

PROGRAM NOTES

*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. 24 in F-sharp Major, Op. 78 (“À Thérèse”)

Between July 6 and 7, 1812, Beethoven wrote a never-sent letter to whom he calls “*Unsterbliche Geliebte*,” the immortal beloved. The 19th-century romantic narrative, upon which the Beethoven myth developed, indulged in trying to identify to whom the letter was addressed, sometimes facilitating the celebrity of certain works simply because of their dedication to one of the “suspected women.” Such was the case with the *Sonata in F sharp Major, Op. 78*, which went down in history as “À Thérèse” thanks to its dedication to one of the von Brunsvik sisters, both longtime Beethoven’s students. Although the search for the letter’s addressee remains a matter of debate to this day, even if Thérèse von Brunsvik is not part of the potential “immortal beloved” list anymore, the narrative about the *Sonata, Op. 78* has left such a mark on its reception that Alfred Cortot generalized this sonata as a “musical flirt.”

Despite an un-extended two-movement form, the complexity and originality of the structure are evidence of a very peculiar moment in Beethoven’s piano creativity. Indeed, on April 20, 1807, Beethoven signed a non-exclusive contract with composer Muzio Clementi to publish three piano works at his London publishing house. Only three months have passed since the printing of the *Sonata, Op. 57*, concluded by Beethoven in the spring of 1806. It was not until three years later, in the second half of 1809, that Beethoven returned to the piano sonata genre, composing almost simultaneously *Op. 78*, *Op. 79*, and *Op. 81a*. After the study for the composition of the *Fourth* and *Fifth Piano Concertos*, and the *String Quartet, Op. 74*, Beethoven had thus returned to the piano sonata with a new aesthetic of subtle clarity, in which “the harmonic and instrumental language, as subtle as it is simple, clearly prefigures the late sonatas,” as Harry Halbreich argues.

The beginning of the first movement with a short *Adagio cantabile* has surprised many commentators because of its brevity and the connection with the following *Allegro ma non troppo*. Charles Rosen argues that this *Adagio* is “a fragment only because it is too short to exist on its own, but it is, indeed, complete. In fact, that is why it is not an introduction: in an

PROGRAM NOTES

eighteenth-century classical form, an introduction is never complete.” In 1802, Muzio Clementi, who commissioned this sonata, published his three piano *Sonatas, Op. 40*. In this opus, the *second* and *third sonata* were surprisingly introduced by a contrasting slow movement, as Beethoven had already experimented in *Op. 13*. In the case of *Op. 78*, Beethoven seems to take up this stylistic pattern again, but the length of only four bars makes this opening *Adagio* sound like an omen, a brief suspended memory. The surprising beginning of the *Allegro ma non troppo*, its thematic fluidity and lyrical, formally free development, suggested to the first reviewer a possible relationship between this sonata and the *Fantasia, Op. 77*. The fades between one theme and the next, the use of short arabesque variations, and the dramatic and dynamic contrasts suggest an improvisatory layout rather than a specific architectural conception.

The flamboyance and audacity, typical of the free fantasy à la Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach – studied by Beethoven in the very months of the composition of this sonata and *Op. 77*, are confirmed in the concluding *Allegro vivace*. The juxtaposition of major and minor modes, surprising harmonies, starting from the first augmented sixth chord, and a succession of appoggiaturas create a picture that Rosen defines as “eccentricity [that] makes no attempt to sound normal.”

Piano Sonata No. 25 in G Major, Op. 79

In a letter to the publisher Breitkopf dated 26 July 1809, Beethoven argues: “Of Emanuel Bach’s pianoforte works I have only a few things, and yet some of them must certainly serve every true artist not only for great enjoyment but also for study, and my greatest pleasure is to play works that I have never or only rarely seen.” Gustav Nottebohm, the first great scholar of Beethoven’s sketches, had already pointed out in 1872 the influence of Carl Philipp Emanuel Bach in pedagogical manuscripts from the second half of 1809. At that time, the composer was working on thorough bass exercises for his student Archduke Rudolph of Austria, and the main source from which Beethoven transcribed entire pages was the “*Versuch über die wahre Art das Clavier zu spielen*,” the “*Essay On The True Art Of Playing Keyboard Instruments*.” While the study of CPE Bach had influenced Beethoven in the improvisational and free-imaginative aesthetics, as evidenced by the *Fantasia, Op. 77*, he also posed didactic and pedagogical problems in rethinking the galant aesthetics and the harmonic

PROGRAM NOTES

and technical structures proposed in the Versuch. The *Sonata in G Major, Op. 79*, composed exactly in the second half of 1809, is a perfect example of this influence: published under the title *Sonatina*, almost as a tribute to his commissioner Muzio Clementi, a famous author of sonatinas with a didactic spirit, this work is a perfect balance between the charming, elegant, and unpretentious galant spirit and a miniature sonata with many didactic cues.

The invasion of the Napoleonic army, which had already taken place at the time of the autumn months of 1809 when Beethoven was working on this sonatina, may have influenced his choice not only to refer to a keyboard school such as that of northern Germany represented by CPE Bach, but also to open the sonata with a *Presto alla tedesca*, literally “in the German style.” This dance picks up on the so-called Teutscher, German waltz-style dances that were evolutions of the *Ländler* and had already been proposed by Mozart in the *Orchestral Dances K. 509* and *K. 605*. In the version that opens the *Sonata, Op. 79*, the style is elegant and gentle, alternating between light, boisterous, and typically rustic tones.

The *Andante espressivo* is a diptych of intimate and restrained character. A first duet with gloomy foreboding, though not desperate, leads into a simple barcarole with a more positive, light-hearted afflatus that returns in the end to the duet, not without leaving its mark. The light-heartedness takes over in the *Vivace*, where Beethoven takes up a theme composed during his Bonn years for the 1791 *Ritterballet*. In a playful tone, the theme is varied and alternated with ironically virtuosic episodes until it is tenderly lost in a concise and surprising conclusion.

Piano Sonata No. 26 in E-flat Major, Op. 81a (“Les Adieux”)

After the defeats in the Battle of Eggmühl and the Battle of Ebelsburg, the invasion of Vienna by Napoleon’s army became increasingly imminent. On 4 May 1809, informed of the French advancement, the imperial family was forced to leave Vienna in haste and take refuge in Buda, today the old part of the Hungarian capital Budapest. With the family, of course, also fled Archduke Rudolf, the 21-year-old youngest son of Emperor Leopold II and Maria Louisa of Spain, and pupil of Beethoven. Just in 1809, the Archduke had become one of the composer’s co-sponsors, after the official stipulation on 1 March of a lifetime stipend

PROGRAM NOTES

in Beethoven's name. The Napoleonic occupation was thus a drama on several levels for Beethoven. On the one hand, he was in danger of irreversibly losing the social and financial support of the Archduke; on the other hand, he had to protect himself (and his feeble hearing) from the invading army's cannonades. At this dramatic moment, Beethoven conceived and composed a movement entitled *Das Lebe Wohl*, "the Farewell," gifted directly to Archduke Rudolf shortly before his departure as a tribute and token of loyalty. Beethoven, therefore, left his flat and took refuge in the cellar of his brother Carl's house, while the troops of Generals Jean Lannes and Joachim Murat occupied Vienna between 10 and 12 May. In the following months, Beethoven's creativity ceased, because of the dramatic impact of the Napoleonic occupation on his everyday life. On 26 July 1809, he wrote in a letter: "Since 4 May I have brought into the world little coherent work, not much more than just a fragment here and there. The whole situation has affected my life and soul..."

The first and only movement composed in the tumult preceding the siege opens with sixteen measures *Adagio*, which begins with a three-note figure over which Beethoven writes the syllables *Le-be-wohl*. This form of greeting is full of hope and addressed to a single, specific person to whom one is particularly close: in this case, it is Archduke Rudolf, the future dedicatee of the *Emperor Concerto*, *Op. 73*, which Beethoven was working on in those months and from which the opening theme of the *Lebe wohl* derives. For this reason, Beethoven wrote to the publisher his disappointment regarding the French translation of this word, which later made the *Sonata*, *Op. 81a* famous as *Les Adieux*: "*Lebe wohl* expresses something quite different from *Les Adieux*: the first is said only to one person and only with feeling, the other to a whole assembly, to entire towns." After this opening, in which Beethoven intimately expresses his greeting full of gratitude and hope, this movement continues the programmatic expression of the drama of the French occupation, becoming tumultuous and anxious. The *Lebe wohl* theme reappears in different forms as a fil rouge that holds together the desperation of the tense atmosphere expressed in the *Allegro*.

In September 1809, after the complex summer he had experienced in the occupied Vienna, Beethoven first jotted down the titles of the following movements, thus thinking of forming a sonata with the movement *Das Lebe Wohl: Abwesenheit (absence) - Ankunft (arrival)*. The expressive *Andante*

PROGRAM NOTES

opens by revealing the secret of the theme of *Das Lebe Wohl*: taking up the third measure of the *Adagio* of the first movement, it shows how the sad foreboding of absence lay in the devoted greeting. The tonal uncertainty and the fragility of the comparison between minor and major modes paint the psychological state of absence, where hope is overshadowed by resignation.

Towards the end of 1809, rumors began to circulate about a possible return of Archduke Rudolf to Vienna, so Beethoven made prepare a fair copy of the last two movements. The final movement title changed during the work: as Barry Cooper states, “The finale had by this time been renamed as “*Das Widersehn*,” usually translated as “*The Return*,” though literally it means “*The Seeing Again*,” without any sense that either party has returned.” Despite this, the copyist had left the title page of the movement free in the fair copy, and it was Beethoven who completed the title in his hand on 30 January 1810, the day of the reunion with the Archduke: “Vienna, 30 January 1810, written on the arrival of His Imperial Highness the esteemed Archduke Rudolph.” Harry Halbreich’s words are the perfect exegesis of the beginning of this *Vivacissimamente*: “The exclamation mark is followed by ten bars of plashing semiquavers, representing the man pushing his way through the crowd. Then comes the exposition, with its quite calm and simple theme; here two friends find each other, and Beethoven knew better than anyone how to express this fine virile friendship.” The whole movement is a balance between bursts of joy full of virtuosity, contained moments of intimate emotion, and control of dynamics as if to restrain one’s feelings: a truly pivotal moment in Beethoven’s life rendered on the piano as a gift to the Archduke.

Piano Sonata No. 27 in E Minor, Op. 90

After the completion of the three *Sonatas Op. 78, Op. 79, and Op. 81a* in the last months of 1809, Beethoven spent more than four years without returning to writing piano sonatas. As Barry Cooper claims, this was the “longest period he spent in Vienna without writing any piano sonatas, except for the very end of his life.” Focused on the work on the *Seventh* and *Eighth Symphonies*, the *Violin Sonata, Op. 96*, two singspiels, and the revival of his opera *Fidelio* in 1814, Beethoven would only return to writing for keyboard because he was forced. As Peter Clive reconstructs,

PROGRAM NOTES

the case that compelled his return to write a piano sonata was a debt to the Viennese publisher Sigmund Anton Steiner, who in December 1813 had financially helped him with his brother Carl's illness treatment, on the understanding that should the debt not clear in nine months, Beethoven would have to repay it with a sonata. Barry Cooper concludes: "By summer 1814, Beethoven probably sensed that repayment by the due date would be impossible, and therefore set out to compose a new piano sonata as quickly as possible."

These were the months just after the Congress of Vienna, and in response to the end of the Napoleonic era, patriotism was emerging in response to the French occupation. Perhaps sympathizing with these ideals, Beethoven chose to use German tempo markings, leaving Italian only for indications such as "crescendo" and "diminuendo", or "dolce" and "tenderamente." This was a choice that might appear trivial, but which traces a well-defined political background in this sonata. In the previous year, Beethoven had been actively involved in patriotic and political music, collaborating with Johann Nepomuk Mälzel on the composition of *Wellingtons Sieg oder die Schlacht bei Vittoria*, Op. 91. In this sonata, however, there is no room for excessive eloquence and heroic afflatus, but a more condensed spirit operates, more dictated by short, concise forms, leaving behind the great sonata monument in favor of a compact diptych with a limpid character. This aspect is immediately evident in the first movement, entitled *Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck*, "With vivacity, and always with feeling and expression." Edwin Fischer claims that, in this movement, "Rhythms and motifs undergo metamorphoses producing patterns which differ externally but are inwardly related. Like the nymph who is turned into a laurel tree or a reed, the divine soul lives on within the new form." In this case, the dominant force that transforms and governs the movement with its metamorphoses is the initial rhythmic pattern, which opens the work with a stuffed fanfare, immediately interrupted by a more dubious and cautious response in a high register, maintaining the same rhythm.

The second movement is an example of liederistic cantabile, renewing the typically Mozartian rondo in a modern spirit. Beethoven's instruction *Nicht zu geschwind und sehr singbar vorgetragen*, "Not too fast and to be played in a very song-like fashion," confirms the vocal inclination and, as Hans von Bülow pointed out, warns against the average pianist's habit of performing all Rondo as "Rondeau Brillants." The domain of this finale is indeed

PROGRAM NOTES

intimate and subdued, and for its five episodes, it constitutes a truly astonishing picture of peace, in which the most lyrical effect used is the subito piano. The conclusion, so unpredictable and surprising in its sudden brevity, as Rosen says, adds “a touch of subdued humor in a lyrical context.”

Piano Sonata No. 28 in A Major, Op. 101

On 15 November 1815, Kaspar Anton Karl van Beethoven, the composer's brother, died after a long tuberculosis. This event ushered in a very troubled period for Beethoven, who even ended up in a court case with his sister-in-law Johanna. His brother Karl had left his son in shared guardianship of the composer and his wife, trying to improve their relationship. On the contrary, Beethoven's morbid affection for his nephew and his total incommunicability with his late brother's widow gave rise to a legal battle that ended in 1820 with the boy's complete custody to his composer uncle. In this tumultuous emotional moment, Beethoven does not continue the compositional forms of the immediate previous period but seeks a renewal that is much more particular in style and more technically complicated. In this sense, the study of counterpoint rethought for teaching Archduke Rudolf perhaps influenced Beethoven in the development of a neo-Baroque style that led to a renewal of the sonata genre, with conclusions in grand fugues. This process led to the *Sonatas for Cello and Piano, Op. 102* and especially the *Piano Sonata in A Major, Op. 101*. In both cases, the structure develops over four movements, in which the last two join seamlessly, leading to a concluding fugue. According to Charles Rosen, “The similarities are so striking, the form so eccentric, that it would seem as if Beethoven considered the structure an experimental one that he wanted to essay with two different kinds of material. I do not know of another example in his work of such a double trial.”

Sonata, Op. 101 opens with an album leaf, a lyrical episode that does nothing to impose a character or emphasize particular thematic categories. On the contrary, it seems to seek a preluding mode that concludes in itself. Beethoven's German indication, *Etwas lebhaft, und mit der innigsten Empfindung*, “Somewhat lively and with the most intimate sentiment,” evolves into a space that does not close any thought. There are no concluding elements nor clear-cut caesuras until the concluding coda, thus setting up a movement that does not, even in a rarefied way, display the characteristics one would expect from the opening of a great sonata.

PROGRAM NOTES

In the style of the free ornate prelude in an improvisational and imitative style, which seems to suggest references to Bach's *Chromatic Fantasy and Fugue*, the third movement retraces the intimate elements with which he had opened the sonata in an even more sincere manner. As Giorgio Pestelli argues, these are "twenty bars of an interior diary of immediate sincerity; the yearning embodied in the word *sehnsuchtvoll* animates the conversation of the two hands, committed to the same singing design." A brief cadenza, as non-virtuosic as it is cantabile, surprisingly brings us back to the reprise of the first movement. This episode, resumed here only in its first four measures, appears transfigured by the effort of recollection, as modified by the experience of the second and third movements.

The surprise of a return to the lyricism of the first movement is soon interrupted by the bursting out of the *Presto*, which once again re-proposes what seems to be the mainstay of the entire work: the compositional development of the imitative style and the canon. In this case, Beethoven transforms a sonata form into an episode of imitation between the two hands, the development of which is a grand fugue with a resolute character that leads again to the reprise of the first episode up to the final coda, which contrasts the searching intimacy with the triumphant final close. The entire episode is enveloped in an unexpected bucolic character, revisiting elements of horns and jodlers and making the revolutionary sense of the work more human, rustic, and consequently surprising.

— *Federico Ervoli*

We acknowledge with respect the Seneca Nation, known as the "Great Hill People" and "Keepers of the Western Door" of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. We take this opportunity to thank the people whose ancestral lands the Eastman School of Music of the University of Rochester currently occupies in Rochester, New York.