

The Orchestral Character of Beethoven's Pianism

Constantin SANDU¹

Abstract: *We can trace back to the pre-classical era pieces written for keyboard instruments but encompassing sonorities typical of other instruments. In Scarlatti's Sonatas we can often perceive flute, oboe, horn, violin, guitar sonorities and so on. At a more complex level, in Bach's works, owing to the polyphonic style, we find different simultaneous lines that can be associated with various instruments. In Haydn's work, especially in the last Sonatas, there is a certain orchestral sound, whereas in Mozart's, the situation is even more complex due to the notably vocal character of his melodies. However, the orchestral sonority fully reveals itself in Beethoven's piano works, due to the existent symphonic structure, based on the continuous and more and more intricate development of the sound form, resulting in the crystallization of the sonata form, which is the foundation for music written not only for one or two instruments, but also for large orchestras and chamber music ensembles.*

Keywords: *Beethoven, pianism, orchestral, sonatas*

1. Introduction

We can trace back to the pre-classical era pieces written for keyboard instruments but encompassing sonorities typical of other instruments. Was this, perhaps, the result of composers' inner desire to surpass the timbre monotony of the harpsichord, and later, of the piano? Or maybe, does the intimate structure of European music force it to find plenitude in the complex sound of a large orchestra? It is said that every sound (even a solitary one) implies harmony. Then, why would not any melodic line imply the tone colour of a precise instrument that can perfectly adapt to its character? In Scarlatti's Sonatas we can often perceive flute, oboe, horn, violin, guitar sonorities and so on. At a more complex level, in Bach's works, owing to the polyphonic style, we find different simultaneous lines that adapt to various instruments, therefore, to chamber music ensembles or to a smaller orchestra, specific to the musical era. In the Suites, we often encounter

¹ Higher School of Music and Performing Arts of Porto, constantinsandu@netcabo.pt

contrasting sonorities, corresponding to the dialogue between the *solī* and *tutti* of the baroque orchestra, as in the *Italian Concerto*, that leaves no room for doubt – although written for the harpsichord; it was devised for the soloist and orchestra. In Haydn, especially in the last Sonatas, orchestral sonorities make their appearance: dense successive chords for *tutti*, melodic lines typical of string instruments, motives specific to winds. The first lines solely, of the *Sonata in E flat Major Hob. XVI: 52*, are enough to illustrate this idea. In Mozart, the situation is even more complex due to the notably vocal character of his melodies. As we often come across orchestral sonorities or piano-orchestra alternations (*Sonata in B flat Major KV 333*), we have, in general, a clear picture of the piece in which voices and instruments harmoniously fuse their own tone colours into music of extraordinary plasticity.

2. The orchestral character of Beethoven's pianism

The orchestral sonority fully reveals itself in the piano works of Beethoven, owing to the existent symphonic structure, based on the permanent development, more and more intricate, of the world of sound form, resulting in the crystallization of the sonata form, which is the foundation for music written not only for one or two instruments, but also for large orchestras and chamber music ensembles. Likewise, the composition of more sonatas with 4 movements instead of 3, as was the custom, drew the piano sonatas nearer to other musical genres, such as the symphony and the string quartet. By following attentively Beethoven's phrasing notations, we can find that many of them do not apply to the entire musical discourse, but only to one of the voices. The placement of the *sf.*, *fp.*, *cresc.*, *dim.* notations leaves no room for doubt. Unfortunately, we encounter many editions that have had no regard for this particularity of Beethoven's writing style and, either because of negligence or typographical reasons, they have displaced the notations, placing them in the middle of the system, hence altering the original musical idea. In the next example, in an excerpt from *Sonata op. 27 no.2*, we can see the difference between the Henle edition, supervised by B. A. Wallner (Figure 1.a) and the Curci edition, supervised by Artur Schnabel (Figure 1.b).

Fig. 1.a. Ludwig van Beethoven - Sonata op. 27 no.2, p.I, bars 62-69

Fig. 1.b. Ludwig van Beethoven - Sonata op. 27 no.2, p.I, bars 60-65

It is clear that Beethoven's intention was to have the bars 62-63 and 64-65 played in a different manner, in the first two the *cresc.* and *dim.* applying to the right hand arpeggio, while in the next ones to the thematic motive in the left hand. Another interesting example can be found in the *Coda* of the first part of *Sonata op.57* (Figure 2): in bar 257 (Henle ed.) we find the *f* dynamic mark for the right hand and the *ff* for the left, then twice *p dimin.* for each line, as Beethoven believed a singular sign would not suffice to convey the message, finally, both hands (instruments or orchestra parts) must play with the same dynamics.

Fig. 2. Ludwig van Beethoven - Sonata op. 57, p.I, bars 256-259

In what follows, I will share a few ideas regarding timbre and orchestral sonorities that help me discover and reveal to the audience the universe of some of the central pieces in Beethoven's work.

3. Sonata op. 53

In part I, the first theme is attributed to strings, the motives in the soprano line being introduced by winds, culminating in a *ff* for *tutti*. The second theme is definitely entrusted to woodwinds (Figure 3), the *sf.* in bar 38 (Henle ed.) applying to the third voice, represented by the horn

Fig. 3. Ludwig van Beethoven - Sonata op. 53, p.I, bars 32-42

The second part belongs to the horns. In regard to the difficulty in performing some of the passages, Donald Francis Tovey writes the following in the foreword of The Associated Board of the Royal Schools of Music edition: `in bars 21-25, a good cellist will play the base line with magnificent colour, spontaneous rhythm and without the smallest temptation to speed` (Figure 4).



Fig. 4. Ludwig van Beethoven - Sonata op. 53, p. II, bars 18-24

The first theme of the third part consists of a dialogue between the flute (in the tonic) and the oboe (in the dominant), which, step by step, invites other instruments to play a triumphant-in-character *tutti*. In the *coda* we find a few bars with *glissandi* in octaves in both hands that would wonderfully fit the harp and I believe it deserves a short parenthesis. We know that these could be easily played on the pianos of that time. To prove it, we have Czerny's Etudes with *glissandi* in sixths, octaves and even chords. On modern pianos, this poses a difficult problem, because of the heaviness of touch and the increased key height. Fischer says: "Scales and octaves must be played *glissando*, which, on some heavy action pianos, is almost impossible. Try to play the first octave in a much emphasized way." (Fisher, 1966, p.80). On the other hand, Arrau asserts: `*Waldstein* was written for a piano with Viennese mechanics, on which *glissandi* in octaves were easy to play. When I come across a piano on which these cannot be played, I change the programme. I only play *Waldstein* if the piano responds` (Horowitz, 1982, p.105). Tovey believes that this was not an easy task, not even in Beethoven's time, due to the quarter note in the middle of the *glissando* that interrupts the continuity of the eights. Thus, he recommends playing that quarter with the left hand (in the right hand fragment), whereas on pianos with heavy action he suggests playing the whole passage with both hands, sacrificing a few notes. He considers the solution of playing the octaves *staccato*, used by various pianists, unhelpful, adding that this can only remind us of Mozart's opinion of Clementi: `he writes *Prestissimo* and

plays *Moderato*. My opinion is that, besides the compulsory speed, the great difficulty is to play the passage in *pp*, as indicated. As a vast majority of pianists do not find themselves in Arrau's position to afford to change the programme on the eve or even on the day of the concert, I think that the two-hand playing is a better choice, as I myself use the following fingering (Figure 5):

Fig. 5. Ludwig van Beethoven - Sonata op. 53, Coda, bars 462-477

4. Sonata op. 57

The initial arpeggios pass from the cello to the viola, next to the violin, the trill motives being played by the woodwinds (Figure 6).

Fig. 6. Ludwig van Beethoven - Sonata op. 57, p. I, bars 1-10

The second theme is performed by the horns and the trumpets, instruments that are able to bestow upon it the majestic character (Figure 7).



Fig. 7. Ludwig van Beethoven - Sonata op. 57, p. I, bars 35-40

The same solemn atmosphere is set by the sonority of the metal instruments that play the theme of the second part (Figure 8).

The image shows the beginning of the second page of Beethoven's Sonata op. 57, titled 'Andante con moto'. It consists of two systems of staves. The first system (bars 1-15) features a treble clef with a melodic line starting at bar 1, marked 'p e dolce'. The bass clef provides a rhythmic accompaniment of chords. The second system (bars 16-21) continues the melodic line, marked 'cresc.', with the bass clef accompaniment becoming more complex and dense.

Fig. 8. Ludwig van Beethoven - Sonata op. 57, p. II, Theme, bars 1-15

The first variation is played by the winds (the chords in the right hand) and the strings (the melodic line in the left hand) (Figure 9), while in the second we have an expressive cello accompanied by a violin (Figure 10).

Fig. 9. Ludwig van Beethoven - Sonata op. 57, p. II, Var. I, bars.16-29

Fig. 10. Ludwig van Beethoven - Sonata op. 57, p. II, Var. II, bars 32-37

In the third part, the theme in sixteenths is performed by the string section; the motives in chords are introduced by the winds (Figure11)

Fig. 11. Ludwig van Beethoven - Sonata op. 57, p.III, bars 21-35

In the *coda* there is an interchange between the *tutti* (chords in *ff*) and the strings section (chords in *p*) (Figure 12).

The image displays a musical score for the Coda of Ludwig van Beethoven's Sonata op. 57 p. III, spanning bars 306 to 323. The score is written for piano and is marked 'Presto'. It features a complex interplay of textures and dynamics. The right hand (treble clef) contains intricate passages, including sixteenth-note runs and chords, while the left hand (bass clef) provides a steady accompaniment with chords and moving lines. Dynamics range from piano (*p*) to fortissimo (*ff*). The score includes first and second endings, and various fingering and articulation markings.

Fig. 12. Ludwig van Beethoven - Sonata op. 57 p. III, Coda, bars 306-323

5. Conclusions

By all means, in these works, as in all the others by Beethoven, there are typical piano-written passages, where figurations cannot be easily and naturally adapted to other instruments. However, in most instances, the global sonority can be transposed to the orchestra by using other figurations, specific to the instruments that constitute it. In this respect, I remember that Sequera Costa, the pianist, once said in a master-class that *'it would be of great use to the composition class students to orchestrate Beethoven's sonatas as an exercise, so suggestive is the music for this purpose.'* In any case, when it comes to pianists, I am convinced that thinking in an orchestral manner helps develop imagination regarding tone colour, which provides an important leap in quality from the level of a good musical performance to a truly interesting one.

6. References

Beethoven, Ludwig van. 1980. *Klaviersonaten* [Piano Sonatas]. Munchen: G. Henle Verlag.

Beethoven, Ludwig van. 1999. *32 Sonate per pianoforte* [32 Sonatas for pianoforte] Milano: Edizioni Curci.

Fischer, Edwin. 1966. *Sonatele pentru pian de Beethoven* [Beethoven's piano sonatas]. București: Editura Muzicală a Uniunii Compozitorilor.

Horowitz, Joseph. 1982. *Conversation with Arrau*. New York: Limelight Editions.