

Analysis of Beethoven's Hammerklavier Sonata, Op. 106

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Beethoven's Hammerklavier Sonata is among the most difficult of all piano sonatas, and is considered by most experts to be the greatest and most difficult of the Beethoven Sonatas. The difficulty of the work lies in part in its sheer magnitude. Taking approximately 45 minutes to perform, it remains one of the longest sonatas in the standard repertoire (Fischer 102). I have taken a particular interest in this sonata because of its wonderful contrasting dynamics, rhythmic drive, and harmonic exploration. Eventually I would love to perform this piece, but for now I am content listening to the wonderful recordings by Schiff, Brendel, and other brilliant pianists.

The German composer, Ludwig van Beethoven (*b* Bonn, 1770; *d* Vienna, 26 March 1827), was one of the most influential and admired composers in the history of Western music. As is so often the case in the lives of the great composers, Beethoven's life was far from a happy one. He had great difficulty forming personal relationships with others, and he spent most of his life either partially or completely deaf. He once wrote to his friend from Bonn, Gerhard Wegeler:

I must confess that I am living a miserable life. For almost two years I have ceased to attend any social functions, just because I find it impossible to say to people: I am deaf. If I had any other profession it would be easier, but in my profession it is a terrible handicap. As for my enemies, of whom I have a fair number, what would they say? (Kremer et al).

Although his life was filled with much turmoil and despair, he demonstrated an appalling ability to overcome great tribulation through the power of human creativity. His music was, to say the very least, revolutionary. Who could write a Symphony after Beethoven had written his nine? How could the great composer be followed? As Schubert once said: "who would be able to do anything after Beethoven?" Because of the way that

Beethoven changed musical composition methods, composers had to push music to new boundaries. One can hear the effect of Beethoven's music on the music of Mendelssohn, Brahms, Schubert, and Schumann, to name just a few. His influence even extends to twentieth-century composers such Bartok, Stravinsky, and Schoenberg, who were interested and impressed by the experimental nature of his later works (Kerman et al).

Ever since about 1828, Beethoven's music has been classified into three periods: early, middle, and late. The early period lasted until about 1802, and mostly shows works in the traditional Viennese style. His middle period lasted until about 1812, and is sometimes known as the "heroic period." He wrote much of his orchestral music during this period. His late period lasted from 1813 until his death in 1827, and was the most complex of all the periods. The Hammerklavier Sonata was written during this period, and demonstrated yet another breakthrough in Beethoven's style, showing many themes which would be revived in many of his latest works (Kremer et al). This included reinventions of traditional forms, such as the sonata form, as well as a return to pre-classical compositional techniques including an exploration of modal harmony, and including fugues in classical forms. These techniques can be seen throughout the Hammerklavier Sonata.

The Hammerklavier Sonata, or *Grosse Sonate für das Hammerklavier*, was written for Beethoven's patron, Archduke Rudolf, at a bleak time during Beethoven's life. Beethoven once said about this work: "It is hard to have to write for one's bread." The soles of his shoes were so worn when he made this statement that he could not even go outdoors. Artaria published the sonata in 1919 in Vienna, and although it would have

been premiered early on, it would have to wait until the end of the 19th century to earn its place in the concert-hall, when Hans von-Bulow brought it to the stage (Fischer 103).

The piece is in 4-movements, with thematic connections between the movements. Charles Rosen and Andras Schiff (both of whom recorded this piece) have noted how this piece has been organized around the interval of the third. In fact, this is apparent right from the opening chords of the sonata, but occurs throughout the piece (Schiff). The first movement, marked Allegro, is in sonata form. The second movement, a Scherzo, is in Compound Ternary form. The third movement, Adagio sostenuto, is in sonata form. The final movement, Introduzione: Largo – Fuga: Allegro risoluto, begins with a slow introduction which serves as a transition between the second movement and the extensive, extremely complex fugue that makes up the rest of the final movement.

Before beginning a complete analysis of the first movement, which will be the focus of the remainder of this essay, it is important to make note of the tempo of this movement, since that can determine the way that certain harmonies are perceived. Beethoven marked the movement with a metronome marking of 138 for the half note, which is supposedly “impossible” (Fischer 103). Many have argued that this marking is incorrect on account of Beethoven’s “faulty” metronome. In a lecture about this sonata, Schiff said that this is really not an accurate statement. Beethoven’s metronome (which Schiff even tested in Vienna) was not faulty, although Beethoven did once say that: “I give these metronome marks, but they are actually only valid for the first bar of the piece” (Schiff). Therefore, 138 would be the correct tempo to start the piece, but there should be a certain amount of ebb and flow.

The first movement begins with an imperious passage of chords, which he then repeats a third higher. "Nothing could be simpler, nothing more impressive...it is Beethoven's masterful way to build his most complex structures out of the most rudimentary material" (Blom 205). The principle subject changes character drastically in the next measures, but soon returns to its more grandiose nature. A brief transition follows, and then at mm. 47, the secondary theme occurs in the key of G, the major key built on the 6th scale degree of B-flat major (rather than the traditional secondary key area of the dominant.) A closing theme appears at mm. 100, and then the exposition is repeated before the development begins. A full diagram of the exposition has been attached.

The development is based largely on the simple motive from the opening of the piece. It begins with octaves that give it a somewhat ambiguous tonal area from the beginning, but quickly modulates to E-flat major. At measure 142, a fugue based on the opening theme begins and Beethoven plays with the simple motive for quite a while (Blom 211). He uses a fragment of the motive to temporarily visit other tonal areas and eventually arrives at a D major dominant-functioning triad. Rather than going to the expected key of G, at mm. 207 he arrives at the tonal level of B major at, the chromatic mediant of the previous chord. Here he chooses to play with the theme from the closing of the exposition. Within just a few measures of this theme, Beethoven arrives at the recapitulation, but he has a long way to go harmonically before the development can end. However, while B major is quite far away from the movement's home key of B-flat major, the dominant-seventh chord of B major (F#-7) is the enharmonic equivalent of the German-sixth chord in B-flat major. He arrives at the F#-7 chord, but then rather

than resolving it as a German-sixth, he uses it to travel chromatically to the dominant of B-flat major (F), and then arrives once again at that simple yet infectious opening motive where he begins the recapitulation.

The recapitulation is similar to the exposition, but a few things are worth mentioning. First, Beethoven uses the first subject (after the introductory motive) as a sequence, and eventually uses it to arrive in G-flat major. The next theme, which was originally stated in B-flat major, is now in G-flat major. He uses a quasi German-sixth chord built on the G-flat to get to b minor, which he soon adds a bass G to, making it a G-major seventh chord. Then he arrives at a c minor chord, which takes him back to an F-7 chord, the dominant-seventh of the original key. At this point, he arrives at the secondary subject, but now it is being stated at the tonic level. This is in accordance with the “Sonata Principle”. The theme at mm. 329 is in E-flat major, and then the closing at mm. 338 is in B-flat Major. Finally, he uses the second part of the closing theme from the exposition to arrive at the coda, which lasts from approximately mm. 358 until the end (Blom 212).

This movement of the Hammerklavier Sonata demonstrates Beethoven’s remarkable ability to build off of a very small, simple motive. One cannot help but draw a connection between this and a work such as his 5th symphony, which was built similarly on a simple idea. Beethoven showed ingenuity and creativity by combining baroque and classical composition techniques, which greatly enhanced this sonata. Through all of his careful crafting, Beethoven created a composition that is brimming with life. I am glad that I was able to analyze this piece because it showed me so much insight into Beethoven’s writing. In performance, I think I would take special note of all of his

“surprises” where the music goes somewhere unexpected. These are all over the place in this sonata—it was hard to even find a conclusive cadence at times. Also, I would take the time to hear some of his harmonies in a performance, such as a German-sixth chord resolution, or a chromatic mediant. These are the things that really bring the music to life, and one can hear them in the performance of the greatest musicians.

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