

Beethoven's dynamics seen in terms of his *Piano and Violin Sonatas*

Mihaela ITIGAN¹, Stela DRĂGULIN²

Abstract: *Of the three great Viennese classics, Beethoven is by far the composer who opens the door to a new world for the stylistics of instrumental music. By virtue of an authentic and bold musical language, he manages to make his own way through the orderly trend at the turn of the 19th century. In his own style, music acquires a sonorous strength that electrifies the audience permanently, creating at the same time a powerful magnetism that keeps the listeners' attention alive almost hypnotically. What makes pulse rise, heart beat irregularly, senses sharpen, and the mix of contradictory feelings pour down on the listener is the magical manner in which Beethoven employs and combines the different specific elements of the musical language. Among the most innovative features, Beethoven's dynamics shape the composer's language through the colour and weight that he gives to his musical discourse as well as manner of interpretation. This article aims to present a brief analysis of this significant musical element in the texture of Beethoven's piano and violin sonatas.*

Keywords: *Beethoven, dynamics, sonata, piano and violin.*

1. Introduction

Vacillating between sadness and joy, rebellion and peace of mind, Beethoven's remarkable creation has the power to perpetually impress the audience through a diverse and authentic musical language. Its complexity mirrors a profound approach to the musical phenomenon in which the epoch's specific entertainment is definitely overthrown by a complete and sovereign art. The musical ideas are arranged and displayed in an original composition manner, whose message foreshadows the beginning of an era marked by new stylistic features. The impressive sonorous constructions outline new musical dimensions and reflect the composer's great figure. Utterly abandoning himself to emotion, Beethoven asserts his rebellion against the rigid principles of the period, in which "any feeling in excess was in disharmony with the precepts of discretion, taste and moral balance characteristic of

¹ PhD Candidate, *Transilvania University of Brasov*, mihaha.mi08@yahoo.com

² PhD, *Transilvania University of Brasov, American – Romanian Academy for Arts and Sciences*, steladragulin2005@yahoo.com

classicism.” (Rolland 2007, 31) He is the composer who adopts the new artistic tendencies whose romanticism and freedom of expression shatter formalism and classical balance. By virtually bridging classicism and romanticism, Beethoven succeeds through a particular language in giving music an overwhelming affect, which will move and vibrate the entire humankind.

2. The dynamics of Beethoven’s language

Responsible for the sonorous intensity variation of a musical work, dynamics – whose denomination originates in the Greek form of the word “dynamicos” – are the dominant feature of musical language that sets the tone and colour of sound. Covering a wide range of nuances, the scope of dynamics is considerably large, starting from the lowest sonority (*ppp*) and reaching the highest (*fff*). Experimenting a wide and varied scale of sonorous intensities, dynamics are an indispensable element of the musical language as they materialize via melody the composer’s vision, desire and feelings.

Beethoven’s dynamics are known as the richest part of the musical language specific to the classical period, being capable of outlining through their coloration the complexity of musical discourse. Having understood their expressive and dramatic power, Beethoven focused all his attention on dynamics, analysing and perfecting them incessantly as stated by musicologist Angus Watson. “Beethoven had experienced the expressive and dramatic effectiveness of varied dynamics, and this remained for him a vital concern throughout his life.” (Watson 2012, 14) Aware of the importance that this feature bears on decoding and conveying the artistic message as well as of the aural impact created by the diversified sonorous intensity, Beethoven always insisted upon a most accurate interpretation of dynamics, ready to express his disappointment over one’s failure to observe or treat this interpretation adequately.

“...all pianissimos and crescendos, all decrescendos and all fortes and fortissimos should have been deleted from my opera! In any case they are not observed. All desire to compose anything more ceases completely if I have to hear my work performed like that!” (Beethoven Letters, letter 104, 100)

The composer’s unbending treatment of dynamics is confirmed by his students as well, one of them – Ferdinand Ries – recalling how “yet when I was at fault with regard to the expression, the crescendo or matters of that kind..., he [Beethoven] would grow angry.” (Sonneck 1967, 52)

At the same time, the composer also expressed his disagreement as to the graphic representation of dynamics, its inaccuracy being the result of the personal interventions made by Beethoven’s publishers. The surprise, the shock, the emphasis

on thematic contrast as well as the overflow of the composer's emotions, all required a dynamic ample vision with which the society of that period was not well acquainted. The 18th century conservatism rendered the melomaniacs' attitude reserved or even critical in some cases towards Beethoven's new approach to musical works, in which dynamics and their interpretation played an important part.

As a matter of course, each composer's musical language originates, in certain respects, in his contemporaries and predecessors' remarkable stylistic features. In Beethoven's case, the dynamic vision is overtly and primarily influenced by the one held by his Viennese mentor, Joseph Haydn. A brief comparative analysis of the two great composers' works mirrors considerable resemblances in terms of the abundance and variety of the approached dynamic elements. Even though the compatibility between the two representative figures of the musical classicism was not successful, determination and willingness to advance urged Beethoven to exploit dynamic elements, so generously detailed in Haydn's works. Undoubtedly, Beethoven's personality will break the barrier of the modest nuances used by "Papa-Haydn", augmenting their sonorous intensity to a far greater extent.

Beethoven's dynamic vision tests new tendencies along with his deeper understanding of Christoph Willibald Gluck and Luigi Cherubini's vocal creations. The richness and spread of arias, the deeply expressed feelings and the unprecedented expressive power of music easily impacted Beethoven's mind about the amount of sonorous intensities. With these two composers stands in Muzio Clementi, from whom Beethoven absorbs his idea of a wider dynamic palette in addition to the use of parallel octaves, sextets and tercets in the piano technique.

One must not forget the influence of the famous 18th century orchestra, the rival to the one in Bonn (Lockwood 2005, 26), where Beethoven played the viola in his young years. It is the Mannheim orchestra known as "an army of generals", who under the baton of master conductors Johann Stamitz and Christian Cannabich revolutionized the manner of instrumental music interpretation through performance accuracy, perfect balance among instrumental groups and the realisation, for the first time in the history of music, of the *crescendo*, *descrescendo* nuances and of the *fortepiano* differentiation in smaller passages.

3. Dynamic elements present in Beethoven's piano and violin sonatas

The dynamic features of the piano and violin sonatas are not dissonant in Beethoven's creation, the abundance of nuances being visible in the pages of these pieces as well. As with the entirety of his work, their variety and complexity increase along with the composer's creative maturation, the peak being reached in the second period of his creation when the Kreutzer sonata, "outrageously unintelligible", makes its debut. The quantitative growth in dynamic indications as well as the appearance of new musical nuances particularly in the piano score is also

due to the mechanical evolution of the instrument of which Beethoven, partly on account of his physical disability, had more and more expectations. The hearing loss is juxtaposed by the inner blend of moods which, combined with the ardent revolutionary ideologies, can only be expressed via a rich and varied palette of musical nuances.

Ever since the first sonatas, the employed language has outlined some characteristics of Beethoven's manner of expression. It is about those signs that one encounters graphically represented in the form of *sforzando* (*sf*) and *fortepiano* (*fp*).

Thought as accents, Beethoven ascribes to them differentiated interpretations connected to the character and expressiveness of the work as well as to the general nuance of the passage in which they appear. The differentiated interpretation consists in volume variation as accent intensity. In this respect, an intense, recitative, profoundly echoing tone like the ones in sonata op. 47 is inappropriate in the serene frame of op. 24, whose delicate harmonies delineate a pastel and so is the tonic in the effervescent op. 24 as compared to op. 96, in which the warmth and peace of heart pervade the entire musical texture. One must not forget the slow parts, particularly the ones that expressively crown the adagios of op. 12, no. 13, op. 24, op. 30, no. 1, in which the lyrical and arcadian fine nuances require the instrumentalist's careful interpretation of these accents.

3.1. Sforzando

The most significant detail related to the appearance of *sforzando* is the composer's intention to emphasize a certain particularity of the melody which, according to pianist Edwin Fischer, he used to technically realise through a "slight rhythmic delay". From this viewpoint, in the dynamic construction of the piano and violin sonatas Beethoven highlighted certain notes, particularly bass notes, whose sustained length support the pastoral ideas of the *piacevole* Allegro in op. 12, no. 2, the glamour and heroism in op. 12, no. 3, the double octaves in op. 24, the "Spring sonata", the intensely emotional content of Allegro con brio op. 30, no. 2, and the overwhelming recitative of op. 47. Not only the bass notes, but also the dissonances are accentuated, whose unstable nature can be found in the modulatory passages of the sonatas, while the instrumental thematic dialogue of the sonata form op. 12, no. 1, op. 23, op. 30, no. 2 is dominated by the *sforzando* at the time when the partner instrument takes over the thematic motif.

Another detail related to the appearance of *sforzando* is the accentuation of the weak tempos of the measure or even of certain tempo parts, which is often encountered in most of the sonatas, the composer seeking to avoid blurring them excessively in the melodic context of the work. This is thus corroborated by the Adagio molto espressivo of the op. 30, no. 1 sonata, in which the last half tempo of the opening thematic motif is accentuated.

At the same time, certain points, in which perfect synchronization between the two instruments is desired, are signalled through the same dynamic element. There are other states of the *sforzando* that present it as a decorative supporter of the trills in the third part of the op. 12, no.1 sonata or as a dynamic element merged with the agogic changes intended to mark the suspense of a semicadence like the one in the third part of op. 23 and with the surprise of an unexpected modulation encountered in the minor variation of the Allegretto in op. 30, no. 1. All these melodic details of the works are associated with the rhythmic ones, which Beethoven feels the need to personalize, bestowing a dancing character upon the refrain in the Rondo of op. 12, no. 3, while outlining their pointed character in the second part of op. 23 and the fourth of op. 24.

Although it seems incredible, there are situations in which this dominant element of Beethoven's language is completely absent, its appearance complicating the melodic flow of the serene Adagio espressivo and Scherzo in op. 24. The purity of the admiration feeling for nature, displayed by the composer in a particularly lyrical manner, would be spoilt by the tense surprises of some *sforzandos*. A similar situation can be found in the expressive Adagio of the last sonata, whose purity and serenity induce an unbreakable inner peace.

3.2. Fortepiano

Another representative element of Beethoven's language is the *fortepiano*, which one can find abbreviated as *fp* in the scores. Interpreted still as an accent but rather with "pathetic meanings", as pianist Eduard Fischer liked to characterize it, the *fortepiano* employed by Beethoven aims to realize an orchestral effect, in which various instrumental tone colours are a delight for musical discourses. As expected, its representation in the violin part is not abundant as compared to the piano, which is the instrument that the composer, through the impact that he exerted on the epoch's manufacturers, permanently sought to perfect both in tone colour and sound. For Beethoven the piano represents the experiment instrument of his orchestral vision, which permanently invaded his creative mind: "I cannot compose anything that is not obbligato..." (Beethoven Letters, letter 39, 37) At the same time, the rich and dynamic tone colour specific to the symphonic orchestra served him as a model for the piano virtuosity and expressiveness by which he distinguished himself at the end of the 18th century.

A graphic analysis of the *fortepiano* in the Beethoven's piano and violin sonatas shows that the orchestral effect intended by the composer weakens in intensity along with the interplay of light and shadow in the "Spring sonata", in which only a few cadences adhere to this dynamic element. Not even the overwhelming "Kreutzer sonata", whose emotional echoes would have been entitled to absorb the pathetic *fortepiano*, does manifest an interest in it. It is no doubt that along with the instrument's emancipation Beethoven was more attracted to the

ample sonorities by whose force and intensity he could create large sonorous masses. At the same time, the expressive character of certain median parts, whose lied forms sing particular lyrical arias such as the one in the op. 96 sonata which reflects a genuine invitation to meditation, does not resonate with the accents of the *fortepiano*.

The effects of this dynamic element can be found more visibly in the op. 12 sonatas, where Beethoven brings orchestral tone colours to the register changes, in the thematic differentiations of the secondary group, in different cadences or concluding motifs, and in op. 23 whose pathetic harmonies outline the main theme motif of the sonata form and its repetition in the development, the authentic cadences of Andante's first section, and the unaccented accordic concatenation whose modulatory character makes the connection between the basic tonality and the dominant of the final part.

Regardless of the achieved intensity and effect, accents are language elements that flavour musical discourse, avoiding melodic monotony and disclosing, through the emphasis of certain details, the particularities of heroic, pastoral or intensely emotional nature specific to Beethoven's style.

3.3. From pianissimo to fortissimo

The musical nuances that Beethoven used in his monumental creation indicate mastery of a rich musical vocabulary, which reflects the variety of his own moods with bouts of fury, rebellion, indignation, but also with poetry, love and fulfilment. Language dynamics constantly breathe new life into music, carrying the listener into a sentimental, emotional world. The monotony of musical discourse is something that Beethoven avoids even in the repetitive passages of short duration. The range of musical nuances has a generous cover, the composer skilfully handling almost all sonorities throughout from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo*.

The sonorous intensity is subordinated to the musical message, the melodic character and meaning resonating in unison. Accordingly, the weak nuances dominate the lyrical and expressive sections as compared to the strong ones, representative of drama, boldness or decision.

The considerable quantity of dynamic indications found in the sonatas is also due to the bi-thematic principle which with Beethoven has a more marked character than with the other classics, the contrast being also encountered within the motifs of the same thematic group. The tonic instability is not neglected either, the modulatory passages being almost always accompanied by *crescendos* that increase tension. Let us not forget the harmonic aspect of the works, where the more or less complex concatenations bring to the fore secondary steps, diminished intervals, lowered seconds or tense seventh chords highlighted through a dynamic palette adequate for a strained atmosphere.

More than with the thematic contrast and modulatory tension, Beethoven musically defines surprise, shock, the quick turns of the musical discourse, the fluctuation in different feelings or the sudden changes of spirits by using the *piano* at the end of a *crescendo*. It is the element that confirms the authenticity of Beethoven's language and its appearance in his instrumental works is exclusively due to the composer. In the piano and violin sonatas, this element has asserted itself ever since the first works, Beethoven dwelling on its use throughout the integral. The effect created by this dynamic element is experimented by Beethoven even on sustained notes, the first part of the op. 47 sonata standing as evidence in this respect. Although, from a technical point of view, its realisation is possible only for the violin, the composer insists that the pianist interpret it as well, thus creating the illusion of a *crescendo* whose materialization takes a rather mental than physical shape. This is the proof of the depth in which Beethoven chooses to treat the dynamics of the work, attaching philosophical connotations to the musical text. Equilibrating the balance of the stormy *crescendos*, Beethoven reacts to them by lowering the intensity to pianissimo, the employed *descrescendos* peacefully finalizing the musical discourses or wrapping them in mystery.

In addition to the diverse and rich dynamic palette presented above, there is the *rinforzando*, an element that through its abbreviation *rinf* echoes another aspect of Beethoven's language. Due to the maximum sonority created by this strong nuance, the listener may experience surprising and vivid emotions. Such surprises can be found only in the op. 12, no. 1 sonata, in the final cadence of the median part, and in op. 24, in the climax of a modulatory inflexion. Both situations demonstrate moments of maximum tension, which are quickly resolved by means of a warm *piano* nuance.

4. Conclusions

Drawing on his predecessor's music, in its stately and expressive form, modelling and personalizing it in a style of his own and adding authentic elements to it, Beethoven built a complex musical language whose dominants materialize an original style marked by the disposition towards melody and expression, by pathetic outbursts, and by a spirit of force, decision and boldness. Paraphrasing Valentina Dediu, he " translates through the language of an intense inner life with bouts of rebellion or with an ideal that is inaccessible either emotionally or socially." (Dediu 2008, 31)

The dynamic elements represent for Beethoven's language an essential link, which through the diversified and original manner of interpretation, makes the connection between the composer's creative mind and the conveyed musical message. This particular code, reflected in a blend of different intensities and

sonorous effects, outlines the portrait of a creator whose vision mirrors the multitude of moods experimented throughout a lonely and introvert existence.

5. References

- Beethoven L. Van, translation Wallace, G. J. 2014. *Beethoven's Letters*, vol.I. Cambridge: Cambridge University Pres.
- Lockwood, L., and M. Kroll. 2004. *The Beethoven Violin Sonatas*. Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press.
- Lockwood, L. 2005. *Beethoven the Music and the Life*. New York: W.W. Norton & Company Publishing.
- Popovici, T. 2015. *Dictionary of Music*. București: Editura Grafoart Music.
- Prod'Homme, J. G. 2007. *Beethoven*. București: Humanitas.
- Rolland, R. 2007. *Beethoven the Creator*. New York: Garden City Publishing.
- Rolland, R., translation Constantinescu O. 2014. *Beethoven's life*. București: Editura Grafoart Music.
- Rostal, M. 1985. *Beethoven the Sonatas for Piano and Violin*. London: Toccata Press.
- Sandu-Dediu, V. 2008. *Ludwig van Beethoven*. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică.
- Schonberg, H., 2008. *Lives of great composers*, translated by Ionescu, A. I. București: Editura Lider.
- Sonneck, O. 1967. *Beethoven: Impressions by His Contemporaries*. New York: Dover Publishing
- Watson, A. 2012. *Beethoven's Chamber Music in Context*. Woodbridge: Boydell&Brewer Press, (Chapter 7, 11, 13, 14).