

Beethoven, Piano Sonata in A, Op. 101

The late Sigmund Freud once attributed all of art, music, and the pursuits of civil society to one basic fundamental motivating factor. This factor of which he spoke was the inherent fear of death, and the inability to come to some kind of reckoning that presumably resides in every human being. Speculations on what could possibly be behind the drive in humans to abstract and create were of course nothing new at this time. This question has been on the brain of every human being that has ever shed a tear at a funeral, or sighed in reverence at a painting, since primitive man executed the first ritual burial and the first cave scribblings. The question or perhaps the sense of mystery has always been the same; this is what connects us as a species. What has distinguished the identities of empires, eras, and individuals throughout the ages, are the musings and responses that have been created or subscribed to in response to this question by the canon of humanity.

The way that different contexts drove humanity to build Rome and then burn it back down. The way that deism is dialectally essential for the existence of atheism. The way that two nations can earnestly speak of their province over love and peace while lobbing bombs at each other. It is simply too profound to write off to a fear of death. The symbiosis of the enlightenment and the industrial revolution which on the one hand decried the absolute integrity of individual sovereignty and on the other produced factories that turned human beings into commodities is another such example, another context to muse on and respond to. We are born into the world shaped by countless

generations of human hands, and we have an important obligation to decide whether we will strive to shape and recreate the world ourselves, or be shaped and defined by the aggressive will or callous clumsiness of others. Enter Ludwig Von Beethoven.

Beethoven resided in Germany and Austria in a time when Europe was rife with social change and revolution and was strongly driven by the ideals that encompassed these things. He was an unapologetic individualist both as a socialite and as a composer. He pushed the boundaries of people and music in ways that shook the earth. Beethoven challenged the social order by mocking social convention in the aristocracy and elsewhere, and he challenged the rigidity of music by simultaneously mastering and subverting the conventional processes of form and tonality. Nowhere is this subversion as clearly marked and aggressive (yet delicate and concise) as in the works produced by Beethoven in roughly the last decade of his life. This time frame is usually referred to as Beethoven's "late" or "third" period. Beethoven's Piano Sonata in A Major, Opus 101, is generally recognized as the definitive point of arrival for Beethoven into this area of his music that combined his mastery of form and tonality with his prowess in the dissolution of both.

There are several contexts in which to consider the significance of Op. 101, and hence just as many perspectives from which it can be analyzed. There is the context of the historical development of tonal harmony, and Beethoven's arrival at (or role of the harbinger of) the end of this development. There is the context of Beethoven's personal life including his poor health, his strong sense of national identity, his deafness, and his trouble with having custody of his nephew. All of these perspectives, as well as others,

are crucial in gaining a more holistic appreciation of Opus 101, the man who composed it, and the things we could learn from Beethoven's brilliance and boldness.

Right from the tempo marking of the first movement of Opus 101, Beethoven challenges the complacency of conventional treatments. Today, almost two hundred years after the invention of the metronome, tempo markings such as largo, allegro, and presto have been neatly organized into beat per minute ranges we merely need consult our metronomes to hear or feel. While the metronome was just being introduced in the early nineteenth century, the treatment of tempo markings was similarly detached and objective. Not one to have convention distort the originality of his art, Beethoven gave the first movement of Opus 101 the German tempo marking of *Etwas Lebhaft und mit der Innigsten Empfindung*, roughly translated as "rather lively and with the warmest feeling".

(4)

I am wholly unaware of a codified bpm bracket for the marking of "warmest feeling". This instruction from Beethoven demands the subjective engagement of the performer, and yet pales in comparison to tempo marking for the finale. The German instruction of *Geschwind, doch nicht zu sehr, und mit Entschlossenheit* translates to "Fast, but not too fast, and with decision". (3) Never has there been, nor shall there ever be a more subjective instruction than 'decision'. These instructions simultaneously carry the implication from the composer that the limited vocabulary of conventional tempo marking is not enough to describe the unique expressiveness that is essential to the validation of a truly emotional composition or its performance. The performance aspect would have been especially important to Beethoven who at this point in his life had given

up public performance due to his deafness, placing the responsibility of all the realization of his music in the hands of the performers.

The simple fact that the instruction was written in German as opposed to Italian was, in itself, a challenge of convention and an assertion of Beethoven's identity.

Beethoven's strong sense of national identity with Germany manifests itself here, and foreshadows his later work of crafting a German name for the Pianoforte, a name he revealed at the heading of his next piano sonata, the "Grosse Sonate für das Hammer-Klavier". Although the music hasn't even started yet, there is still more to discuss about Opus 101.

Just as Beethoven's tempo markings suggests an individualistic approach to performance and composition, the dedication of this piece, and the story surrounding it, also speaks for the intimate nature of Opus 101. The formal dedication of Opus 101, in German is as follows:

Der Freiin Dorotea Ertmann gewidmet.

This dedication was made to a Viennese Baroness pianist who was a close friend to Beethoven in his later years. Mendelssohn met the baroness to whom Opus 101 was dedicated when she and her military husband were an elderly couple and garnered this anecdote that she had communicated in a letter:

"When she lost her last child, Beethoven at first did not want to come into the house; at length he invited her to visit him, and when she came he sat himself down at the pianoforte and said simply: 'We will now talk to each other in tones.' and for over an hour played without stopping. She remarked: 'He told me everything, and at last brought me comfort.'" (2)

The idea of ‘speaking in tones’ is an appropriate anecdote for Opus 101. In traditional harmony and form, the relationship between composer and listener is predominantly one of a composer making tonic – pre-dominant – dominant – tonic statements while the educated listener appraises the syntax of these statements. In Opus 101, the relationship between the composition and the tonally trained listener is much more of a dialogue than a lecture. The demand for the listener to contemplate the resolutions, or lack thereof in Opus 101 establishes a conversation between the performer and the listener on the very nature of expectation and resolution. With the first movement opening on a dominant scale degree theme that outlines the tonic key of A major, our ears are expectant of some kind of resolution to a root position A major triad in order to resolve the tensions of the dominant meanderings prevalent in mm 1-5. We are not only kept from the tonal relief of the A major triad, but our expectations are further frustrated with a deceptive cadence on beat 2 of mm. 6 that also serves to modulate the key to the sub-dominant, F#. Only six measures into the piece and Beethoven has already made a substantial modulation without a clear presentation of a tonic sonority anywhere. This is clearly a strong example of Beethoven’s “movement towards the open forms of the Romantic period, even if the harmonic language retains the firmly closed nature of the classical style.” (6) This ‘dialogue’ about a reinterpretation of harmonic expectations is reflected in the melodic component of the music as well. “...With one phrase answering another (bars 16-25) or a single voice repeating something with a slightly different inflection” (3) there is a kind of conversation that takes place between the motivic variations within these phrases. Rhythm and phrasing throughout

the first movement of Opus 101 provoke even further discourse on the subject of expectation and frustration.

From the palette of broad, though not altogether gross, generalizations of Beethoven's late period, one of the commonly accepted norms is that "the harmonic accents are frequently separated from the rhythmical accents wherein something like a dissociation between the different strata of the material occurs." (1) In this way, Beethoven mirrors his thorough exploration of harmonic tension with the thematic capabilities of complex syncopations.

The transition to the coda, mm. 77 – 86, begins with a simple four measure long, tonic – dominant progression in a solid two beat feel. This four-measure span is among the most resolutely tonal and rhythmically straightforward moments present in the first movement, but it quickly progresses to one of the most rhythmically obscured and harmonically tense. Five measures into the coda transition; a two beat dotted quarter syncopation is imposed with accents on the third and sixth subdivisions of each measure. These are definitively weak beats for a rhythmic subject, but there is a great deal of power drawn from them as the harmony gets progressively more dissonant and tense, ultimately ending up on a fortissimo borrowed fully diminished vii chord with scale degree 1 (A) in the bass. With two diminished fifths a minor third apart (G#-D, B-F) and the fortissimo accent falling on the third subdivision of beat two, this is a provocatively obscure sonority to develop from what was, moments before, a tonally and rhythmically straightforward passage. This section is the closing of an idea but reverses the principles of functionality in that its resolution of this idea is ultimately in the completeness of its decay.

If a matrix of Beethoven's genius, as affected and shaped by his proud individualism, his isolating deafness, and his arrival at (or role as the harbinger of) the end of the development of tonal harmony were ever to be manifested in the world, it surely came closest to the true forms of these things in the late music of Beethoven. The definitive beginning of which is his Piano Sonata in A major, Opus 101. The strife of the world in which he lived, with his health, and with the development of music can be seen with a brilliant clarity from the pages of opening movement of Opus 101 which in some editions spans only two pages. The beauty of engaging and enduring this turmoil which is life, is finally spoken in the last measure of the movement with a solemnity and deceptively simple resolve that would move a listener to tears to think that this was in fact a deaf man. At the end of a crescendo and ritard we finally hear a full root position V7 chord in the last subdivision of the second to last measure and are almost ready to exhale, when for just one more moment Beethoven suspends the V7 and starts to only suggest a resolution by adding a low A in the bass; a resolution we finally receive a beat later. There is an unexplainable eternity between this final unexpected tension and the sigh of completion given to us in the last chord of the piece, which can only be interpreted as homage to the kind of hope and perseverance that shapes a man like Beethoven out of an ordinary human being.

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