

Beethoven Sonatas 29 and 30

Beethoven's last three sonatas were sketched and composed at the same time, as he had done with other groups of sonatas, but unlike those other groups, published separately. Perhaps he did it because each represents a unique formal statement; perhaps three opera instead of one brought in more money. What interests us here, since two are being performed together, are the aesthetic similarities.

In these last sonatas, Beethoven, like Mozart before him, and Schubert afterwards, obsessively developed his technique of counterpoint. In op.109's opening, the main theme is a four-part choral harmony disintegrated into individual components; in the second movement the bass and treble are invertible; the third, a set of variations, with all the homophonic simplicity of the theme, features pointillistic two-part harmony, canons, and a fughetta. Opus 110 holds the famous last-movement fugue and its subsequent inversion and diminution.

Another apparent obsession is with the music of Bach. The description of op.109's variations could just as easily apply to Bach's Goldberg Variations, and there are more similarities: both sets end with a repetition of the theme; both alternate strict and free canonic imitation; the last variation in op.109 is a long continuous double trill with hints of the melody sparkling above, just as in Goldberg Variation #27. There are other instances which will come up later.

Both op.109 and 110 begin with outwardly serene, aurally beautiful music, followed by violent (and for op.110, humorous) middle movements, and then varied last movements that are twice as long as the previous two combined. Opus 109 begins with a very short movement, where the two principal themes are set apart by drastic changes of tempo, meter and harmony (diatonic to chromatic). The last calm chord is interrupted almost immediately by a wild, furious scherzo á tarantella, followed by the variations discussed above.

A Classical convention is broken here. Tradition would have the second movement be both the slow movement, and if in a minor key, the relative minor to E major (c# minor). Instead the "slow" movement is the last, and the scherzo is in e minor, the tonic minor (Beethoven did a similar but less dramatic thing in his Sonata op.90). This unusual choice creates the effect of shattering the previous atmosphere; even if the themes and dynamics were the same, playing this scherzo in c# minor would present a new atmosphere, one almost logical to what preceded it, rather than the irrational rejection that this key change represents. The connection between the 2nd and 3rd movements thus becomes a significant, transformative silence rather than just a conventional pause. E minor not only ends, but dissipates, and the variation theme comes as an emergence from the clouds, of tenderness from fury.

If op. 109's opening eloquently juxtaposes diatonic and chromatic harmony, op. 110's does the same with major and minor. I was amazed to go back and discover the only minor harmonies in the entire movement are shadows of the murky development section, and a single f minor chord at the end of the recapitulation, which, even coming in a sequence, it is still heard as significant. One of the most conventional aspects of Western harmony is elevated to a totally different plane. The development section sounds as though entering another mysterious, dark and ominous world; the return of the main theme in the tonic is the light at the end of that particular tunnel.

Is it a hint of death, but subsequent survival? If so, the utterly unique finale is the full experience of death – with subsequent resurrection. The floating grave introduction is followed by an operatic recitativo (not new for Beethoven) that reaches its high point on a suspended A, repeated twenty-seven times, strangely notated like this:



Here the deaf Beethoven intones sonorities of a bygone era: on the clavichords of the 18th century, a vibrato effect (in German, *Bebung*) was possible by a shake of the finger. On the 19th century's modern fortepianos, it was impossible to do – but possible to imagine.

After this a *Klagender Gesang*, song of suffering, is heard in a-flat minor. The melody is a quotation from Bach's *St. John Passion*, an aria called, "*Es ist vollbracht*" – it is fulfilled, meaning the Crucifixion. Whether or not the music refers to death in the religious sense is unknown, but the allusion helps us to understand material which will come later. The song of suffering closes darkly but enters seamlessly into an organ-like fugue on a theme in fourths that recalls the opening movement. The fugue builds to a climax which dissolves into a transposition, into g-minor, of the original *Klagender Gesang*, this time marked "*Ermattet klagend*," an exhausted sorrow, and "*Perdendo le forze*," losing life; the music correspondingly is written in halting fractures.

The end of this aria is funereal with its added silences: but a Picardy third and the subsequent repeated G-major chord (10 times repeated) act as electricity flowing once again through the veins, and we have reached the poetic resurrection: indeed, the inversion of the fugue which follows is marked "*Nach und nach wieder auflebend*," gradually returning to life. The gathering energy from the first fugue finally reaches a climax, as the piece ends in an ecstatic, virtuosic peroration.

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