

Beethoven's C minor and the anxieties of inner conflict from the perspective of the Piano and Violin Sonatas

Mihaela ITIGAN¹

Abstract: *Causing a radical change to the musical language at the turn of the 19th century, Beethoven is the composer of a profound musical discourse which expressively exploits a ceaseless alternation between rhetoric and virtuosity, thus elevating music to new stylistic and aesthetic heights. In consonance with the darkest entities of Beethoven's emotional plane, the C minor tonality has the quality to emphasize the symbolic character of music typical of the analogies created between its own sonorities and the different, mostly febrile, states of mind. Under the aegis of an authentic and evolutive vision, the piano and violin sonatas follow the ascending path of the musical language, the composer focusing attention on his works according to experienced emotions and conveyed artistic message. Therefore, the composer will begin his first period of creation works in a classically aesthetic pattern which, gradually elaborated, will be centered on the pathetic C minor of the piano and violin sonata op. 30, no. 2.*

Key-words: *Beethoven, piano, violin, sonata, art&music, pathetic*

1. Introduction

The C minor sonata op. 30, no. 2, is Beethoven's one of the most known works of the genre, its qualities morphing it into an impressive composition. Completed at Heiligenstadt in the summer of 1802, the sonata bears the mark of those months' anxiety, exacerbated, as it turned out, to the dimensions of a will. Of the three works of the opus, the C minor is the mirror of Beethoven's flaming temper which, to paraphrase Watson, leaves the imprint of depression and fury on the musical discourse particularly throughout the outer movements of the second work. "The outer movements of the C minor Sonata, for example, certainly reflect his 'fiery, active temperament' and seem to convey, or at least provide metaphors for, the anger, depression, and frustration." (Watson, 2010, p.120) The analogy of the

¹ Vocational High School of Music *Tudor Ciortea* Brasov, mihaela.itigan@unitbv.ro

biographical events with the feverishness of the experienced feelings is easy to draw, the nature of the emotional plane being correlated with the physical disability that will mark his entire existence. The drama of his experiences is justified, the resigned acceptance of the adverse destiny being unfamiliar to his strong personality. Terrified of the idea of losing his hearing, his rebel nature will urge him, in the beginning, to revolt, the later depression and frustration deeply affecting his self-esteem. Humiliation is felt at every step, the image of a deaf composer being inconceivable to Beethoven at that time.

2. Allegro con brio op. 30, no. 2 and Beethoven's C minor

It is beyond dispute that Beethoven's deep feelings found favourable conditions to thrive throughout the Sonata op. 30, no. 2, their turmoil being evoked starting with the sonata form, whose first contact is felt along with the first theme. Bracing itself for the harmony of C minor, the thematic unity begins, in terms of motif, with the sonority of the tonic, its accordic elements underlying the melodic design. The depressing emotional breakdown is dictated by the descending melodic line, the rhythm supporting the unquietness through the development recorded by the third beat of the first measure. Controversial through their extreme intensity, the dynamics are elaborated in a small nuance of piano, proportionally antagonistic to the depth of inner turmoil. The significance of the psychological state, from an abstract point of view, gives meaning to the concept of inner turmoil, the dynamics underlining the intimacy of a unique feeling, as the emotional drama can be interpreted in terms of the sonorous analogy with the personal experience and not generalized at the level of mankind's collective experience.

Although the thematic line appears to escalate in intervals, it continues the descending melody of the design, the sequencing of the motifs throughout the measures 3-4 being just a register shift necessary for the natural acoustic path of the involved tone colours. The uninterrupted falling of the melody intensifies the inner drama, the chromatic passage (measure 6), supplemented by the presence of the dominant, which is finalized cadentially, adding to the melodic tension and, at the same time, underlining the tragic character of the theme. The accompanying bleak thoughts can be compared with the thematic sonorities, their aesthetic interpretation reaching the dimensions of purification through suffering, a concept perfected by Wagner in Romanticism, one of the tragic attitudinal elements of musical nature being the chromatization of the melodic line. The identity of the tragic dimension might also be legitimized through the rhythmic elaboration of the theme, the augmented exploitation of the time values, approached in a repetitive

manner, uniformly preserving the depressive reaction of the measures 5-8. The subjectiveness of the introspective judgments place in the same dilemma the interpretation of the structural-formal unity of the second theme. Uncertainty appears along with the ornamental figurations of the harmonic support, the semitonal alternation of the bass being dually interpreted by musicologist Angus Watson, his vision vacillating between the military metaphors invoking Napoleon's figure and an emotional experience. "In the first subject, accompanied by threatening semiquavers, suggest a military metaphor [...] but also, perhaps, an emotional one" (Watson 2010, 124). One can remark, throughout the conclusion, the expression of a syncopated rhythm which, together with a number of stirring arpeggios and distanced octaves, prompts in the listener a state of inner turmoil, which surges up along with the sharp cadential accords of the expositional finale.

The exacerbated dynamics are suddenly deserted at the beginning of the development, the composer approaching once more the strategy of internalizing the emotional plane, which is overlapped by a wailing line affirming a series of intervals sonorously associated with the different psychological states. The semantic functionality of the music finds the echoes of emotional instability along with the sequentially elaborated sevenths, the lability being morphed into the sixth of prayer before the intervallic fulfilment of the perfect fifths. The delay of the intervallic resolutions provides the development with a stirring background, the sequenced configuration of the three-stage pattern adding to the tension of the passage. "A string of dissonances whose resolution is always postponed leads to uneasiness, disorder" (Nattiez 1975, 152). The disorder is supported by the variety of the tonal plane, which vacillates between the major-minor modes of the same tonality. It is the moment of the sonata form's climax, responsible for the partial sequencing of the thematic motif, without exception in each different tonality that is away from the third. The variety of the tonal plane is translated semantically as a turbulent emotional state with dramatic and pathetic accents found at that time with Beethoven only. The dominant pedal is also present, its melodic, chromatic pattern preserving the uneasiness of development, which is accentuated by the restless accompaniment in the sixteenths.

The reprise stands out among the works of a similar kind through the development of the coda which, invoking both thematic motifs, looks as if it reviewed the whole chromatic palette of emotions. The elements of Beethoven's musical language contribute to the devastating denouement through the punctuated rhythms, repeated acute notes, exploited bass octaves, evolutive dynamics, and tense tonal background, everything culminating in the last phrase with the octave torrent in the bass supporting the violin's dangerous leaps, sharply

transformed in the final cadence into a stark semitonal reply reflecting, as stated by Angus Watson, “deep sadness.” (Watson 2010, 124)

3. The major-minor dichotomy of the Adagio cantabile op. 30, no. 2

Describing a complex tripartite form, with a posterior extension reflected in the conformation of a coda extended to the very dimensions of a *postlude* (term coined by Professor Livia Teodorescu Ciocănea 2014, 124), the second articulation of the sonata abounds in its elegiac discourse, focused, to start with, only on the piano part. The musical discourse of the first section lays out the theme of the imitative adagio, the partner instruments making sure of the musicality and expressiveness of the melodic line. They do not dialogize, do not debate, do not develop their own directions, but support each other in a perfect harmony, the timbre duality being the sole varied element. Drawing on the aesthetic views on beauty, the melody of the first passage flirts only with the harmonies of the tonic and dominant, delineating throughout the 32 constituent measures a periodic structure built on the harmonic relationship between antecedents and consequents. With the piano nuance as the dominant, the dynamics evoke a general feeling of calm and peace. They aid the theme in gradually conquering the dominant points, just like its melodic model which, except the diminutions, exposes itself progressively, in an ascending or descending, and linear fashion. In contrast to the musical discourse, the second section puts the violin on the soloistic pedestal of the musical text. In the cavatina atmosphere of the minor homonym, the violin outlines the dimensions of a grieving image, in which the sixth evokes a profound spiritual experience, a prayer initiated adoringly by the semitonal movement of the melodic line. The second articulation of the sonata op. 30. no. 2, stands out by an unusual coda, which particularly draws attention to the stormy interference of the C major. As part of the ascending, linear progressions, the C major imposes itself providentially, the ethos of the tonality evoking divinity, as Angus Watson suggested in his volume “Beethoven’s Chamber Music in context”, and along with it the hope for an unquestioning denouement completed by the rebirth of the thematic motif in the pastoral area of the F major (measures 97-98). Though idyllic, the image of the Adagio, coming to an end in the resonance of the primary tonality, blurs the pastoral sonorities to later reiterate the acceptance of the stark reality. “In the language of keys, [...] C major is the key of Providence; [...] a vision of hope and strength, perhaps, but one which soon fades to make way for sad acceptance.” (Watson 2010, 125)

4. Allegro op. 30. no. 2 in the states of the final articulations

The lyricism and the expressive melodic line of the Adagio are deserted along with the third part of the sonata, Beethoven finding the strength to explore the comic side of the aesthetic categories, which are resolved through a variety of humoristic expressions. The humour of the Scherzo alternates with the pedantry of the Trio which, with the confidence typical of the fugue style, reflects the dimensions of a chivalrous canon, its rigour being crumbled by the polyrhythmic vision affirming the intervention of the triolets overlapping a binary rhythm.

It appears that the bleak atmosphere of the sonata form has not entirely deserted the narrative line, the final part of the sonata generously nourishing the anxieties of Beethoven's vision. The reiteration of the emotional plane creates, as Max Rostal argues, a unitary image of the whole work, the tumultuous sonata form rising again in the harmonies of the final Rondo. "This finale shows close affinity to the first movement of the Sonata and should, both emotionally and formally, be understood as the concluding parenthesis, conferring an admirable unity on the work as a whole" (Rostal 1985, 115). Oscillating between the C minor primary tonality and its homonymous relative major, the Rondo reveals a diverse tonal incursion, which supports a ceaseless troubled state on account of the uneasiness of the emotional plane. The modulations drive the melody towards the romantic area of the musical discourse, typical of which is the experimentation of a wide range of harmonies. With all the serenity of the major, whose ethos it invokes throughout the first two episodes, the antagonistic minor, reiterated on every occasion of the refrain, keeps the intensity of emotions alive, with an ascending incursion towards the finale of the work and reaching the dramatic peak of the extreme presto. The sharp dynamics amplify the tension of the moment, the rhythmic-melodic events underlining their intransigence through the repetitive approach to the constitutive elements throughout the first semi-phrase. Rests are of great importance in the context as they alternate the linear descending progression, identified by the superior voice of the musical fabric. The sighs of cesuras fade along with the piano nuance, the abstract interpretation of the psychological significance reflecting a heartbreaking image of resignation. The magnificent coda enacts the unitary aspect of the work and, at the same time, the cyclic form representative of Beethoven's creation through the invocation of the first motif of the sonata form reinvented in terms of value and dynamics in both the violin and the piano part.

5. Conclusions

It is impressive how a tonality acquires the proportions of a concept and offers the tonal framework favorable to the expressive dimension of sadness, suffering, pain, tragedy as well as of courage and strength. In the dark harmonies of the C minor, which antagonistically mark the principles of the first period of creation, he chooses to sing about his own suffering, the dimensions of the inner conflict disrupting the balance and symmetry of the classical discourse. In accord with the ideological current, the pathetic sonata op. 30, no. 2 will heartily feed on the ethos of tonality, its harmonies serving as a symbolic material for the sonorous analogies with the composer's inner drama. The work elevates Beethoven's creation to a unique and sufficient piece of the genre given the emotional load of the musical discourse.

References

- Cooper, Barry. 2000. *Beethoven, The Master Musicians*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Furet, Francois. [trad. Giuliano Sfichi.] 2000. *Omul romantic*. Iași: Editura Polirom.
- Geck, Martin. 2017. *Beethoven: Der Schöpfer und sein Universum*. München: Siedler Verlag.
- Nattiez, Jean-Jacques. 1975. *Fondaments d'une semiologie de la musique*. Paris: Union Generale D'Editions.
- Rostal, Max. 1985. *Beethoven The Sonatas for Piano and Violin*. London: Toccata Press.
- Sandu-Dediu, Valentina. 2008. *Ludwig van Beethoven*. București: Editura Didactică și Pedagogică.
- Schonberg, H., [trad. Ionescu, A., I.]. 2008. *Lives of great composers*. București: Editura Lider.
- Suchet, J. 2012. *Beethoven the Man Revealed*. New York: Atlantic Monthly Press.
- Swafford, John. 2014. *Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph*. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company.
- Ștefănescu, Ioana. 1996. *O istorie a muzicii universale*, vol.II. București: Editura Fundației Culturale Române.
- Teodorescu-Ciocănea, Livia. 2014. *Tratat de forme și analize muzicale*. București: Editura Muzicală Grafoart.
- Watson, A. 2010. *Beethoven's Chamber Music in Context*. Woodbridge: Boydell Press.