ceased to attend any social functions, just because I find it impossible to say to people: I am deaf. If I had any other profession it would be easier, but in my profession it is a terrible handicap. As for my enemies, of whom I have a fair number, what would they say?” (Kerman §5)

Beethoven knew his deafness was escalating and irreversible, and would be a handicap for both his professional life and his social life. The overwhelming tinnitus made it quite difficult for him to perceive music, thus affecting his ability to compose. However, his social aspect was affected even more so as he did not present himself at any social gatherings and avoided conversation (Kerman §5).

There is no question that composers' styles change over time, and Beethoven is no exception. Beethoven's life is most logically divided into three periods. Music of the late period changed dramatically from that of the early and middle periods and thus “redefined his legacy” (Solomon 1-2). His later works are instantly recognizable as his own, even to the amateur ear. There are many connections to the characteristic features of the late period and the varying conditions of Beethoven's life. His deafness manifested its full power in 1818. In consequence, he became especially unhappy and more inclined to separate himself from the world, and his mental state suffered. His inner conflicts seem to be related to his later music output.

Beethoven was well known for his motivic style and thematic development (in contrast to Mozart's singing, lyrical, melodic style). However, as Beethoven moves further into the late

period, he develops a more fantasia-like style and his piano sonatas becomes more lyrical than that of the early period. Within movements, his key relationships become more unconventional: he works with the relative third rather than the dominant. The sonata length in and of itself grows to be much longer.

Beethoven experimented with the genres of fugue and variation in his late piano sonatas, something he had not done before. He used devices the Baroque counterpoint composers used, such as inversion, retrograde, diminution, augmentation, and any combination thereof. He also displays elements of canon, fantasia, recitative, and arioso. Most importantly, Beethoven has changed the very structure of the traditional sonata form familiar with Mozart and others. In all but one of his last sonatas, Beethoven abandoned the minuet/scherzo and trio movement and replaced it with either a march or a rapid movement. He also changed the structure of the traditional slow movement (Kirby 127-129).

Beethoven's last five piano sonatas are Ops. 101 in A major, 106 in B-flat major, 109 in E major, 110 in A-flat major, and 111 in C minor. It should be noted that by the time Beethoven composed Op. 106, he had fully lost his hearing. Comparable to Symphony No. 9, "Op. 106 is a work of extremes in terms of its length, its technical difficulty, and the cerebral concentration it requires" (Drake 271). The opening has an overall dark atmosphere illustrated a daunting leap and extreme dynamics in the introduction, an unexpected ritardando and fermata that serves as a segue into the restatement of the first theme group, immense range of pitch by the end of the first theme group, unconventional voice featuring, and erratic dynamic contrast in the second theme group. To make matters worse, Beethoven himself gave the tempo marking "Allegro" with a metronome mark of one half-note equals 138 beats per minute (Verlag II.227). Despite the slows

and stops, the first movement is in perpetual, anxious motion. Beethoven's point here is to make the playing experience an adventure.

This sonata is the only one of Beethoven's last five that include a scherzo movement. In this case, he puts it second, rather than third. In fact, this movement is truly a scherzo in name, form, and style. The motif is very short: only four chords. Beethoven plays with this rhythmic theme throughout the piece, changing the texture slightly. We then arrive at a new section, the trio, which is introduced in the key of D-flat, a relative minor third from the tonic. Again we see an example of Beethoven using unusual key relationships (Verlag II.240-244) (Blom 213).

The third movement, marked "Adagio sostenuto," "is one of the longest and most elevated in all music." One must have a cultivated sense of patience to either play or listen. Not all exciting pieces are fast, loud, or heroic (Blom 216). The fourth movement is ridden with unexpected key relationships, time changes, and tempo changes. Although the composer makes key changes frequently, that is not to say the tonal center, or the tonic, is changed (Blom 240). This is another aspect of Beethoven's style that we can attribute to the late period. In addition, he plays with rhythmic themes and motifs such as fast repeated notes and tremolos, trills, and long virtuosic scale passages (Verlag II.256).

Beethoven wrote, "what is difficult makes one sweat... what is difficult is also beautiful." Indeed Op. 106 is a difficult piece and Beethoven composed it with that intention. If we were to play cautiously and aim for perfection, the mood of the piece would be lost (Drake 270-272).

In summary, Beethoven's piano music was very different in the later third of his life. He experimented with form, texture, key, time, structure, length, and virtuosic abilities. He also incorporated in his music elements of other styles that he had not used before. We can instantly recognize his later music, almost as if he composed his signature directly into the sound itself.

This is the Beethoven who comes to mind first. He considered his hearing loss a curse, but in fact it affected his style in an astonishing constructive manner. One can only imagine how he would react if he could hear his later music performed in today's time.

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