**Mozart and Beethoven: a journey from and return to the white keys of the piano**

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART  Piano Sonata No. 16 in C, K. 545

WOLFGANG AMADEUS MOZART  Fantasie, K. 475 and Piano Sonata in C minor, K. 457

LUDWIG V. BEETHOVEN  Sonata for Piano No. 27 in E minor, Op. 90

LUDWIG V. BEETHOVEN  Sonata for Piano No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111

**‘Too easy for children, too difficult for artists’**

‘A little keyboard sonata for beginners’. With those words Mozart entered the C major Piano Sonata, K 545 in his thematic catalogue on 26 June 1788. They encapsulate the problem posed to posterity not just by this work, but by all of Mozart’s essays in the genre. So too does the description, ‘Sonata facile’, under which it was first published in 1805. ‘Too easy for children, too difficult for artists,’ was Artur Schnabel’s celebrated description of Mozart’s piano sonatas. In that respect, this decidedly ‘late’, spare work – let us not confuse apparently modest technical demands with dilution of artistry – offers their *ne plus ultra*. The once common relegation of Mozart’s piano sonatas to the uncomprehendingly condescending realm of ‘teaching pieces’ receives confirmation and yet its greatest refutation; this teaching piece is so much more than that.

There is rarely anywhere for the performer to hide in Mozart; here, that tendency is taken to its Webern-like extreme. Only the greatest of pianists and musicians will emerge unscathed –and perhaps only on a lucky day. Extreme simplicity of texture does not, however, inhibit musical expression or exploration; it encourages them. Not only for Stravinsky (‘The more constraints one imposes, the more one frees one's self of the chains that shackle the spirit’) could limitation serve as a spur to invention. What might seem mere ‘instructive’ features – concentration upon the white keys of the piano at times to rival neo-Classical Stravinsky; ability to ‘sing’ a long, *legato* line; facility (far from *facile*) with scales, arpeggios, sequences, ‘Scotch snap’ ornaments, and a good few ‘basic’ finger patterns – are explored, yet no more ‘in themselves’, without ‘musical’ expression and priority, than in, say, a Chopin *Etude*.

The first movement’s structure seems to proceed according to textbook ‘sonata form’, until a gentle jolt is received in the recapitulation: the first subject not in the tonic, but in the subdominant, F major. The recapitulation itself seems more to open up new paths than really to recapitulate, and the second subject necessarily sounds different, not only in the tonic, but in a different key from its big brother. In light of that subdominant surprise, Mozart eschews his most typical practice for the slow movement, by moving instead to the dominant, G major for the (apparently) effortlessly lyrical *Andante*. Here, as indeed in its predecessor and successor, texture and expectations are such that the introduction of any chromatic note registers with a harmonic effect both subtle and yet unmistakeable. The turn to G minor offers a hint of something sterner, noble, if not quite tragic. Repeated thirds announced at the opening of the finale offer another instance of the union of ‘technical’ and ‘musical’ requirements. The player will learn, practise, attempt to perfect. (S)he will also hear pairs of woodwind, relate the work to Mozart’s concertante, symphonic, operatic, and other writing, and consider how that device and that harmony proves generative for the movement as a whole. (So too, God willing, will the listener.) This rondo alternates between statements of this principle theme and a typically Mozartian profusion of balancing alternatives, returning us home to C major at just the right moment: an instruction in form, just as much as more narrowly defined technique.

***Sturm und Drang*: Mozart in the minor mode**

The C minor Fantasia and Sonata, K 475/457, the former apparently written in 1785 as a *post hoc* ‘prelude’ to the sonata composed in the previous year, stand in many ways at the other extreme of Mozart’s solo piano output. With the possible exception of the D major Sonata, K 576, they are the least likely to be considered ‘too easy’, whether in technical or musical terms. Nevertheless, relative to much of Mozart’s concertante writing for the instrument, or indeed to the overt virtuosity required by Beethoven and other successors, Schnabel’s caution would still hold. We hear instantiated the paradox, or better dialectic, fundamental to the entirety of the Austro-German musical tradition from Bach (and earlier) to Schoenberg (and beyond): freedom and organisation are two sides of the same musical coin. Likewise all manner of other musical dialectics: major and minor; diatonic and chromatic; fury and repose; ‘instrumental’ and ‘vocal’; and so on. The Classical style, as Charles Rosen would have put it, is perhaps especially adept at bringing such contests – and reconciliations – to the musical fore.

In the Fantasia, a homage to the extemporising, *Sturm und Drang* tradition of C.P.E. Bach’s keyboard works, which yet entails a mastery in navigating the tonal universe worthy of Emanuel Bach’s father, Mozart’s minor-mode daemon delves into the deepest chromatic, ‘expressive’ reaches, vertically and horizontally. Listen to the almost dizzying round of modulations with which the opening ‘Adagio’ section, the first of six, takes flight, just as harmonically disorienting, and yet also just as sure of its destination, as the celebrated opening to the development of the first movement of the G minor Symphony, K 550. It also offers the pianist, ‘child’ or ‘artist’, similar technical challenges, a few levels advanced, to those in the ‘easier’ C major Sonata. (The ‘Alberti bass’ figuration in the left hand is never far away.) As the great Mozart scholar-pianist Denis Matthews explained, the Fantasia ‘achieves unity and continuity because each [section] (except the last) is open-ended and unresolved, as though aware of an imminent change of scene.’ In Mozart’s instrumental music, the opera house is never distant.

C minor emphatically reinstated at the close, it provides the springboard for the explorations of the Sonata’s ‘Molto allegro’ first movement (an unusual marking for Mozart, another point in common with the aforementioned Symphony). Sinuous chromaticism, once again presaging Wagner and Schoenberg in its vertical and horizontal formulations, offers a counterweight to solidity of tonal purpose. Such is the world of *opera seria*, never more so than in the tragic yet consoling pathos of the ‘Neapolitan’ move to D-flat major in the recapitulation. The second movement rondo offers the ‘scoring’ and mood of an operatic aria, replete with embellishments in the returns of the theme and the coda, some of them unknown until as recently as 1990, when Mozart’s autograph (now in the Internationale Stiftung Mozarteum in Salzburg) was rediscovered in Philadelphia. Elements of its form and that of the first movement are combined, contested, sublimated in the *Allegro assai* finale. Will-o’-the-wisp mystery announced by multiple syncopations in the opening theme, it finds its dialectical opposing force in vehement, tragic eruptions, as if from *Idomeneo*’s Elettra or some other great *seria* heroine. The coda’s closing underline the return to C minor, tonic and dominant, almost as if it were Beethoven insisting; however, the foregoing chromaticism and sudden balm of A-flat major brook no Mozartian argument.

**Soft-spoken Romanticism**

Beethoven’s E minor Sonata, op.90, belongs to that extraordinary group of works – give or take the execrable *Wellington’s Victory* – that stand almost, yet not quite, on the threshold of his ‘late’ period: the world of the *Bagatelles* as much as the sonatas. A performance will last roughly as long as one of Mozart’s ‘Sonata facile’, and some of the motivic building blocks are still far from dissimilar either from that or from the C minor Fantasia and Sonata. Something of the Fantasia’s open-ended freedom may be discerned in the opening, E minor movement: not only is there no exposition repeat, but, as another fine pianist-scholar William Kinderman has noted, many of the formal divisions between exposition and development, and development and recapitulation, are elided. Triple-time, minor-mode restlessness might seem to suggest commonality with the Mozart Sonata, but the energy of ascending E minor arpeggios is quite different: lonelier, more ‘Romantic’, less defiant, than Mozart’s thunderbolts of Zeus.

The second movement, taking a path very different from Mozart the tragedian, turns to E major. Its kinship to Schubert has often been noted; Kinderman calls it ‘the most Schubertian movement in Beethoven.’ Indeed, there is something of the Romantic wayfarer to it, perhaps something even of Beethoven the *Lieder* composer, above all the composer of the first song-cycle, *An die ferne Geliebte*. It marks the final staging post in Beethoven’s series of gently lyrical, long-breathed rondo finales. Variation comes through the changing character of the episodes and the light they shed upon the returning, more or less unvaried theme.

**A final reckoning: Beethoven’s last piano sonata**

With the final sonata on the programme, we return to C minor for the work which, not least on account of its final placing in the series of thirty-two, retains perhaps the greatest aura of all amongst Beethoven’s piano sonatas. Beethoven revered, arguably inherited Mozart’s C minor daemon, remarking, following a performance of Mozart’s C minor Piano Concerto, K 491: ‘We shall never have any idea such as this.’ The third and, of course, last of Beethoven’s piano sonatas in this key, it is, like the op.90 Sonata, written in two, greatly contrasted movements: respectively in tonic minor and tonic major. Any parallels one might draw with earlier works, though, will be confounded by other aspects of this unquestionably ‘late’ world. Counterpoint and harmony remain as two sides of the same late Classical coin: rarer, alas, in performance than one might suspect. The diminished seventh chord, as in Mozart, as in Beethoven’s own *Pathétique* Sonata and Fifth Symphony, offers both vertical and horizontal impetus from the very first melodic interval onwards. Fugal methods, as so often in late Beethoven, feature strongly, melding with sonata form to offer a still more titanic conception of struggle. The exposition’s move to the submediant, to A-flat major, rather than to the conventional relative major, E-flat, perhaps helps set up the possibility of the surprise, hushed *tierce di Picardie* conclusion in C major, presaging the finale’s tonality (and returning to that of the first work heard tonight).

It is a set of variations on a hymn-like ‘Arietta’, caught in the balance and/or dialectic between sublime simplicity and necessary complexity. Rhythm – harmonic rhythm as much as ‘mere’ metre – is key to Beethoven’s progress through the celebrated ‘boogie-woogie’ variation – in truth, its anticipation of jazz tells us very little – and beyond. Asked by Anton Schindler as to why he had not written a third movement, Beethoven, should we trust his interlocutor’s account, gave the appropriately contemptuous response that he had had no time to do so. For there can be no doubting the transcending finality of these variations: nor the profound quality of resolution Beethoven here offers to the violent conflicts enunciated in the preceding *Allegro*. White-key C major, possessed once more of but a very few inflections, spins its trillingly gossamer way towards a quietly intoned and quietly unanswerable Amen.