Beethoven's Piano Sonatas in the Context of his Other Works

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Abstract: This study deals with Beethoven's piano sonatas in relation to his works in other genres. Unlike Haydn or Mozart, Beethoven composed many more piano sonatas than symphonies or string quartets; the sonatas far outnumber piano concertos, string trios, sonatas for piano and violin, and sonatas for piano and cello. Moreover, he wrote piano sonatas regularly, with few extended interruptions. During the approximately twenty-nine years between Op. 2, No. 1 (1793-95) and Op.111 (1822), there were only two three or four-year periods—1806-08 and 1811-13—in which he did not complete a piano sonata. In other genres, Beethoven neither composed nor completed works for extended periods of time.

Keywords: Beethoven piano sonatas, piano sonatas, Beethoven and genre

On March 29, 1796, the Viennese publisher Artaria proudly announced the publication of Beethoven's three piano sonatas Op. 2 in the *Wiener Zeitung*:

> Since the previous work of the composer, the 3 piano trios Op. 1, which are already in the hands of the public, was received with so much success, one promises the same for the present works, the more so since apart from the value in them may be seen not only the strength with which Herr v. Beethoven manifests as a piano player but also the delicacy with which he knows how to treat the instrument.[1]

Given Beethoven's preeminence as an improviser and virtuoso, it is not surprising that he used the solo piano sonata to experiment with new compositional ideas. Late eighteenth-century musicians regarded the keyboard sonata as a flexible, somewhat improvisatory genre. Around 1789, the theorist and composer Daniel Gottlob Türk wrote that one is "in no instrumental composition less restricted—as far as character is concerned—than the sonata, for every emotion and passion can be expressed in it."[2] Piano sonatas were also relatively unrestricted in their number of movements—three, two, or (occasionally) four—in contrast with late eighteenth-century symphonies or string quartets, which usually included four movements.

[1] H.C. Robbins Landon, *Haydn: Chronicle and Works: The Years of the Creation: 1796-1800* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976-80), p. 95.
[2] Daniel Gottlob Türk, *School of Clavier Playing,* trans. Raymond H. Haggh (University of Nebraska Press: Lincoln, 1982), p. 83.

During Beethoven's lifetime, piano sonatas were performed in private rather than in public concerts. Beethoven himself often played his solo sonatas, as well as chamber works, in musicales in the palaces of the Viennese aristocracy. His student Ferdinand Ries related an amusing incident that occurred during Beethoven 's performance of his recently published (1803) Sonata in D minor, Op. 31, No. 2 in the home of Count Browne, one of his patrons. Earlier in the evening, Ries sight-read the piano part of a Beethoven sonata for piano and violin missed a note, and in consequence, received a tap on the head by the composer, who turned pages. Afterward, Beethoven himself made a bad slip while playing his D-minor sonata. Ries describes how one listener, Princess Marie Liechtenstein, tapped Beethoven

> […] several times on the head, not at all delicately saying: if the pupil receives one tap of the finger for one missed note, then the Master must be punished with a full hand for worse mistakes. Everyone laughed, Beethoven, most of all. He started again and performed marvelously. The Adagio, in particular, was incomparably played.[3]

Publishers paid relatively high prices for Beethoven's thirty-two piano sonatas with opus numbers, and music lovers eagerly purchased them.[4] In a letter of January 15, 1801, to the Leipzig publisher Franz Anton Hoffmeister (1754-1812), for example, Beethoven asked as much money for a piano sonata (Op. 22) as for a symphony (Op. 21) or a septet (Op. 20). Anticipating resistance, Beethoven wrote that

> […] perhaps you will be surprised that I make no distinction between sonata, septet, and symphony. The reason is that I find that a septet or a symphony does not sell as well as a sonata. That is the reason why I do this, although a symphony should undoubtedly be worth more."[5]

Unlike Haydn or Mozart, Beethoven composed many more piano sonatas than symphonies or string quartets; the sonatas far outnumber piano concertos, string trios, sonatas for piano and violin, and sonatas for piano and cello. Moreover, he wrote them regularly, with few extended interruptions. During the approximately twenty-nine years between Op. 2, No. 1 (1793-5) and Op.111 (1822), there were only two three- or four-year periods—1806-8 and 1811-13—in which he did not complete a piano sonata. In other genres, Beethoven neither composed nor completed works for extended periods. Some genres were largely composed during a specific period. For example, almost all of the chamber music for winds was written before 1802; all of the concertos before 1810; all but three of the twenty independent sets of piano variations before 1804; and nine of the ten piano and violin sonatas between 1797/8 and 1803. Beethoven wrote almost all of his

[3] Franz Wegler and Ferdinand Ries, *Beethoven Remembered: The Biographical Notes of Franz Wegler and Ferdinand Ries*, trans. Frederick Noonan (Great Ocean Publishers: Arlington, Virginia, 1987), p. 82.
[4] Beethoven's three piano sonatas WoO were published in 1783 when he was twelve years of age.
[5] *The Letters of Beethoven*, trans. Emily Anderson (London: Macmillan, 1961) I, p. 48.

symphonies and overtures between 1799 and 1813. The string quartets are more evenly distributed, but there is an enormous gap between Op. 95 of 1810 and Op. 127 of 1824-25.

Beethoven composed most of his piano music, solo as well as chamber music, during his first decade in Vienna. This period brought hard work, growing confidence, public praise and—in Beethoven's twenty-ninth year—the first symptoms of deafness. Twenty-six of his first thirty-five opus numbers are works with piano, ten of which are piano sonatas. Between 1793 and the end of 1802 Beethoven wrote twenty solo piano sonatas and eleven sets of variations for piano. This period also saw the composition of the first three piano concertos and much chamber music involving piano, including the piano trios Opp. 1 and 11, the piano and cello sonatas Op. 5, and the quintet for piano and winds Op. 16. In addition to the piano music during this period there appeared the string trios Opp. 3 and 9, chamber music for winds, winds and strings, dances for orchestra, songs and arias to German and Italian texts, as well as other vocal pieces.

Conspicuously absent during Beethoven's first few years in Vienna are genres such as the symphony, string quartet, theater music, oratorio, and Mass. Beethoven may well have consciously delayed undertaking genres that invited unfavorable comparison with works by Haydn and Mozart.[6] Though Beethoven sketched an unfinished C-minor symphony in 1795-6, he composed the First Symphony only in 1799-1800 and the six-string quartets Op. 18 in 1798-1800. The success of the first public concert for his benefit on April 2, 1800, which included the First Symphony, the Septet, Op. 20 and a piano concerto—it is not known which one—spurred the creation of more orchestral music in 1801-3/4: music for the ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus,* Op. 43, the Second and Third Symphonies, and the oratorio *Christ on the Mount of Olives.*

The monumental Eroica Symphony (1803/4) and the opera Leonore (1804/5; later named Fidelio) give expression to Beethoven's fascination with heroism. The Eroica Symphony's expanded time-scale and powerful sonorities found a parallel in Opp. 53 ("Waldstein"; 1803/4) and 57 ("Appassionata"; 1804/5), two of the three piano sonatas Beethoven composed from late 1803 to early 1805. In 1805, while working on the finale of Leonore, Beethoven wrote the following comment in a sketchbook: "On June 2—finale always simpler—the same goes for all piano music. God knows why my piano music still always makes the poorest impression on me, especially when it is badly played."[7] Beethoven's subsequent compositional output reflects this negative view of his piano music. For almost four amazingly productive years (1806-8), he concentrated on orchestral, choral, and chamber music, including the Fourth Piano Concerto, the Violin Concerto, the Fourth, Fifth, and Sixth Symphonies, the three String Quartets Op. 59, the Mass in C, the

[6] Joseph Kerman, *The Beethoven Quartets* (New York: Knopf: 1967), p. 11.
[7] Douglas Johnson, Alan Tyson, and Robert Winter, *The Beethoven Sketchbooks: History, Reconstruction, Inventory* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), p. 150.

Sonata for Piano and Cello, Op. 69, and the two piano trios of Op. 70. However, on September 19, 1809, Beethoven wrote to the publisher Breitkopf and Härtel: "I don't like to spend much time composing sonatas for pianoforte solo, but I promise to let you have a few."[8] He resumed composing piano sonatas in 1809-10 with Opp. 78, 79, and Op. 81a, *Das Lebewohl or Les Adieux* [*The Farewell*], his only explicitly programmatic sonata. He composed this work in 1810 to commemorate the departure and return from Vienna of his patron and student Archduke Rudolf at the time of the invasion and withdrawal of the French army.

After 1810, Beethoven did not write piano sonatas for almost four years. During this time he composed such enormously varied works as the String Quartet Op. 95 (1810-11), the Seventh (1811-12) and Eighth (1812) Symphonies, the "*Archduke*" Trio, Op. 97 (1810-11), and the Sonata for Piano and Violin, Op. 96 (1812).

The presence of kings and princes during the Congress of Vienna in 1814-15 brought Beethoven his highest public acclaim. In 1814 he revised Fidelio and composed the two-movement Piano Sonata in E minor, Op. 90, dedicated to his friend and patron Count Moritz Lichnowsky. Beethoven's tremendous productivity began to slacken around 1813, however. The publisher's announcement of Op. 90 reflects this slowdown: "All connoisseurs and friends of music will surely welcome the appearance of this sonata since nothing by L. van Beethoven has appeared now for several years."[9] The year 1815 saw the composition of two Sonatas for Piano and Cello, Op. 102 (1815).

The last five piano sonatas—Opp. 101, 106, 109, 110, and 111—were written from 1816 to 1822, years marked by Beethoven's deafness, bad health, and legal battles with the widow of his brother Casper for exclusive custody of his nephew Karl. Beethoven completed the Sonata in A major, Op. 101, in November 1816, shortly after writing his song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte*, Op. 98 (autograph inscribed April 16, 1816). At Beethoven's insistence, the title page of this sonata included the German designation "*für das Hammerklavier*" [for piano] as well as the usual "*pour le piano*" in French. The influence of German nationalism demonstrated by this indication probably resulted from Napoleon's defeat in 1814. Beethoven's next Piano Sonata in Bb major, Op. 106 was designated similarly, "*für das Hammerklavier*." This sonata has been referred to as the "*Hammerklavier*" ever since. This gigantic and extremely difficult sonata preoccupied Beethoven almost exclusively in 1817-18. Preliminary sketching for the first movement of the Ninth Symphony was his only other major project. The publisher's announcement for Op. 106 reflects an awareness that Beethoven had entered a new style period: "This work stands out above all other creations of the master not only on account of its rich and

[8] *The Letters of Beethoven*, I, p. 244.
[9] William Newman, *The Sonata in the Classic Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1963), p. 526.

abundant imagination, but because in respect of artistic perfection and unified style, it initiates, as it were, a new phase in Beethoven's composition of piano works."[10]

Beethoven composed his last three piano sonatas—Opp. 109, 110, 111—during interruptions from work on the Diabelli Variations, Op. 120 and the *Missa Solemnis*. In the Spring of 1819, Beethoven began working on the Diabelli Variations but abandoned it by early June after two-thirds of the variations had been sketched.[11] In April/May 1819, he started the *Missa Solemnis*, which was to be completed only in August 1822. Beethoven interrupted the composition of the Credo in March/April 1820 to write an independent piece that was to become the first movement of the Sonata in E major, Op. 109.[12] In April, Beethoven's friend Franz Oliva suggested to him in a conversation book that "maybe you can use this little new piece in a sonata for [the publisher Adolf Martin] Schlesinger."[13] A request for piano sonatas from Schlesinger on April 11, 1820, also influenced Beethoven's decision to incorporate this piece within a sonata. In reply to Schlesinger of April 30, Beethoven proposed a set of three sonatas: "I will gladly let you have new sonatas—but not at a lower price than 40 ducats each. Hence a work consisting of three sonatas would cost 120 ducats..."[14] Beethoven returned to the Credo starting in April, but worked on the second and third movements of Op. 109 from June through September, 1820.

After completing Op. 109, Beethoven again worked on the *Missa* Solemnis and did not compose his next piano sonata, Op. 110, until the late summer or early fall of 1821. The completion of Op. 110 in December 1822 overlaps with the composition of Op. 111, which was finished in early 1822.

After his final piano sonata, Op. 111, Beethoven completed the *Missa Solemnis* in 1822, the Diabelli Variations, Op. 120, in 1823, the Ninth Symphony in 1823-24, and Bagatelles for piano, Op. 126, in 1824. He devoted his last active years—1824-26—to the string quartets Opp. 127, 130, 130 (initially including the *Grosse Fuge,* Op. 134, as its finale), 131, 132, and 135.

Beethoven's last work for piano was a duet arrangement for four hands of the *Grosse Fuge* (1826). The publisher of the original string quartet version initially commissioned such an arrangement from the pianist and composer Anton Halm, but Beethoven was not satisfied with it and wrote his own arrangement. In 2005, Beethoven's long-lost manuscript of this arrangement was found in the library of the Palmer Theological Seminary in Pennsylvania, and sold at auction for almost two million dollars.

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[10] Joseph Schmidt-Georg and Hans Schmidt (eds.) *Ludwig van Beethoven* (New York: Praeger, 1970), p. 179.
[11] William Kinderman, *Beethoven's Diabelli Variations* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1987), p. XVII.
[12] Nicholas Marston, *Beethoven's Piano Sonata in E, Op. 109* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), p. 24.
[13] Ibid., p. 39.
[14] *The Letters of Beethoven*, II, p. 893.

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