

# Seymour Lipkin, piano: Piano Sonata in B-flat Major, Op. 106, “Hammerklavier”

None of Beethoven’s piano sonatas had a longer gestation than the “Hammerklavier” Sonata Op. 106, which was his main creative preoccupation during the latter half of the year 1817 and the greater part of 1818. It is written on a scale such as to dwarf any pre-existing work of its kind, and it marks the start of a whole series of monumental compositions by Beethoven, each evolving over a number of years – among them the Ninth Symphony, the “Missa solemnis” and the “Diabelli” Variations Op. 120. The first two movements of the “Hammerklavier” Sonata were intimately bound up with the composer’s intention to write a work for the name-day of his most ardent admirer and patron, Archduke Rudolph of Austria, which fell on April 17. Among Beethoven’s sketches is a version of the opening movement’s main theme as a setting of the words “Vivat, vivat Rudolphus!” together with the comment that it was to be developed before being assigned to a four-part chorus.

The Op. 106 Sonata owes its nickname to Beethoven’s nationalistic attempts during his later years to replace Italian musical terminology with German equivalents – “Hammerklavier” being his translation of “pianoforte.” Like the original version of his late String Quartet Op. 130, the “Hammerklavier” Sonata ends with an intractable fugue of colossal proportions. Both are pieces that strain wilfully against the medium for which they are written, and both make almost impossible demands of their performers. In the case of the string quartet, Beethoven eventually yielded to the entreaties of the work’s publisher, and replaced the fugue with a more lightweight finale. Such a substitution would be unthinkable in the “Hammerklavier” Sonata, where the fugue itself is preceded by an introduction offering a gradual awakening from the profound stillness of the slow movement to the contrapuntal style of the finale.

The slow movement itself is the longest and most profound piece of its kind Beethoven ever wrote for piano. If we dis-

count, as we should, the slow movement from one of the piano quartets he had composed at the age of fifteen, it is also his only piece in the key of F-sharp Minor. (Curiously enough, Mozart also wrote no more than a single movement in F-sharp Minor – the Adagio from the Piano Concerto K.488 – and in so doing likewise produced a piece of haunting melancholy.) It is like some slow-moving, deeply tragic barcarolle; and when, in the recapitulation, the main theme is transformed with the aid of ornate filigree work, the music seems to stretch out its wings and take off into the infinite.

While the sonata was at its final proof stage, Beethoven gave instructions that a measure was to be added to the start of the slow movement: a rising phrase forming a pre-echo of the falling melodic interval with which the movement’s main theme begins. The rising phrase Beethoven inserted also mirrors, as though in slow motion, the conclusion of the preceding scherzo. In turn, the scherzo itself is like some miniature parody of the sonata’s first movement, whose main events it reproduces in drastically condensed form. One of those events is the rising and falling shape of the fanfare-like “Rudolphus” theme. Another is the conflict between the tonic note of B flat, and the dark force of a “foreign” B natural, a semitone higher. In the scherzo’s closing bars the note B natural invades the music with some force – as though in caricature of the ending of the first movement’s exposition, which plays on the same opposition between B flat and B natural. In the opening movement the measures leading back to the beginning of the piece, for the repeat, have the music alighting on the note B flat; but when the same moment is reached the second time, as a transition forwards into the central development section, the B flat gives way to B natural. Even more striking, however, is the start of the recapitulation, where the main theme is suddenly catapulted into B minor, a key Beethoven once described as “black.”

Just as Beethoven labelled the string

quartet Fugue Op. 133 which had formed the original finale of the String Quartet Op. 130 as *Tantôt libre, tantôt recherchée* (“at times free, at times rigorous”), so the finale of the “Hammerklavier” carried its own disclaimer: *Fuga a tre voci, con alcune licenze* (“three-part fugue with a few free passages”). Despite the composer’s admission that he had departed from rigorous fugal style, the sonata’s finale runs the whole gamut of contrapuntal techniques. Like the string quartet fugue, it is constructed as a gigantic chain of fugal variations; and towards the end, as a moment of stasis welcome to listener and performer alike, a calm new theme is introduced. The new theme is subsequently combined with the main fugue subject in double counterpoint, and from this point on, the music gathers strength again, until it reaches a climax over a long-sustained trill deep in the bass – an expanded form of the trill contained at the start of the fugue subject itself.

In writing his Op. 106 Sonata, Beethoven was, he told Carl Czerny, aiming to produce his greatest work of its kind – one that, as he said, would “give pianists something to do” and would be played in 50 years’ time. Few in the 19<sup>th</sup> century apart from Hans von Bülow and Liszt (whose interpretation of the slow movement was likened to “an eyewitness of secrets of a world beyond the grave”) ventured to perform it in public, and if it has become much more familiar today, it is a work whose stature, grandeur and beauty have lost none of their power to overwhelm.

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