

Elements for a lesson: Beethoven Sonata op. 53 *Waldstein*

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Abstract: *Beethoven Sonata op. 53 "Waldstein" serves as a pretext for the analysis of some elements of interpretation, normally used in the pedagogical process: the formal conception, the tempo, the logical organization of the musical material, the pedal and the orchestral sonority of the composer's piano music. Exploring my experience of more than four decades, both as a pedagogue and as a performer, the text tries to bring readers closer to the stylistic characteristics of Beethoven's piano music and to my personal conception of the interpretation of these works.*

Key-words: *Beethoven, Sonata, Waldstein, piano, lesson.*

1. Introduction

An instrument lesson represents a moment included in a long journey of mutual knowledge and joint work between teacher and student. Generally, the student is already familiarized with the performing ideas and teaching methods of his tutor and, on the other hand, the teacher transmits his teaching in accordance with the level of development of his student.

In this work, I will present some performing elements that I believe are important for the pedagogical process, in which the teacher tries to transmit to the student both fundamental principles of interpretation as well as his own vision of the work, that means objective elements on the one hand, and subjective elements on the other.

The choice of the Sonata op. 53 for piano by Beethoven, dedicated to Count Ferdinand von Waldstein, friend and protector of the composer (Tranchefort, 1987,

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114) as the object of this analysis was not accidental. In addition to my soulful and intellectual inclination towards the work of the Bonn titan, this repertoire is, without doubt, fundamental for pianistic pedagogy and for the complex training of a musician. In this sense, Edwin Fischer (1966, 9) stated: “in the study of Beethoven's Piano Sonatas one encounters difficulties and problems whose resolution represents not only a part of his piano education, but his entire artistic education”.

As far as I am concerned, this work represents a reference in my pianistic activity, as it has accompanied me for decades, since I learned it at the age of 17, when I was still studying with professor Constantin Nițu at the *George Enescu Arts Lyceum* in Bucharest. I also worked on it with my mentor at the *Ciprian Porumbescu Music Conservatory* in the same city, Constantin Ionescu-Vovu, preparing for some international competitions, then in masterclasses with Sequeira Costa and Dimitri Bashkirov and I performed it in countless recitals. Also, this Sonata appears on my first CD released in 2001 and dedicated to Beethoven. I taught it to few students, because I believe that, for a truly valuable performance, are necessary exceptional musical and pianistic qualities.

The fundamental principles of the musical classicism (balance between content and form, restraint in the expression of feelings, stringency, sobriety, earnestness) were applied to a greater or lesser extent to all subsequent creative periods. With regard to interpretation, these principles were preponderant in the second half of the 20th century and continue to be today. In addition to this aspect, there is the fact that the classical repertoire continues to be the fundamental material in most piano teaching methods, old and modern. Therefore, I consider that a pianist's training is fundamentally done through classical music, without disregarding other epochs and styles, all of them being important for different aspects of a musician's interpretation and training.

Of equal importance for the formation of a young artist is the philosophical meaning that Beethoven's creation conveys, within the aesthetic spirit of his time: the moral value of the work of art, the need to purify and ennoble the listeners (Kirby, 1995, 115). The role of teachers is also to shape the consciousness of our pupils, to form not only musicians, but good human beings.

The study of this rich universe raises an inexhaustible problem, both from a pianistic and musical point of view. Given the limits inherent to this type of work, I will only focus a few elements that seem relevant to my concerns as a teacher and as a pianist.

2. The unitary formal conception

Most of the formal analyzes normally carried out, however interesting they may be, suffer from a fundamental defect – they are linear, meaning that they subdivide the musical work into a sequence of excerpts, a fact that does not facilitate the creation of a global view of it. Based on the teachings received from Master Constantin Bugeanu², with whom I analyzed during years many works for piano and beyond, I propose as an alternative, a "pyramidal" analysis, which means the structural subdivision of the musical text into several levels, based on the musical motif and up to the entire piece. The annotation of this type of analysis results in a pyramid in which the different musical fragments, larger or smaller, are linked and interrelated with others, whether they are from the same or other levels.

The impossibility of going back on the reception of a work, due to the temporal nature of the art of sounds, is compensated by the existence of repetition (of a note, a group of notes, a shorter or longer section), which provides the listener an impression of order, creates a balance. However, to value repetition and avoid monotony, it is completed by difference (contrast, distinction, novelty, development). All musical forms are constructed based on these two concepts.

Tripartite microstructures can be considered complete, as they encompass both repetition and difference (or contrast). In this case, there are three possibilities: ABA, AAB and ABB, thus creating a binary system in which the same letter means repetition. If the ABA structure is well known for its existence in larger structures (*Lied* form), the other two derive from the medieval German strophic form *Barform* (AAB), which can be inverted (ABB). The traditional subdivision of a musical phrase into motive/repetition/development perfectly illustrates the *Barform*.

The first theme (bars 1 - 34) of the *Waldstein* Sonata is a very clear example:

- the first musical period has 13 bars divided into 3 small phrases; the second is the repetition one tone lower of the first, the third introduces a new melodic element, developing the final motive of the previous phrases; thus, we have a *Barform* (4+4)+5 (the digits indicates the number of bars);

² For the Romanian musical world, Constantin Bugeanu needs no introduction. For any foreign reader, I just want to mention the fact that, in addition to being a conductor with great experience, Bugeanu created a modern school of high-level orchestral conducting, having as disciples renowned Romanian and foreign conductors, such as Mandea, Andreescu, Marinescu, etc.

- at the higher level, a second period of 9 bars is a variation of the first, being the third one a virtuosic development with a different figuration from the previous ones; again *Barform* (13+9)+12;
- the second subject group has a similar construction, with the theme repeated by a variation and followed by a virtuosic development that results in the climax of the exposition;
- the exposition can be seen as a *Barform*, due to the affirmative character and increasing tension of the two themes, with the closing area being a moment of decompression and transition to the development;
- the 1st movement is structured ABA + Coda, with the development being the differentiating element from the other two similar segments (exposition and recapitulation).

In this way, starting from the musical phrase that represents the first level (the lowest), several phrases come together in a musical period (second level), two or three periods in a larger section and thus, organizing several structures at a higher level, we arrive at to the entire work, represented by the highest point of the pyramid.

The performance is conditioned by the meaning of the elements of these structures, as repetition either represents a slight release of the inner tension or sometimes an insistence (also depending on whether the repetition is the same or brings new elements); on the other hand, the difference implies a different interpretative attitude, it is the place where something different happens in relation to the previous one.

Taking the first theme of the Sonata as an example, the first two phrases are interpreted in a similar way, only taking into account the lower tone of the second one, that is a slight darker color; the difference of the third phrase in relation to the previous two must be felt in the sound of the first note of the right hand, like a still distant but penetrating signal, from which a rapid *crescendo* builds towards a first explosion of energy of the work.

At the higher level, of the first complete theme, the vivacity of the virtuosic figuration of scales and arpeggios must be very different from the sound homogeneity existing in the two previous phrases.

And, so on, or rather, to the top of the pyramid, looking for the sound relationship between differences and repetitions appropriate to each level, in which each element has its place and its importance, but always interconnected with the others, the interpretation becomes logical and homogeneous. By organizing the elements within a sentence, a small line is created. By integrating these elements at higher levels, subordinating them, increasingly larger lines are

created. This way, we get a global view of the work, resulting in a coherent interpretation, perceptible to the listener.

3. The tempo

On this subject, I already had the opportunity to write in the *Studii de Muzicologie* journal, Iasi 2020, so I will only refer to the work in question, namely the importance of choosing the right *tempi* in its 3 movements. According to Paul Badura-Skoda (2006, 10), Mozart considered tempo as "the most important element in music."

Of great help is the statement made by the great pianist Edwin Fisher on the subject. He considers that, in many cases, the existence of a theme or a passage that does not leave much freedom of choice directs the interpreter to the right *tempo*. When a wrong tempo is played, reaching that passage, an (unwanted) adjustment has to be made to be able to play it. Therefore, Fischer (1966, 84) recommended that, "before starting the piece, analogies should be made with other themes that would leave no doubt about the tempo."

In the first movement of op. 53, I consider that the second theme (from bar no. 31) is that passage. Thought out fluently, the pulsation allows the first theme, the closing area and the various moments of development to be performed at an energetic pace, but not too fast, as is often heard.

The tempo of the second movement is defined by the second theme *cantabile* that begins in measure no. 10. In this case, the melodic fluency must be subordinated to the somewhat heavy environment in which, each beat (eighth note) illustrates the indication *Adagio molto*.

The third movement is a good example to confirm my conception of the right choice of tempo. Within the wide variety of tempo found in interpretations by renowned pianists, I noticed the existence of two tendencies, which derive from thinking in larger or smaller units of musical discourse. So, with the indication of 2/4, is the end of the "Waldstein" Sonata thought of in 1 or 2 beats per bar? I remember that Sequeira Costa recommended me to think in 2 (subdivision of the bar), while Dimitri Bashkirov in 1 (*Alla breve*); Obviously, the interpretations acquired very different valences from each other. For me, none of these concepts completely convinces me, as I believe that both are difficult to apply from the beginning to the end of a certain movement or a certain work. Therefore, I came to the conclusion that the *tempo* must be conceived on the border of these two

trends, which allows the performance of some passages, phrases and even fragments of phrase using one of them and others using the other (Sandu 2020).

This conception allows the maintenance of a rigorous pulsation, but subject to small fluctuations that allow the sound space to enlarge or contract, depending on the psychological perception of time, conditioned by the quantity, quality and novelty of the information (Pitiş, Minei, 1982, 112): the greater the information (modulation, unexpected harmony, change in melodic direction, culmination, rhythmic changes, etc.), the more necessary a slight dilation of time is, which allows the message to be understood; on the other hand, time compresses at other moments, thus balancing the moments of deceleration.

So, thinking in general about the 1st movement in 2 beats per bar, right at measure no. 12, it changes to 4, which allows the end of the phrase to fit better and the rests between eighth notes to be better understood. The same need to broaden the thought exists in bars 66-67 or 111, due to the climaxes being there.

The third movement is undoubtedly in 2, given the indication *Allegretto moderato*. But, it becomes in 1 in measures such as 98-113, 221-312. *Coda Prestissimo* is in 1, with the exception of measures 441-460 and 485-506.

These small changes to a basic pulsation or, in other words, the balance between the rigor of the pulse and the freedom of its variations, creates life in the performance and, at the same time, unity in the construction.

4. The logical organization of sound material

A basic task of an interpreter is to combine emotion with logic in a coherent way. I deeply appreciate Daniel Barenboim's statement (2006, 5): "feeling and thinking are inseparable things. (...) The first condition for making music is to base feelings on reason."

We often hear students who are playing focusing on the inspiration of the moment and taking advantage of their musicality. It generally works, but there are always moments that are less clear, less successful, due to the lack of logical thinking that should emerge as the result of systematic work regarding the organization of the sound material.

On the horizontal level, it is about the melodic construction, the relationship between the notes of a motive, of a phrase. All of these groups of notes have a climax point and the other notes (which we can call "passing notes") are dependent on this, namely preparing it or declining from it. The climax is heavy, the passing

notes should be light. This heavy/light alternation (which sometimes coincides with the pulse of the work, whether binary or ternary) creates an inner movement in the music, gives it life.

This logical construction of the melody I usually call *legato cantabile*, adding the term *cantabile* so as not to be confused with the technical-pianistic *legato*. Because you can technically play *legato* without creating a real connection between the notes and, on the contrary, you can play *non-legato* and achieve, from a musical point of view, a perfect *legato*. The designation of *cantabile* reinforces the desire to bring the sound of the piano closer to the human voice, to imitate its naturalness, minimizing the instrument's percussive element.

How is this *legato cantabile* performed, despite the impossibility of the instrument maintaining the vibration of sounds, as happens with the voice or with any string or wind instrument? The ear will perceive the continuity of the specific vibration of a *legato*, as long as the difference between the sounds appears as it would have existed the real acoustic possibility of maintaining the vibration throughout their entire duration. And this certain difference can be achieved as long as the pianist internally sings the sounds with their respective dynamic evolution (Pitiş, Minei 1982, 131).

Equally important is to differentiate the support between longer and shorter notes, to balance the sound information produced per temporal unit. The longer the note, the more supported it must be played, deeper into the keyboard, to vibrate more; therefore, playing short notes with the same intensity as longer ones results in an excess of information that breaks the connection between them.

The same phenomenon occurs on the vertical plane: in any passage there is a most intense point (which generally coincides with the melodic climax), which can be prepared by the harmonic chain that precedes it and/or followed by a resolution. Given the interdependence of the two planes, harmony can be seen as a horizontal movement of several simultaneous voices; This means a different treatment of these from a sound point of view, favoring one or the other at any time, thus opening the way for an orchestral performing conception.

5. The pedal

The third movement of this Sonata is a paradigmatic example of Beethoven's pedal. In the first theme we find the tonic/dominant and major/minor mixtures on the same pedal.

Beethoven was very careful in noting the pedal and had clear musical intentions on the subject, which must be respected. One of the countless examples of this statement can be found in bars 395-399 of the same movement of the Sonata op. 53 (Henle 1980, II 116) where the author had to write two quarter-note rests instead of the usual (one half-note rest) and marked the end of the pedal on the second rest, clearly indicating the lifting of the pedal on the second beat, not at the end of the bar.

The pedal problem on actual pianos is not solved with the foot, but with the hands: the execution of the right hand accompaniment (1st theme) on a real *pp* solves the sound problem, thus allowing the pedal to do its job, to maintain the bass until the end of the phrase. From a technical point of view, this effect is achieved with very soft, stretched fingers and the position of the hand a few millimeters higher than normal. However, the hand must feel an attraction from the keyboard, which prevents the fingers from lifting, as if it were a magnet (Sandu 2017).

6. The orchestral sonority

One cannot finish a work on Beethoven's pianistic art without mentioning the orchestral character of his writing for his favorite instrument.

Daniel Barenboim stated in an interview (2006, 5): "Playing the piano becomes interesting only when the instrument stops sounding like a piano and creates the illusion of a sound that transcends it."

Without any doubt, although he wrote for the piano, the composer's thoughts transcended the sound of this instrument to an orchestral one, which finds its complete expression due to its symphonic structure based on the permanent and increasingly complex development of the sound material and which resulted in the peak of the sonata form, a fundamental structure for music written not only for one or two instruments, but for large orchestral and chamber ensembles (Sandu 2019).

In the specific case of the *Waldstein* Sonata, I think it is obvious that the sound of the 1st theme is that of the string orchestra, to which woodwinds are added in bars 4, 8-11, while the second theme is that of the woodwind ensemble. The second theme of the second movement (bar 10) features a cello solo commented by woodwinds. In the third movement we have in bar 221 an alternation between *Tutti* (one and a half bar until *Sf.*) and woodwinds; in bar 251

there are arpeggios of a harp over the thematic motif emitted by the brass section; *Prestissimo* presents the theme on the *piccolo* flute and the *glissandi* are again from the harps. The last four bars contain the *Tutti* in the first two of them (*ff*) and only strings in the last 2 (*f*).

All these ideas are subjective, so I don't usually impose my vision on students, but I leave them the freedom to search for the sound their hearing imagine on their own. It's important to look for it.

Penetrating this transcendent sound world involves two main coordinates: the technical element manifested by the multifaceted relationship with the keyboard (position and attitude of the fingers, attack style, weight) and the psychological element represented by the development of the inner ear.

In this sense, Walter Gieseking (1967, 83) defined the "toucher" as a complexity of movements and indicated it as one of the most important objects of study for a pianist. He also considered that "the only way to acquire playing that produces a beautiful sound is the systematic education of the ear (Gieseking, 1967, 84)."

The technical work, being indispensable, would not have great artistic results without the psychological element, without the desire to create a certain sound, overcoming the limitations of the instrument. Therefore, the development of the inner ear, which anticipates and conditions the emission of sound, is fundamental for a pianist, to allow him to create the artistic image before materializing it on the keyboard (Sandu 2019). And the richer this image is and the more it materializes in the hands of the pianist, the better. Because what most defines a pianist is his sound.

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