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by Derek Katz

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
Three Piano Sonatas, Op. 31 (1801-02)

Most accounts of Beethoven's life and compositions assume a point of inflection shortly after the turn of the nineteenth century, separating what we now think of as the "early" works from the "middle" works. According to this narrative, for roughly the first decade after Beethoven's arrival in Vienna in 1792, he composed music that to a great extent engaged with the models of Mozart and Haydn, moving through genres associated with them; from keyboard trios to keyboard sonatas, piano concertos, string quartets and symphonies. The music that follows this decade often sounds quite different, although it is an open question whether this is a result of Beethoven merely following his own artistic inclinations, or whether it is also a product of biographical or even historical circumstances. It was at the end of the eighteenth century that Beethoven began to notice symptoms of hearing loss, and in 1801 he wrote to two friends to describe his condition, and the professional and (especially) social difficulties that he was confronting. In the summer of 1802, he wrote the notorious "Heiligenstadt Testament," a long, never delivered, letter to his brothers filled with despair and resignation. This was also a time of great turmoil in Europe, with the French Revolution and Napoleon's military campaigns, including war with Beethoven's Austria. In the case of a "middle" period work like the "Eroica" Symphony, initially dedicated to Napoleon, then renamed, and filled with musical topics of heroism and marches, the connections between musical substance and historical context seem quite clear.

No such obvious connections exist for the three piano sonatas of Op. 31, but we have Beethoven's own word that they represent a significant shift in his style. According to Beethoven's student Carl Czerny, "Around the year [1802] Beethoven said to his friend Krumpholz: 'I am not satisfied with what I have composed up to now. From now on I intend to embark on a new path.' Soon thereafter the three sonatas of Op. [31] were published" (Czerny, writing long after the fact in 1852 got both the year and the opus number wrong, but we know what he meant). The set of sonatas were at least partially composed just outside of Vienna in Heiligenstadt, during the summer of 1802, at exactly the same time as Beethoven was writing the "Heiligenstadt Testament." While the assertive heroism of the "Eroica" is the character most readily associated with Beethoven's "middle" period, the "new path" broken by the Op. 31 sonatas is marked by a staggering diversity of mood and expression, with no affect predominating.

The Beethoven piano sonatas heard thus far at Camerata Pacifica programs last season were mostly dedicated to specific female patrons who were also keyboard players, but these sonatas were commissioned by a Swiss publisher for a series of periodical publications comprising keyboard repertoire of new works by important composers. Anecdotes about these sonatas also give us a sense of how these sonatas were experienced in Beethoven's day, before the advent of the piano recital as we now know it.

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Beethoven's student Ferdinand Ries was hired by the Count and Princess Browne to play Beethoven's piano works for them in their home. The Brownes were amongst Beethoven's most important Vienna patrons, and his Op. 10 piano sonatas (one of which was heard during the last Camerata Pacifica season) were dedicated to the Princess. Apparently Beethoven visited the Browne home and reprimanded Ries for missing a note.

Later, Beethoven was playing the "Tempest" sonata and made a similar mistake. The Princess rapped him on the head in a parallel reproof. This type of private, privileged rendition was the way that Beethoven's sonatas circulated in his Vienna.

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Piano Sonata in G major, Op. 31, No. 1

The first sonata of the set, perhaps surprisingly for a piece intended to herald a new phase in Beethoven's career, is marked most strongly by humor. The wittiness of the sonata is immediately announced in its opening gesture, in which the pianist's left and right hands cannot quite agree about where the downbeat is. The off-kilter effect, with the left hand dragging slightly behind the right (or is the right hand impatient and always jumping in early?) persists throughout the movement, with only the final two quiet chords finding the hands in resigned agreement (itself a very funny gesture after the drawn-out disputes that precede it). There is also humor in Beethoven's stubborn returns to the opening gesture, as if the dislocation of the hands is preventing him moving away from this material. There is a more conventional contrasting second theme, a bouncy, syncopated tune heard first in a cheerful major in the right hand, and then in a more dramatic minor in the left, sounding like a cello or bassoon. Even here, Czerny directs pianists to be playful and teasing.

On the face of it, the middle movement is a lovely serenade, with a singing melody sustained with trills (even more necessary to give the illusion of a long note on the pianos of Beethoven's day) over arpeggios, perhaps evoking a singer and a guitar. When this melody returns in the middle of the movement, over an even more active accompaniment, Czerny explicitly requests the left hand imitate a guitar. And yet, it is difficult to avoid the impression that Beethoven is gently mocking this kind of music, rather than whole-heartedly exemplifying it.

The melody is ornately embellished to the verge of parody, especially when the trills move into the bass and alternate with increasingly florid passage work from the right hand (independence of hands continues to be a topic!). The late pianist Alfred Brendel, an eloquent writer about music as well as a marvelous Beethoven player, described this movement as sounding "like a parody of early Beethoven produced by Rossini," and as creating a balance between "sympathy and mockery," and between "the graceful and the bizarre."

If we hear the first movement as essentially funny and agree with Brendel that the middle movement balances wit and beauty, the final rondo completes the shift from the ironic to the expressive. The lovely rondo theme is unusually lyrical for Beethoven and is one that we are happy to meet again when it returns (Schubert modelled a rondo from one of his last sonatas on this movement). The idea of moving material from the right hand to the left is still present, but here it is an opportunity to explore different sonorities and to combine the theme with graceful scales, rather than played for comic effect. Wit and humor do make a final appearance at the very end of the piece, as Beethoven slows fragments of the rondo theme down into a mock-serious coda, before a helter-skelter dash to the finish, which (like the first movement) ends with an anti-climactic evaporation.

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

The nickname "Tempest," now firmly and apparently permanently attached to the second sonata of Op. 31, does not originate from Beethoven, nor was it used during his lifetime. Instead, it comes from an anecdote relayed by Beethoven's first biographer, the notoriously unreliable and dishonest Anton Schindler, who claimed that Beethoven told him that Shakespeare's play was the key to understanding this sonata. The persistence of the nickname is surely due to the appropriately stormy character of the sonata, and who knows, perhaps Schindler was telling the truth for once. Beethoven was known to have taken inspiration from Shakespeare on other occasions. In any case, this sonata is worlds removed from the sly wit of its predecessor.

The opening of the sonata is remarkable. First we hear just an arpeggiated chord. What is this? Part of a slow introduction? Before we have time to properly consider the matter, a burst of, well, tempestuous music breaks out and then subsides into a decorated cadence. What was *that*? A theme? More introduction? The arpeggiated chord and the quick outburst are repeated, and this time the music settles into a constant tempo. Only now do we realize that the slow arpeggiated chords were actually embellishing a long-short-short figure which turns out to be part of the first theme, played in the bass, and answered with a more lyrical figure in the right hand. The remainder of the movement is very economical; constructed almost entirely out of these elements. The slow arpeggios return in the middle of the movement, blossoming into an instrumental recitative in the form of a single line in the right hand with the sustaining pedal held down.

This device, of an instrument imitating an operatic voice in story-telling mode will return in many of Beethoven's last works, most notably introducing the "Ode to Joy" theme in the last movement of the ninth symphony.

The arpeggiated chord that opened the first movement is also the source of the opening of the slow movement. Now the rolled chord is in the lower register, and the short-short response has been transformed into a three-note scale fragment high above it. A second idea plays out in steady chords over a kind of timpani tattoo in the left hand. There is also a brief, but exquisite, more conventional contrasting theme singing over steady arpeggios in the left hand.

We may not believe Schindler about Shakespeare, but the eminently trustworthy Czerny claims that the final movement of this sonata was inspired by the sound of a horse galloping past Beethoven's window. This seems entirely plausible for this propulsive movement, built almost entirely from relentless four note figures in the right hand, creating a constant flow of rapid notes, pausing only occasionally before careening downward and galloping on.

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

After the lively wit of the first sonata and the impassioned gravity of the second, the third sonata opens with questions. Two falling gestures over an unstable chord inquire, then slow down and grow in volume before a response and resolution. Perhaps because of this repeated "question-answer" pattern, Czerny describes this movement as "more spoken than painted." The initial falling question becomes part of the main theme, adorned with grace notes and transformed into trills and faster figures. Beethoven keeps returning to the opening question/answer pair, bringing it back in the middle of the movement, and again, with an extended and more searching question phase very near the end, before the final and decisive response.

The second movement is labeled as a scherzo, which is already a surprise after two sonatas following the expected first movement-slow movement-Rondo pattern. It's also a rather peculiar scherzo. For Haydn and Beethoven, the scherzo was essentially a sped-up menuet, keeping the triple meter, repeated phrases and contrasting trio of the court dance. This scherzo, however, is in duple meter, and has neither repeated strains nor a distinct middle section. Instead, we have a kind of quick but noble march, striding over lively staccato patterns in the left hand.

The surprises continue in the next movement, where we might reasonably feel that we are due a slow movement, but here is a menuet. The general rule is that we would expect a four-movement piece to have a scherzo or a menuet, but not both. Perhaps in compensation for the absent slow movement, this is a graceful and lyrical menuet. It is also strikingly conventional, doing all of the things that the preceding scherzo did not; constructed out of short, repeated phrases, and with a bouncy central trio for variety.

The last movement is very fast and begins already in motion with a quiet but vigorous bustle in the left hand. The horn call-like figures in the right hand have caused this sonata to sometimes be called "The Hunt" (an idea that goes back at least as far as Czerny, who says that it should "have the effect of a hunting piece"). The hunt takes us to some unexpected places, both becoming louder and more assertive and moving to distant harmonic realms. There is also a kind joke in moving the bustling accompaniment figure into the right hand and forcing the left to play the tune both above and below it. This reminiscence of the humorous first sonata is a fitting cap to this supremely varied and continuously surprising set.