

The “Hammerklavier” Sonata, Opus 106 Adagio Sostenuto



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. . . for what is difficult is also beautiful, good, great and so forth. Hence everyone will realize that this is the most lavish praise that can be bestowed, since what is difficult makes one sweat.¹

The “Hammerklavier” Sonata of Ludwig van Beethoven is indeed concerned with that which is difficult. It is also concerned with what is great. It is concerned with what is beautiful since beauty in this work is the painful emotional struggle that defines suffering and redemption. And finally, it is concerned with a vast scope whose tensions and conflicts indeed make one sweat. Kenneth Drake says of the work:

Opus 106 is a work of extremes in terms of its length, its technical difficulty, and the cerebral concentration it requires. Its allure is its dimensions, a keyboard Ninth Symphony and Grosse Fuge combined under one’s ten fingers.²

The Sonata fits neither into the second nor into the third period of creativity. And although it is the first of a series of monumental works including the Ninth Symphony and the *Missa solennis*, as a piano work it stands midway and alone between Opus 101 (written in 1816) and Opus 109 (written in 1820). It is also the biggest of the sonatas, it places the Scherzo as a second movement, it contains the longest slow movement, and its fugal finale is Herculean in size and demand. The pianist is challenged both physically and musically to extreme limits: leaps and cross-hand leaps, written-out trills, trill passages with leaps, double trill passages in middle voices, timed trills with weak fingers, abrupt and frequent dynamic changes, innumerable specific damper and soft pedal changes, a six octave ascending scale in duple and triple, finite rhythmic challenges in the Largo, and necessary finger contortions and manipulations in the Fugue. There are also the very conspicuous and interesting metronome markings. These markings, the only ones that Beethoven designated for his sonatas, are amazingly (if not impossibly) fast in the outer movements, and thus of course, present another physical challenge to the pianist.

The work is in four movements. The first is in sonata-allegro form, the Scherzo is ABA, the third movement is also in sonata form, and the last movement is a Fugue. All movements are tightly linked, each starting with the interval of the third. In fact, the very opening leaps come from a low B-flat single note to a B-flat major chord with a melodic D. And that germ is what will take the entire work to its mammoth ending of trilled simultaneous octaves leaping tenths a step at a time, until arriving at two sets of dominant seventh/tonic chords, the latter of which is even syncopated.

The Adagio sostenuto is the longest slow movement of all of Beethoven’s sonatas. But in fact, much of the feeling of its vastness is due to the many harmonic as well as melodic postponements that

¹ *The Letters of Beethoven*, 3 vols. trans. and ed. by Emily Anderson (New York, 1961), II, 661.

² Kenneth Drake, *The Beethoven Sonatas and the Creative Experience* (Bloomington, 1994), 271.

exist throughout its 187 measures. It is built of an immense sonata form in the key of F# minor, enharmonically a third below B flat (the tonic of the work). The opening section contains two themes: the first is played *una corda* throughout, introducing a glimpse of the Neapolitan G major in bars 14-15 and again in mm. 22-23. This exquisite harmonic change is literally a ray of hope and serenity. It justifies mentioning each time it appears. The second theme played *tre corde*, is an embellished variation of the original theme, beautifully and gently ornate in the right hand, while tensely and traumatically accompanied by the left hand. A key change in bar 41 introduces D major, a third below the F# tonic, and in m. 45, the right hand crosses over into the caverns of the bass only to repeat 4 octaves higher the same tune. (It is tempting here to note the similarity of this specific tune to that of the opening theme of the Arietta of Opus 111, though the key here is in C major.) The ensuing close of the exposition alternates *una corda* and *tutte le corde* passages using diminished seventh arpeggiations to alternate with the absolute stillness of block chords. These modulate into B major, back to D major, into F# major, briefly to C# major (which hints at being a V of F# minor) and finally into the development on m. 76.

In the development, Beethoven takes the opening theme fragment and after using alternating *una corda* and *tutte le corde* to help color and delineate, he sequences harmonic passages of descending thirds written in octaves. The left hand fills in that harmonic language with arpeggiated upward-moving 16th notes. It is a passage of amazing economy—only 11 measures long, but because of the melodic and harmonic extensions as well as the *sforzandos* which fall on the weak beats and therefore draw attention to the static tension, the feeling is one of prolonged, albeit troubled, spaciousness. This short development leads, on m. 85, into a hesitant two bar descending diminished 7th chord which rises upward in diminished arpeggios in m. 87 to the recapitulation in m. 88.

The recapitulation is hardly a predictable or symmetrical one. The main tune is now exquisitely embellished in thirty-second notes in the right hand (once again perhaps foreshadowing a similar passage in the Arietta of Opus 111) while the left hand, as if to make sure that movement is and remains minimal, drones in harmonic support with predictable, heavy, and static eighth notes. Only in m. 93 does Beethoven brilliantly switch to sixteenth notes in the left hand. After nine more beats of forward thrusting, syncopated sixteenths, the familiar static eighth notes return. This familiarity allows preparation to be made melodically and harmonically instead. It will be a preparation for the most exquisite and tender 4 bars of the movement: the spiritual epicenter of the Sonata.

These measures deserve special notice. In m. 98 the crescendo marking to the hairpin serves to highlight the two sets of minor ninths in the right hand. The first is a preparation for the second over the hairpin, creating unbelievable emotional pain and grief. The crescendo and hairpin in the next bar are modified in that the first ninth of B to A is now a major ninth, and the interval over the hairpin is G# to A, a minor 2nd. This “loosening” of the traumatic tension in bar 99 is absolutely perfect in preparing for the next exquisite measures: 100-101. In these, the G major respite of the exposition is given a lyrical space and floating immobility that creates a beauty and serenity simply beyond words. One could argue that it is in this passage that Beethoven finds the peace and spiritual evolution that will be found again, and even more frequently, in the last three sonatas. In any case, this G major passage rests for that magnificent moment on the hair-pinned C Major before once again re-establishing the tonic F# minor theme. The second G major phrase of the recapitulation is much more embellished than that of the exposition. Where it is marked *espressivo* in m. 26, it is marked *ritardando* over 6 full bars from mm. 107-112. What a prolongation this is, as well as a difficult passage for the performer in trying to proportion the long *ritardando* into m. 113. But the lengthy time is worth the ‘stretch’ because once here, a songful melody (similar to that starting on m. 26) beautifully fills in the huge register gaps using syncopated eighths, sixteenths, and thirty-second notes. An exquisite vocal trill in m. 118 is marked *con grand espressione*. This place, foreshadowing Chopin’s musical language and pianistic style, is another one of magnificent beauty. But unlike the sublime G major passage of mm. 100-101, this vocal trill over a V/7 and then a VII/7 of B minor, feels at once tragic and beautiful, painful and very humanly vocal. The cross-hand passage of D major in the exposition is repeated in F# major in the recapitulation, and once again rests in static chords on bars 146-47 on E-flat major, then on F# major, briefly on D major to its relative B minor before finding the sixth degree of G major. This introduces the coda in bar 155-56. If the

emotional climax was heard in the body of this movement, the dramatic climax is truly found in the coda.

Now and for the first time, when the cavernous cross-handed passage is played, Beethoven specifically writes *tutte le corde*. This must be a hint that what had been so intimate and static in D major and in F# major, now will introduce some compositional and emotional surprises. And indeed, in bar 159, the introduction of the A# in the tenor changes the whole “tenor.” Beethoven incorporates a rising line in the bass fighting against the firmly rooted and defiant F#'s of the right hand *Bebung*. The (by now) thirty-second notes become feverish in their futile manic attempts to break free. The return of the opening is indeed exhausted, but the last bars in F# major seem to protect and reassure, resolving the desolation of the movement as a whole. So exquisite is the left hand rocking and lulling F#-C#'s in mm. 178-180 that the movement seems to come to an end in peace. Except...the last two chords. The A#, doubled and in the conspicuous position of being the bottom note of the right hand and the top note in the left hand, is too suspicious. Does this prominent placement of the leading tone of B minor (the “black key” in Beethoven)³ indicate that there is much more yet to come? It would seem so, and indeed the opening dolce of the Largo is only a fleeting, ambiguous moment before the fugal finale lunges with determined energy.

On the Performance

The difficulty of any musical analysis lies in the fact that the more the piece is dissected into its smallest units, the closer one comes to mere sound, and all music consists of mere sounds.⁴

Adorno might have some allies in the form of performing pianists with this statement. How can one bring thorough analysis, cohesion, and understanding to this huge Adagio? Or can one? It is argued here that a starting point of the working process must be born from a deep mental and emotional curiosity to probe, and that in itself must come from the love of the work, as well as a loving connection to the composer. That said, if the process includes an analysis of the type just undertaken, then, with that structural understanding and support, one must still deeply consider the limitations and limitless possibilities of another dimension: the fingers, feet, intuition, and instrument. The Adagio of the Hammerklavier Sonata has numerous instructions, more than in any other single movement of Beethoven. Yet in the second measure alone, the *mezza voce* marking can be taken to mean exceptionally soft, softly, or in a softly spoken voice. One must also consider that the whole movement is to be “*molto sentimento*” in mood. To what does the *mezza voce* truly apply? The specific bars or the prevailing mood? Then there is the question of pedaling. Would one want to “bump” the melody using three pedals in m. 2? Or two pedals? Or on the other hand, would one go over the bar line with the damper in mm. 3-4, in order NOT to “bump” the D's? And once again in bars 7-8, if the pedal options are large, then the experiments are endless. Each pedaling decision helps to get closer to the overall mood which the performer has chosen (at least for that particular performance or performing season) to convey. What about m. 27? Where would one use the damper pedal, how much, and again, what feeling will it convey? How can the marking *con grand espressione* be determined and how should one pedal the passage to get closer to the stagnancy of the left hand while simultaneously achieving an overlapping legato in the right hand? Then there is the consideration of where to physically sit for the cross-hand passage starting in m. 45 and its counterpart later on. One must learn where the best trajectory is to achieve the quality of sound necessary in crossing over, especially so deeply in the register. In the development, the descending thirds, harmonically in diminished sevenths, must be placed and spaced with angst, but not rushed. Once again, to quote Adorno: “The recurrent, idiosyncratic harmonic formulae which intentionally suspend the surface clarity include, in particular, the chord of the diminished seventh on the

³ William Newman discusses the demonic aspects of the key of B minor in this sonata as well as other Beethoven works. See *Beethoven on Beethoven: Playing His Piano Music His Way* (New York, 1988), 274-5.

⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music* (Stanford, 1998), 4.

anticipated resolving note in the bass.”⁵ That indeed is analysis. But it is analysis which gives feeling to the passage only if the pianist will take the time and the energy to experiment with all the physical possibilities, then blue-print those final decisions into performance, while emotionally continuing to breathe fresh life and love into the work. Indeed, one can spend hours, years, or a lifetime on the ending alone. How does one roll the last chord? Slowly? Evenly? What does it suggest? Is it really an end? Or is there more to come? Does Beethoven want it to be played *tutte le corde* or is *tutte le corde* in reference to the rests and the *Largo* to follow? Does one cross hands? Where does one cross hands? Is the damper to be raised with the chord? Or to be fluttered with the last chord, or half-pedaled before the last chord?

The performer must patiently, while systematically, work towards re-creating a likeness to the original spirit of Beethoven’s dictates. This can only be done with analysis on the one hand, and numerous physical experiments on the other. Finally, the performer must always stay alert to new thoughts and ideas, while keeping the original love and curiosity as the cornerstones to his responsibility.

⁵ Adorno, *Beethoven*, 129.