

LATE STYLE

An essay on the program

Selecting a program of music to play in public is almost like doing a self-portrait.

Not so much in the content as in what one wants the recital, the solo performance, to be. In my own case, I think the story of European classical music is not, as is sometimes believed, a golden gallery of geniuses but rather a web of associations between apparently isolated figures. I am very interested in emphasising their affinities and their differences so that the listening experience is enriched by these comparisons, drawn in live public performance and relying on the concentration of the listener.

In tonight's program we have the last sonatas of Mozart, Haydn and Beethoven - the final legacy of three great composers of Viennese Classicism. Their lives are intertwined with the success of the sonata form, and thus it is interesting indeed to see what point form and language had reached in these final works, in a musical genre which Haydn developed continuously and innovatively, Mozart considered intermittently as his preferred vehicle of expression, and Beethoven chose as one of the three basic items in his catalogue of works (the other two being symphonies and string quartets).

Given the shortage of space, I must restrict myself to some observations which in reality deserve quite different treatment. The first arises from the fact that we all attribute a 'late style' only to Beethoven, whose work clearly shows an extraordinary evolution.

Nobody talks about Mozart's late style, and very little is heard about what was developed in Haydn's work. In fact if we browse through the catalogue of Mozart sonatas we cannot fail to notice how omnivorous he was stylistically, even in the use of contrasting styles, and how varied are the outcomes of his keyboard compositions in terms of expression. Take for example the dramatic Sonata in A minor (K310), with those insistent percussive accompanying chords, and the Sonata in C minor (K457), so rich in variations and theatrical pauses; just comparing these two compositions and the Sonata in F major K332 or the B flat K333 shows us how open Mozart was to profound change. But the real major qualitative leap came from his study of the austere style of Handel and Bach. From that moment on Mozart became a different composer.

He came to know traditional classicism; or rather he created a new Classicism which placed the Viennese style in unexpected and surprising synthesis with the imitative counterpoint style of the baroque era. From this major shift there emerged what we'll call Mozart's 'late style', which produced among many other masterpieces the *Jupiter Symphony*, *The Magic Flute* and *La clemenza di Tito*.

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On the keyboard, Sonatas K533, K570 and the last, K576, unquestionably represent a clear change of direction. The typical features of this change are greatly simplified instrumentation - nearly always reduced to just two voices, one imitating the other - rarefied expression through the controlled use of the minor mode and stylised melody, and the form, which acquires crystal clarity through the elements just mentioned. Indeed the sonata form, especially in Sonata K576, reaches a peak of absolute purity. It doesn't take Mozart much to celebrate the triumph of tonality; everything is resolved with an economy of means demonstrating mastery worthy of Raphael; it all flows with a fluency that appears miraculously natural. Any debt to the past is dissolved in what is a completely personal style, no longer required either to surprise or to impress.

While it is possible that Haydn and Mozart met and conversed at times during their careers or competed at a distance, after the death of his younger colleague Haydn increasingly took on absolutely unmistakable personal characteristics. His long list of sonatas for keyboard does not follow any consistent path in terms of style or form: very often, in addition to expressive influences, he was sensitive to the person to whom the work was dedicated. His creation of music was not unconnected with its utilisation. Thus with Haydn we have big sonatas alternating with small, the earliest form of the Romantic with the academic, surges of genius

with backward steps. But the last sonata, in E flat, clearly shows us the point at which we can place Haydn in the history of the sonata, before the appearance of Beethoven. The piece opens with a compact, peremptory theme - almost an actor's gesture - a statement of intention and character announcing a figure of greatness. From here on the changes in mood, colour and instrumental tessitura are numerous, surprising and even disconcerting. The first movement has some odd harmonic changes that strive for 'discontinuity' of the musical discourse at all costs: only a genius like Haydn can afford to do this without it destroying the structure of the sonata form. In this composition we can speak of a much more advanced pianistic sensitivity than in Mozart: we need only look at how the melody sings in the low notes on the keyboard and then suddenly leaps to the extreme limits of the highest notes.

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The shift from the first movement in E flat to the second in E major is a marvel of colour. Here Haydn anticipates one of the stock devices of the Beethovenian style: the sliding of the fingers from the black to the white keys, with a harmonic result that borders on magic. The *Adagio*, compared with the sublime virtuosity of Mozart's Sonata in D, jumps about nervously, all sharp anti-sentimental fragments. There is no place for gentleness or abandon. Finally, the frenetic rondo is full of surprises, in the style of the symphony finales which Haydn invented and raised to the height of perfection.

Beethoven's 'late style' is the subject of endless studies, a few of them very interesting indeed. The most stimulating is the material put together by the German philosopher T.W. Adorno throughout his life in preparation for publishing a 'definitive' book on Bonn's supreme composer. Adorno's great merit lies in posing a series of questions, which certainly contain the key - in other words the right approach - to understanding Beethoven's late period. However, although it may be possible to find partial answers to problems, Beethoven's overall composition process remains unclear. I accept that for some listeners, and even some reviewers, a 'romantic and sentimental' approach to the great works of Beethoven's late period may be sufficient; I respect others' views, but for me, as an interpreter, who in order to tell the story must understand it, such an approach cannot suffice.

The intellectual level Beethoven reached in the last years of his life is unique in the history of music and may be considered one of the highest peaks Man has achieved, even outside the realms of art. At this level it is no longer enough to say that music communicates feelings of happiness or sadness. The weight of the structural factor becomes predominant; indeed, Adorno is more than once tempted to compare Beethoven with Hegel. He goes so far as to make this fundamentally important statement: 'The image of the objectivity of music is presented by Beethoven as a thing that exists per se, not as a thing created by him: he is the recorder of the composition, which is objectified, in other words freed from the chance nature of individual responsibility'. And later: 'the will- a force that form ignites in Beethoven - is always the *Whole*, the Hegelian *World-Spirit*'. A requiem for the romantic aesthetic and a valuable guideline for listening to and playing Beethoven's music.

The concept of the *Whole* as opposed to the *Particular*, the *individual*, is constantly and insistently stressed by Adorno, an underlying accompaniment to all his notes. It is a concept that has ramifications for the reading of Beethoven's texts and clarifies many

uncertainties about his instrumental writing and his choice of material for

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motifs and themes; it explains the very nature of the themes (Adorno says 'they are possibilities or ideas of

themes') – as far from Viennese Classicism as they are from the emerging German Romanticism. The often repeated charge that they are trivial and ineffective in comparison with the inspiration shown in other composers' melodies loses all sense if they are seen as part of a musical discourse where the theme, with no programmatic value in itself, is understood only within the whole, the *Unit*. Any detail which on partial reading might appear to lack 'quality' acquires meaning only when integrated within the organic structure of the composition. It is exactly the same as in works like the Sistine Chapel - or better still Michelangelo's late sculptural work 'Prisoners' - where the absence of detail in a particular part, if we fail to consider the whole, can be incomprehensible.

Instrumental conventions such as scales and arpeggios, for example, are no longer notes grouped together for a dynamic purpose, but only a gesture, a musical thought - a crescendo, an ascent - made up of sounds. It is no longer important which notes are written down:

all that matters is the impulse they translate into sounds. In reality the whole structure of the sonata

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- responds to the need for a higher

unity, where listeners can understand the composition only if they are in a position to go over it in their minds ('Beethoven achieves his most powerful formal effects when a musical idea, previously present only as a theme, becomes a result, thus acquiring a totally different meaning. At times it is precisely this reprise that also makes musical sense of all that has gone before. . . ' Adorno). The memory of what we have heard in the exposition is the instrument we use for understanding the dialectic of development and reprise of the first section; in Opuses 109, 110 and 111 this is no longer the usual recapitulation, but includes variations which Adorno calls 'deviating repetitions': an unusual way of moving beyond the sonata convention.

In his early years, up to Sonata Op.53, Beethoven consolidated the sonata structure by strengthening the development section, reassessing the exposition in its entirety, and expanding the final coda. The result was an extremely cohesive structure, still based on the principle of symmetry. We notice the first 'cracks', the first signs of doubt about the possibility of continuing along this path, in Opuses 78, 79 and 81a.

Sonata Op.101 signals a definite shift: the symmetry is not eliminated, but rather taken for granted so that the dialectic moves beyond it. Thus the recapitulation becomes a new creative phase, a new development miraculously balanced between what we have just heard and the new. The mould is rejected because it has been mastered and totally absorbed.

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Never had creativity found such fertile ground in form. The unknown sense of the *whole* achieved by Beethoven frees him from any restriction or convention, but paradoxically the conventions resurface in their simplicity in the last sonatas, filled however with unknown meaning. It is certainly no accident that in Op.110 we find together the *recitativo*, *arioso*, fuga and the inversion of the fugue, all leftovers from the past that could have remained mere lifeless academic quotes. On the other hand, if we observe the pattern of the movements in the three last sonatas we see that none of them follow the traditional *allegro/adagio*/(scherzo)/rondo pattern.

We are by now far removed from a convention that Beethoven himself had helped to establish as canon.

So was Beethoven destroying what he had built? No, since he saw himself as defending 'Classicism' against the Romanticism taking root in Vienna. He was simply beyond Classicism, if we interpret it as a crystallisation of patterns. Yet Beethoven was the most classical of composers, since he considered music a universal entity - as we saw in the quote from Adorno - separated from the chance nature of the particular (the individual). And so we perceive the lessons of Beethoven's composition as the expression of an overbearing personality, which in the act of manifesting itself discards the boundaries of the personal to become universal: Beethoven's music becomes Music, breaking off its relations with its creator. Hence the overwhelming authority of musical thoughts which in

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others would be embarrassingly trite. To further clarify this important concept, it is enough to look at the wealth of meaning contained in the most ordinary cadential formula, the basic supporting structure of all classical composition.

In Beethoven the cadence becomes something that only 40 years earlier would have been inconceivable. It takes on a commanding extra-musical significance - I'm not sure whether to call it philosophical - and occasionally approaches the peremptoriness of natural phenomena, an edict of the Will. Thus simple phrases, which at unhappy times in the course of Beethoven's career had revealed the coarseness of the raw materials, now magically become infinitely rich in meaning - so rich that today they sound perhaps even more authoritative than a century ago.

The basic character of Beethoven's music in Opuses 109, 110 and 111 is that which we commonly associate with the 'Ode to Joy' in the Ninth Symphony. In reality, if we want to go beyond a mere reading of the text and attempt to make it our own in order to give it back to the audience as a living entity, 'joy' pervades every musical situation in the last sonatas. To explain this conviction I need a better definition of the term 'joy': joy as hard-won peace, joy as a hymn of thanks (the theme of the Andante in Opus 109 and the Arietta in Opus 111, as well as the Pastoral Symphony), joy as a recognition of human dignity and of all creatures (it would take too long here to discuss Beethoven's religiousness. . .).

This is Joy that manifests itself in a way that cannot be separated from the greatest triumph in the history of music: the triumph of tonality. The definition and confirmation of tonality - in other words the sonata form interpreted as a gigantic cadence celebrating the conquest of tonal certainty - is closely linked to the conscious joy of living and being. Even when the choice of the baroque convention propels the music into an expression of suffering, in the Arioso in Opus 110, we have the fugue illuminating the darkness dialectically in response.

The task of the interpreter relates only in part to the intellectual interpretation of the texts, but much more to their emotive legacy: it treads the paths not of the intellect but of intuition. So it is better that I stop here and once again appropriate the words of TW. Adorno:

'In Beethoven I have learnt, every time something appears to me to be wrong, senseless or weak [or incomprehensible, let me add], to give him the full benefit of the doubt and look for the fault in myself'.

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