

Beethoven's „Moonlight Sonata“

The Original and the Romantic Transfiguration

Special Exhibition at the Beethoven-Haus Bonn
28th June to 16th November 2003

Beethoven's piano sonata in C sharp minor, opus 27 no. 2, is one of the world's best loved pieces of piano music. Written in 1801, the sonata was received with particular enthusiasm, although strictly speaking it cannot claim any special place within Beethoven's remarkably varied cycle of 32 piano sonatas. It provoked the imagination of audiences in a way that no other composition of Beethoven's did. The sonata is still known universally as the „Moonlight Sonata“, a name given to it long after it was written and without Beethoven's blessing. Nevertheless the piece of music and its „title“ seem to be irrevocably linked with each other.

The aim of this special exhibition at the Beethoven-Haus is to show to what great extent the composition is dominated by the history of how it has been received by audiences. For this purpose the original sources, made available in a new facsimile edition, have been consciously juxtaposed with selected documents relating to the story of the sonata's reception, which have influenced its interpretation until this day.

The composition of the Sonata in C sharp minor

The first two showcases contain the five known genuine sketches for the piano sonata opus 27 no. 2. They all refer to the third movement and were originally part of a sketchbook used by the com-

poser between spring and autumn 1801. The art and music dealer Ignaz Sauer, after whom the sketchbook is now named, bought it on 5th November 1827 at the auction of Beethoven's musical estate for 2 Florins 50 Kreuzer. He divided it up into single sheets, which he then tried to sell for 20-30 Kreuzer each (60 Kreuzer made up 1 Florin). On the cover of the sketchleaf, which is part of the Beethoven-Haus collection, Sauer confirms its authenticity (*showcase 1*). This is the oldest surviving sketch connected with the sonata in C sharp minor. On the front (lines 1-6) is a draft of the second theme of the third movement, which is much more simple in its construction than the final version. In the top left-hand corner is the abbreviation „M.G.“ („Mittelgedanke“ or „intermediate idea“). The second original sketch in the exhibition has been lent by the Musashino Academia Musicae in Tokyo, where it is normally kept. In the first two lines of music it contains a draft for the last four bars of the movement and below that an idea for the composition up to the second bar of the reprise. This idea was not incorporated into the final version. The rest of the front and the following back show a draft for the coda to the end of the movement.

The copperplate engraving by Johann Joseph Neidl shows Beethoven in the year the piano sonata was written. In the two letters written the same year to his old boyhood friend Franz Gerhard Wegeler (shown in an etching by Rudolf von Normann, 1839), the physical and psychological problems become obvious, from which Beethoven suffered through his increasing deafness, which is referred to here directly for the first time („you can hardly imagine how gloomy, how

sad my life has been during the last two years, my poor hearing has appeared to me everywhere as a ghost, and I have fled - from the people“). Strengthened by his affection for Countess Giulietta Guicciardi (1784-1856), to whom the sonata is dedicated, Beethoven set himself to oppose his fate with extraordinary vigour: „I shall grab my destiny by the throat, it certainly will not manage to overcome me completely“ (*showcase 2*).

Beethoven's Manuscript

The manuscript of the piano sonata in C sharp minor opus 27 no. 2., written in 1801, has been in the possession of Beethoven-Haus since 1898 (*showcase 3*). The minutes of the auction of Beethoven's musical estate show that it was sold as article No. 85, described as the Fantasy Sonata, to the Viennese music publisher Tobias Haslinger for the very moderate price of 1 Florin 40 Kreuzer.

As it is today the manuscript consists of 16 eight-line sheets with 30 pages containing music. Since 1830 at the latest, the first and last sheets, containing the title page, the first 13 bars of the opening movement and the final three bars, have been missing. Why and when these sheets were removed remains a mystery. The numbering of the pages, in red ink, was undertaken later by an unknown hand. All instructions for the use of pedals were added retrospectively in light brown ink during a final revision.

First Edition and Reprints

The First Edition (*showcase 4*), published in Vienna in March 1802 by Giovanni Cappi, was dedicated

by Beethoven to the beautiful Giulietta Guicciardi (a bust of her is also on display), towards whom his feelings went far beyond the normal relationship between teacher and pupil. The sonata was published simultaneously with the sonata in E flat major opus 27 no. 1, although due to the separate dedications they had to be printed with different front covers. In many subsequent reprints, including the one on display from the original publisher, the wrong front cover was used, i.e.: that of the sonata opus 27 no. 1, which was dedicated to Josephine Duchess of Liechtenstein. Also on display are four more contemporary editions of the sonata in C sharp minor.

The small table-piano was built by Johann Andreas Mahr in the year the sonata in C sharp minor was first published and represents a typical instrument of that time.

Arrangements

(*Showcase 5*) The many different arrangements of the sonata in C sharp minor are an indication of the remarkable popularity it achieved. In 1831 Gottlob Benedikt Bierey arranged the adagio as a kyrie by using the original piano part, writing an orchestral instrumentation and adding a simple choral part. The interpretation of the adagio as a plea for mercy had been underlined during Beethoven's lifetime when the Kassel composer Georg Christoph Grosheim asked him, albeit unsuccessfully, to make that movement of the sonata into a choral work by underlaying it with the poem „The Praying Woman“ („Die Beterin“).

When in 1815 Franz Schubert set „To the Moon“ („An den Mond“) to music, he used moonlight as

a metaphor for death and bereavement as well as copying the musical techniques of the minor key and the calculation of triads in triplets. The unauthentic three-bar piano introduction, which was added later, should be understood as a parody of the opening bars of the „Moonlight Sonata“.

And Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny describes the adagio in his Piano Tutor of 1842 as being „*highly poetic and at the same time easily understandable to everyman. It is a nocturnal scene, in which a grieving voice sounds in the far distance*“.

The Romantic Transfiguration

(*Showcase 6*) In the middle of the 19th century there arose a striking fable surrounding the composition of Beethoven's „Moonlight Sonata“. Beethoven meets a blind girl sitting at a piano and, stricken by her fate, he sits down himself at the piano and can suddenly feel the rays of moonlight coming in through the window and weaving themselves into the notes he is playing. He rushes home and writes down the „Moonlight Sonata“. In another version he watches how the moonlight is reflected in the features of a blind girl while he is playing for her and her brother. The tale and its symbolism were of particular interest to visual artists and some of their interpretations of the subject are displayed on the walls.

The coining of the name „Moonshine Sonata“ was attributed in 1852 by Wilhelm von Lenz to the poet and music writer Ludwig Rellstab, who apparently as early as 1832 had compared the adagio to a barque sailing in the moonlight against the backdrop of the wild scenery on Lake Lucerne in Switzerland. It has however never been possi-

ble to find the quoted passage in Rellstab's works, so one can assume that Lenz wove his own interpretation into what he had read in Rellstab. In his novel *Theodor: A Musical Sketch* of 1823 Rellstab provides the first visual description of the meaning contained in the music of the adagio when he calls it „*a lake which shimmers in the rays of the setting moon*“. The richness of this description is intended as an analogy to the language of Beethoven's music.

The French musician and music writer Paul Scudo took up the biographical connection, i.e.: Beethoven's feelings towards Giulietta Guicciardi, in his story *Une Sonate de Beethoven*. In it the hero describes how his beloved is „transfigured by a moonbeam“ which strikes her while she is playing the sonata in C sharp minor.

The early facsimile editions of the sonata proved to be very popular. On display is the first facsimile edition by Heinrich Schenker, published in 1921 and owned by the Swiss Beethoven collector Hans Conrad Bodmer. Its importance to him is underlined by the fact that he had it personally autographed by the famous pianists and conductors Eugen d'Albert, Felix Weingartner, Frederic Lamond and Arturo Toscanini.

The „Moonlight Sonata“ can be heard in the original version and in an arrangement as a Kyrie by Bierey in the lecture room on the ground floor.

N.K.

(translation: John Simons)