

## Historic landmarks in Beethoven's Sonata for Piano and Violin

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**Abstract:** *Ludwig van Beethoven's sonatas for piano and violin have enriched the published literature with ten musical works, which are in line with the collaboration and unity with the musical discourse of partner instruments. Chronologically organized on opuses and common particularities, the works reflect the path taken by the composer in terms of composition, between tradition and innovation. The genre begins with the op. 12 three sonatas that have a flavour of Mozart's style; in the 23rd and 24th op. the melodic charge is expressed with elegance, while the 30<sup>th</sup> op. gives evidence of Beethoven's maturity; the 47<sup>th</sup> op. is representative for the concert instrumental virtuosity and the 96<sup>th</sup> op. reflects a true creative synthesis. Through his entire creation, in the area of the sonata, Beethoven has entrusted his spiritual experiences to his music, as well as the stylistic searches for an original language that influenced the next generation of musicians and composers.*

Key-words: *Beethoven, classical music, piano and violin, sonata.*

### 1. Introduction

Ludwig van Beethoven is the “creator” that transformed the instrumental art of the era in a product of complex artistic thinking; he marked the turn of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, which had a great significance in the music history and evolution, and during which the classicism's conservatism began to be replaced gradually with romanticism's freedom of expression. Thanks to his genius and composing originality, he is the titan who made the musical discourse monumental, profound, and defined by personality and lyricism at the same time. All these stylistic dominants are reflected through his entire opera, which still impresses the audience after more than 200 years, each time, with the same intensity as for the first performance.

Beethoven's creative universe, even if revolved mainly around the piano, the composer excelled also as a pianist and his virtuosity had no equal in the period, has enriched the published literature with a palette of diverse musical works which

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resulted in different symphonic creations, concertante, vocal and chamber creations. From the long line of musical pieces, the composer was interested in the sonata since his early creative years, and the sonata is the framework that offers unity to Beethoven's entire work. Quoting George Balan, critic and musicologist "it can be said that in the artist's life this musical genre was a kind of workshop or laboratory, where he would close himself daily to deepen problems and experience means related to his entire creative activity" (Bălan 1970, 35). Beethoven started from the balanced classical structure, underlain by Haydn and Mozart, and then he customized the sonata, emphasizing the contrast in theme, amplifying the sections, addressing more daring modulations in development, intensifying it in a dynamic and agonistic manner; in other words, as Valentina Sandu-Dediu, musicologist, mentioned in the book *Ludwig van Beethoven, he will change the form of the sonata gradually, reaching the new configuration from romanticism. It will be Beethoven's confidante, he will entrust the sonata with his "state of mind and his searches for stylistic means by which to communicate more directly and more convincing the torments of his thoughts"* (Ștefănescu 1996, 314).

## **2. Piano and violin sonatas**

Starting with sonatinas in G and F major and finishing with the monumental op. 110, 111 Beethoven created for this musical type over fifty instrumental pieces, for both piano and different chamber music ensembles, among which the sonatas for the piano-violin, piano-violin and piano-horn duet. The sonatas dedicated to the piano-violin duo provide unique experiences and challenges to the instrumentalists throughout the ten musical works. Their typical technical and interpretative difficulty transforms them into true "piece de resistance", challenging even for the most skilled instrumentalists.

The sonatas debuted in the traditional principles of the classics, as all of Beethoven's works of the type, and not only, and they gradually evolved with the composer's artistic maturation. The musicologist Harold Schonberg, in his book "The lives of the great composers", says that "He began as a composer faithful to the classical tradition and concluded as a composer beyond time and space, using a self-created language: compressed, encrypted and explosive [...]. Under his pen the sonata undergoes a metamorphosis" (Schonberg 2008, 113).

The instrumental sonata for violin and piano became very spread in Germany towards the end of the eighteenth century, mainly because of Mozart's compositions but also thanks to two respectable cultural figures of the century, from Bonn, the capelmaestro Andrea Lucchesini and the musical director

Christian Gottlob Neefe. Certainly, Beethoven was familiar with this genre as a child, especially because of Gottlob Christian Neefe, whose name appears in all of the composer's bibliographies, who was one of Beethoven's leading teachers in

Bonn. Knowing this type of works from an early age is an opportunity, and the composer exploited it later when he began to write his own sonatas. We must mention Franz Rovantini, a violinist in the Bonn orchestra, and Franz Ries, the concertmaster of the same orchestra, as each of them contributed to the musical education of the composer with regards to playing the violin, an indispensable instrument in achieving a complete musical discourse specific for the piano and violin sonata. Parenthetically, we mention that Franz Ries was the teacher who thought Beethoven his true violinist art. As a sign of gratitude and respect, the composer will become a true supporter and dedicated teacher to his former maestro's son in the second part of his life. However, moving to Vienna was a decisive step for the creation dedicated to the piano-violin duet. Vienna was a magnet for the instrumentalists and musicians of the time, as it was a city where art was studied and performed at the highest levels. In Vienna Beethoven met Ignaz Schuppanzig and based on a shared love of music they became close friends and collaborated in both piano-violin duets and string quartets. Bibliographical studies attest that not only Schuppanzig, but also three French violinists from Giovanni Battista Viotti's school influenced the composer's piano and violin creation. They are Pierre Rode, Pierre Baillot and Rodolphe Kreutzer, whom Beethoven met in Vienna between 1798 and 1810. Certainly the presence of these violinists in the composer's life and entourage, as well as the instrumental technique they mastered, are the reasons that led to the conception of the ten sonatas for piano and violin. The violin method enlarged the possibilities of string instruments in terms of expressiveness and was a turning point in the history of the genre and music in general. Influenced by this method, Beethoven attempted to create a pianistic style as close as possible to the partner instrument's possibilities, in terms of interpretation and touch, according to musicologists Lewis Lockwood and Mark Kroll. Around the 1840s the famous educator and composer Karl Czerny talks about his legendary ability to play legato in the same way as he was playing the violin.

“During the first lessons [...] while he were exercising, my attention was particularly drawn to his ability to play legato in a way that could not be broken, and which all pianists of the time thought to be impossible to perform at the piano; the *non-legato* playing, with small and short strokes, was still fashionable after Mozart's passing”. (Prod'Homme 2007, 17)

## 2.1. Piano and violin sonatas op.12

The op. 12 sonatas belong to Beethoven's first stylistic stage, as defined by analyst Wilhelm von Lenz, and they complete the multitude of representative works from this period, together with op. 2, op. 7, op. 10 piano sonatas, op. 5 cello sonata, op. 1 piano trio, the two cantatas “Cantata on the death of emperor Joseph II” and

“Cantata on the accession of Emperor Leopold II” as well as op. 15 the first concert for piano and orchestra. Douglas Johnson analysed the paper and writing on op. 12 no. 2, 3, and concluded that they were published in 1798. The works are composed on the classic template, with a three-movement structure, based on the dynamic triad fast-slow-fast, and written in major tonalities D, A and Eb. The year 1798 is also confirmed by the archives of the “Academy”, where on March 29th, during Josepha Duschnek’s concert, the name of violinist Ignaz Schuppanzigh appears as interpreter of some sonatas. In his book, “The Beethoven violin sonatas” musicologist Sieghard Brandenburg expresses his conviction that the works interpreted are Beethoven’s sonatas for piano and violin op. 12, even if the instruments are not clearly specified.

The pieces show a strong influence of Mozart’s style, whose structural balance and fluidity in the musical discourse are noted by musicologists such as Lewis Lockwood and Mark Kroll, who say that Beethoven’s sonatas are unconceivable without Mozart’s k.380, k.454, k.526. Angus Watson mentions in his book „Beethoven’s chamber music in context” that Mozart’s influence lies in the manner instruments are treated in terms of balance and timber; it also lies in the fact that attention should not be focused on one of the instruments but on the of cooperation between them. He also emphasizes the striking similarity of the main theme in op. 12, no. 3 and k.304, and the elegiac character of the median parts. However, they admit that the composer’s striking personality marks this influence, and transforms it in a creative transition between “Mozart’s charming touch and Beethoven’s novelty”, as noticed by musical historian Ioana Ștefănescu in her book “A history of universal music” vol. II.

Even if they are anchored in classicism’s traditional rules, the sonatas’ first auditions provoked strong reactions from audience and critics. The famous pages of a nineteenth century publication „Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung” present the critics of a columnist who, while hearing the sonatas, felt like a man “lost in a forest, caught up by hostile entanglements at every turn and finally emerging weary, exhausted and without joy” (Lockwood 2004, 26). The originality of Beethoven’s language was obviously not understood by his contemporaries, who had a rigid and conservative mentality and who minimized the importance and influence this work had over the following generation of musicians.

Researchers argue that the sonatas op. 12 were not inspired by Antonio Salieri’s figure, and that Beethoven composed them at Prince Lobkowitz’s request; a private concert was held at his residence on April 5<sup>th</sup> 1798, with the duo Beethoven- Kreutzer as protagonist. It seems that the violinist visited Vienna in the spring of 1798 and this was the true cause, which led to the genesis of the op. 12.

## **2.2. Piano and violin sonatas op.23, op. 24**

The year 1801 marks the publication of the following sonatas for violin and piano, op. 23 and op. 24, written in a fertile creative period, the period of the first

symphony, a total of eight sonatas for piano, among which Pathétique and the Pastoral sonata, op.29 quintet, op.9 trio, septet in E flat major, the concert for piano and orchestra op. 19, op. 17 sonata for horn, string quartet op. 18, the ballet "Prometheus". Beethoven's language began to crystallize, and the composer is paving more and more his own way.

Composed in 1800, as shown in the manuscript from the Berlin State library, this was the first work of this kind written in a minor tonality. A minor, with its grey nuances, makes us think about the composer's ferment on the grievous disability that will mark him until his last moments. It is the time when he becomes aware of the fact that his hearing loss is irreversible, as it was made clear in the letters he addressed to his good friend Franz Wegeler "[...] there is a whooshing day and night in my ears [...] I am unable to tell people: I am deaf". (Beethoven 1972, 22) The minor tonality turns this sonata, dedicated to count Moritz von Fries, into an exception, due to the anxiety nuance that envelops the main theme. As opposed to sonata op. 12, this sonata does not have stylistic ornamental means; it heads more towards a fugat language with variation tendencies and counterpoint imitations underlying the thematic fund.

Composed around 1801, the year Beethoven fell in love with the beautiful Giulietta Guicciardi and was hoping to have a family, the op. 24 sonata leaves the sphere of the tragic feeling, of the op. 23 pathos, and brings a fresh and serene air into the music. It is the first sonata of the ten works to develop its discourse on four parts, the novelty consist of a scherzo in the penultimate part which reflects the principle of presenting the thematic material, integral to both instruments, a principle that governs Mozart's sonatas as well. Dedicated to count Moritz von Fries, as well as op. 23, an "important collector of art, music-lover and patron [...] partner in the Viennese banking house Fries & Co (Rostal 1985, 77), the sonata is also known as the "Spring Sonata". The piece, an incontestable proof of Beethoven's "melodic elegance and musical qualities" (Lockwood 2004, 24), receives this name only in 1860, certainly because of the composer's attitude towards nature. "It was his only confidante" says Therese von Brunswick, and Charles Neate adds that "he never met a man with such a love for flowers, clouds, nature; it was as tough he lived through them" (Rolland 2015, 53).

### **2.3. Piano and violin sonatas op.30**

The three sonatas op. 30, no. 1 in A major, no. 2 in C minor and no. 3 in G major are published in 1802, a year of great political unrest as the revolution was penetrating Vienna, as well as great inner turmoil, which culminated with the Heiligenstadt Testament. Amid these important events that radically changed the composer's life view, the sonatas op. 30 are published, reflecting suffering, discouragement, inner tragedies combined with pride and willpower, also found in other dramatic works such as: op. 26 funeral march sonata, sonata Quasi una Fantezia and the op. 27

Moonlight sonata. It is the peak season of the transition period, which puts every sonata to the test, no. 2 is the one most subjected to most changes. The four parts structure, “the dramatic recitatives resembling a grandiose and sad monologue” (Rolland 2015, 30), the insistent presence of marching and fighting rhythms, “the tragic, gloomy and energetic spirit, and a spirit of strength, decision and audacity” (Sandu-Dediu 2008, 29), very close to the second symphony composed at the same time, lay the foundations of Beethoven’s heroic musical style.

Inspired by the tomb scene of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet*, the op. 30 no. 1 sonata returns to the tripartite architectural form with the centre of gravity on the second part, where the harmonies reach mortuary intensities making us think about the composer’s burden of an unjust destiny. Composed after the Heiligenstadt Testament, op.30, no.3 reflects the spiritual balance reached by the composer, after the hearing loss threat and the love disillusion after Giuliette Guiciardi refused to marry him.

Dedicated to Emperor Alexander I of Russia, the works were paid only in 1815; in this year, at the urge of his doctor, Andreas Bertolini, Beethoven also composed the op. 89 polonaise for the Empress of Russia, who was visiting Vienna. Beethoven takes advantage of this opportunity and recovers the money he was expecting for over ten years now.

#### **2.4. Piano and violin sonata op.47**

In the year 1803 Beethoven confides to his close friend Krumpholz “I am not at all satisfied with what I have written so far: from now on I want to take on a new path” (Prod’Homme 2007, 20). Moreover, he kept his word, composing *Eroica*, the opera *Fidelio*, *Aurora* and *Appassionata*, the *Kreutzer sonata* that rises like a grand mountain chain above everything the composer had created in the previous period. In terms of style, the work opened a new stage in Beethoven’s creativity, his second to be more precise, characterized by monumentally on different “planes of thought-under construction, in expressivity, in sonority”. (Ștefănescu 1996, 320) Written in a “concert style- as it was a concert”, the op. 47 sonata was first performed in public, according to Beethoven’s pupil Ferdinand Ries, on May 24th 1803, however, with George Bridgetower, a mulatto violinist, musician of the English court and not with the one it was dedicated to. The newspaper “Freimuthige” wrote about Bridgetower after the presentation, “he is a very vigorous violinist, who overcomes hardship with courage and ease. The personal way of playing is overly bright, the trend towards originality, for the unusual, reaches in him extreme limits” (Alšvang 1961, 138). Too bad that Bridgetower did not excel in manners; Ries told that after the concert he insulted a lady from Beethoven’s company, which revolted greatly the composer. We do not know exactly what happened after that, what is certain is that the op.27 sonata “Quasi un Concerto” was no longer dedicated to George Bridgetower, as the composer initially intended. Unfortunately, Kreutzer, the violinist after which the

masterpiece was named, considered it “outrageously unintelligible” (Sandu-Dediu 2008, 36), due to the alert and lifted notes that were unusual for his violin style, which is why he never played it.

### **2.5. Piano and violin sonata op.96**

Composed almost ten years after the other nine works, the op. 96 sonata concluded the 1812 series with a serenity and tranquillity characteristic to the cultural personalities who come to materialize their whole experience in artistic creation. It was dedicated to Archduke Rudolph and violinist Pierre Rodes, who were visiting Vienna during that time, and it premiered on December 29th at the residence of Prince Lobkowitz; the second performance was a public concert on January 7<sup>th</sup> next year, and those for whom it was dedicated interpreted it. The critics soon followed; there was an article in the newspaper *Gloggl's Zeitung* showing appreciation for the instrumentalists' interpretation, a bit more for the Archduke's interpretation for obvious reasons.

“The great violinist Rode recently played a new duet for pianoforte and violin with His Imperial Highness Archduke Rudolph [...]. It was as a whole well performed, but we must remark that the piano part was performed far more excellently, more suited to the spirit of the piece, and with more soul, than that of the violin.” (Rostal 1985, 165).

The sonata belongs to the creator's last creative period, together with the last piano concertos and symphonies, fantasies for piano and orchestra, the great sonatas for piano Waldstein, Appassionata, Hammerklavier, the string quartets, *Missa solemnis*, all of them priceless for the published literature. In this last creative period, Beethoven has outdone himself in terms of diversifying the expression methods and customizing the musical language. They are novelties that give personality to Beethoven's work, and they create a special style based on monumentality, structural diversity and depth in expression. The sonata is a true creative synthesis „ a pastoral mirror of an unlimited universe that brings a wide range of sounds that reflect this universe. [...] it is the image of complacency and a silent prayer”. (Lockwood 2004, 111)

### **3. Conclusions**

Thanks to their uniqueness, Beethoven's sonatas for piano and violin develop a new musical language, whose expressive power combined with the instrumental force and virtuosity turn them into promoters of all romantic pieces of this kind. The manner in which Beethoven treats the two instruments, a dialogue based on

collaboration and partnership, will inspire the sonatas of Robert Schumann, Johannes Brahms and the French composers Cezar Franck, Gabriel Faure, Claude Debussy and Sainy-Saens. In order to understand the musical message and increase the quality of the artistic performances it is important to know the historical frame in which they were created and published, the influence of the socio-political events, the composer's frame of mind, the people with whom he interacted and collaborated during the time. From the beginning Ludwig van Beethoven was a "creator, one of those natural talents, full of ideas and originality" (Schonberg 2008, 104), and he opened new horizons in the universe of the classical music.

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