A careful study of these works will transform us,
for Beethoven will become our teacher and
lead us to develop our own personalities and characters.
— Edwin Fischer

Piano Sonata No. 16 in G Major, Op. 31, No. 1

On October 6, 1802, Beethoven wrote a letter to his brothers Kaspar Karl and Nikolaus Johann expressing his growing distress and desire for isolation. Never sent and only found after the composer's death, this letter is a true psychological confession that went down in history as the Heiligenstadt Testament. Beethoven revealed the growing weakness of his hearing, which had slowly isolated him from society and forced him "to live completely alone," and the pain of appearing to others rude and unpolite. Driven by the feeling of imminent death, Beethoven appears to farewell his brothers before a suicide. Indeed, on October 10, he wrote on the reverse side of the document: "Thus, then, I take my leave of you, and also with sadness...As autumn leaves fall and wither, so my hopes are ruined." However, Beethoven's deep faith in art overflows from the entire document, so much so that we can find between these lines the revelation that sheds light on what will keep him clinging to life more than anything else: "Art! Only Art deterred me. How could I leave the world before I had produced everything I felt to be my calling?"

As in Aeschylus' famous phrase "πάθει μάθος" (learning from adversity), Beethoven makes this moment of imbalance between psychological despair and success as a composer one of the most decisive turning points of his originality. The creative reaction led him to complete, during 1802, his *Symphony No. 2, Op. 36*, *Violin Sonatas, Op. 30, Piano Variations, Op. 34* and *Op. 35* and, finally, *Piano Sonatas, Op. 31*. The first of these sonatas is so satirical, playful, and caricatured as to suggest that one of the decisive values of the art that kept Beethoven alive was that of downplaying. The effervescence and vitality of the musical discourse, expressed with brilliance at the keyboard that appears almost carefree, ward off seriousness and heaviness. On the contrary, it almost seems the whole work intends to poke fun at that music that takes itself too seriously.

The *Allegro vivace* opens with an astonishing gesture: the right hand anticipates the left hand by a sixteenth, creating a rapid acciaccatura with a disturbing effect. Constantly repeated, the gesture becomes the caricature

of a pianist whose hands cannot play together. The alternation with subdued cadences played coordinated makes the scene even more comical, as if, now and then, the pianist's practice takes effect, and his hands manage to play together. A popular dance theme interrupts with an insistent syncopated rhythm the satirical scene. The extravagant alternation between the two hands and the jaunty bass accompaniment paint a village scene, paradoxically mixing with the compositional seriousness of the challenging modulating path. Between virtuosity and grotesque gestures, the scene returns to the uncoordinated pianist, concluding with extreme comedy. According to Rosen, "if a piano recital were not so desperately serious an affair, ...it would make the listeners laugh."

In the *Adagio grazioso,* the humor shifts to Italian voice technique, with a whimsical, satirical picture full of exaggerated flourishes, warbles, and diminutions. The theme is paraphrased from the aria *Mit Wurd' und Hoheit* from Haydn's oratorio, *Die Schöpfung*, already in the opening transformed by the first irreverent trick: the melody attaches on an exaggerated trill, suggesting an overblown throttled warble. Just as a good singer in the Italian bel canto tradition would use every wizardry in his baggage to enchant the audience with the variation of an aria, so Beethoven engages in a great variety of keyboard tricks, perfectly rendering the satirical idea of virtuosic exaggeration. Again, Beethoven's intent is not to elevate or evoke seriousness but to desecrate and play wittily with "high" culture.

The mocking and provocative tone pervades the *Rondo: Allegretto,* only seemingly innocuous and serene. In the *Adagio* preceding the coda, the theater even becomes overt, with pantomime-like gestures that remain unresolved and suspended before the hastily resolving finale typical of comic theater. Musicologist Arnold Schering gave rise to heated controversy and attacks when, in the 1930s, he bizarrely declared that he had incontrovertibly discovered the literary sources that had inspired Beethoven in composing many of his instrumental works. *Sonata No. 1, Op. 31* was by Schering associated with Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* – a bold connection that will be up to the listener to find or not to find in the work's comic vein.

Piano Sonata No. 17 in D Minor, Op. 31, No. 2, "Tempest"

In his second volume of *Life of Beethoven,* Anton Schindler reports a series of anecdotes and conversations with the composer concerning the piano sonatas. One of the most famous and influential narrates: "I requested him to furnish me with the keys to two sonatas, that in F minor, *Op. 57*, and that in D minor, *Op. 29 [31]*. His answer was, "Read Shakespeare's Tempest." While the sonata, *Op. 57*, went down in history as "*Appassionata"*, without reference to Shakespeare, the *Sonata in D Minor* became famous in the 19th Century precisely as *"The Tempest"*. Although various letters and testimonies confirm Beethoven's passion for Shakespeare, the title of *Sonata No. 2, Op. 31* generated more myths than certainties. Some scholars have bravely sought bold connections between the plot and themes of Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and the sonata. Others are skeptical of Schindler's anecdote, like Charles Rosen: "Beethoven is supposed to have claimed that this work came from Shakespeare's The Tempest; if so, he cannot have read anything beyond the title." However, as Fischer argues, this title "does not help us very much – it merely tells us that nature's demons, wind and water, have a hand in this movement."

According to Czerny, *Sonata No. 2, Op. 31* represents the perfect composition: "The unity of the ideas and of the tragic character, the artistic form, which is disturbed by no episode, and the romantic and picturesque nature of the whole, will never fail to produce the greatest effect when the fancy of the play." Since its appearance, this Sonata has become one of the most celebrated and beloved, not only because of its legendary and imaginative connection with Shakespeare but also because of its unpredictable drama, the surprisingly fused form between improvisational genres and precise architecture, and its evocative narrativity.

The opening is among the most discussed and controversial conceived by Beethoven, since it combines two opposing metrical indications – largo and allegro – and two opposed states of expression. The initial ascending arpeggio is the typical preluding gesture, with a consequent improvisational quality. This arpeggio creates a state of suspension, surprisingly broken by an agitated thematic fragment. The listener moves along an unstable path that gives no points of reference. Shortly after the beginning, the bass theme appears, followed by the soprano's plaintive comment, and a more comprehensible form finally seems to emerge. But,

again, the initial episode surprisingly returns at the beginning of the development, questioning the form and narrative that seemingly had come to life. This dimension of complicated definition, which seems to have simultaneously definite and indefinite contours, is summarized by Carl Dahlhaus as a "processual character...a process of coming into existence."

In a parallelism with the first movement opening, the *Adagio* begins with an arpeggio in the same register. Similarly, the lack of a definite theme is again the entrance into a process of research, formation, and the evolution of something still undefined. It soon becomes clear, however, that the leading theme is precisely this indefiniteness, which suddenly becomes the narrative foundation of a lied. Yet, when this conviction now seems clear, the second theme appears. According to Adorno, this theme "is not simply a beautiful melody..nor is it distinguished by exceptional expressivity...Against the dark, diffuse backdrop of what has preceded, the accompanied upper voice that characterizes the second theme acquires its dual character of reconciliation and promise." This is a musical episode that removes all certainty while at the same time makes new ones acquired, so much so that it is called precisely by Adorno a "consolatory passage," which in some ways is "...like the sentence from Goethe's *Elective Affinities*: 'Hope descended from the heavens like a star'."

The idea of becoming and the process of formation at the core of the sonata embodies in the third movement a "perpetuum mobile", an ostinato passage that on its surface remains the same, but it is a new perspective on evolving and changing. The syncopated impulse of the ostinato passage creates through its constant repetition an effect that Rosen calls "hypnotic." Its brief interruption and the insertion of new dramatic elements such as octaves and sforzandi depicts even more vividly the disturbing inability to respond about becoming and evolution that permeates the entire sonata until its closing – circularly mirroring its opening – in a descending arpeggio.

Piano Sonata No. 18 in E-flat Major, Op. 31, No. 3

In mid-1802, Beethoven received a letter from the Swiss composer and publisher Hans Georg Nägeli, with the proposal to open a series entitled *Répertoire des Clavecinistes*. The previous year, the Zurich publishing house had presented Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* to launch the series "*Musikalische Kunstwerke im strengen Style"* ("Works of musical art in the strict style"), and then wanted to focus on piano works "...in the grand style, of great scope, with diverse differences from the usual sonata genre." Beethoven agreed to write three sonatas, even granting a discount from the price he demanded until a few months earlier: 100 ducats, 30 less than the usual price. Nevertheless, there was no shortage of discussion regarding payments, and Beethoven received all the ducats just in August and delivered the three sonatas by the end of 1802. But Nägeli published only the first two, hoping to sign a new deal for a fourth sonata. Beethoven, for his part, had been greatly altered by the lack of accuracy of Nägeli edition of the first two sonatas, full of errors and even with added bars. For this reason, he declined all requests for further collaboration, and the *Sonata in E-flat Major No. 3*, *Op. 31* remained unpublished until 1804.

Long known by the apocryphal title *"The Hunt,"* the E-flat major sonata is the only one in *Op. 31* to be composed in four movements, and surprisingly without a slow movement. The joviality and freshness of the themes move far away from somber or dramatic themes, preferring a rural setting painted by woodwind and horn imitation.

Shortly after the conclusion of the Sonata, Beethoven used the first movement theme to compose the lied *Der Wachtelschlag ("The Song of the Quail")*. This assonance encouraged the popularity of the title, which referred to a hunting party, characterized in the first movement by the contrast between the imitation of natural elements, such as the singing and unpredictable flight of the quail at the beginning of the first movement, and contrasting elements, such as sudden forte all over the keyboard that would refer – according to the tradition – to gunshots. What the sonata is surprising for, however, is once again its ability to evade the listener's expectations with the balance between puzzling harmonic experimentation and conventional elements. In the *Allegro's* opening, for example, Beethoven does not make the tonal context clear, eluding the tonic and leaving tension chords suspended. Only a basic

cadenza finally makes the pitch clear to the ear, juxtaposing the simple with the complex. According to Rosen, this sonata's beginning "is a dialogue, opposing passion and ironic mockery."

The *Scherzo* is a fanfare in binary time and with a witty character based on dynamic contrasts and staccato timbre. The irony does not cease with the basic idea but evolves, emphasized by eccentricities, such as unexpected gestures like groups of five fast notes alternately ascending and descending. Instead of a slow movement, Beethoven writes an intimate and lyrical *Minuet* with the indication *Moderato e grazioso.* According to Roman Vlad, "Far from having the appearance of a dance, it transfigures the metrical scheme of the Minuet to the point that it can be considered rather as a lyrical intermezzo." In contrast, the idea of the quick dance is characteristic of the *Presto con fuoco*, where the Tarantella rhythm proceeds incessantly and is accentuated throughout the piece. As Harry Halbreich argues, "This sonata, which began with a tender and anxious questioning, ends with a radiant affirmation of life."

— *Federico Ercoli*

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