

Piano: 6

Beethoven

INTRODUCTION

There has been so much said about Beethoven's music that my contribution may be seen as superfluous. I feel, however, that what I have to say on the subject could be useful. So much written about him that it can sometimes be difficult to see "the wood for the trees". I hope that this article contributes some common sense clarity to the subject.

SOME GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

Beethoven's works for the piano are generally acknowledged to represent the Everest of the pianist's repertoire. And so they do. The range of expression that his piano music covers is far greater than that of any other composer. The demands he places upon the pianist, both technical and musical are, without doubt, formidable. This is just as it should be. The greatest composer of all time (or is it J.S.Bach?) is bound to take even the finest musicians and pianists to their limits. How then can anyone cope with the responsibility? Simple! Be.....1)..

...Realistic. Your contribution is that of an individual. No matter how gifted you are, there is simply no way that you are capable of doing complete justice to the work that you are performing/studying. His music is just too good. All you can do is your best. All you can do is "get close".

2) Enjoy the experience. Just because this is Beethoven that you are playing doesn't automatically mean that you must go into hair shirt mode; weighted down by the responsibility of your task - as if carrying The Cross of Western Music on your frail and unworthy shoulders. This is, still, just music. The world is a miserable enough place already without you suffering over a piece, no matter how great. This may seem a little "flip", but over reverence and over analysis can lead to playing which is, frankly, constipated. You don't need me to tell you that there are an awful lot of constipated Beethoven pianists out there, just use your ears.

3) Shoot from the hip. Beethoven was a man who "went for it". He was a man without guile. He was wholehearted, sincere. He was a fully functioning, paid up, member of humanity. Complete, in his emotional ability to feel what we human beings are all capable of feeling. A man utterly incapable of pretense and pretention. The world of polite chicanery; the world of social manouvering was alien to this most honest of men. Yes, he was subtle! Yes, he was emotionally sophisticated! Yes, he was crafty! Yes, he was passionate! BUT he was NOT a "bullshitter"!

Play what is written, be emotionally honest, direct and, in the idealistic sense, keep things simple.

GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

The most valuable advice I can give to anyone who wishes to play Beethoven's music well, is to make this one observation which is fundamental to the understanding of his work :- Beethoven was the first major composer in whose music the performance directions are a fundamental part of the musical structure.

Although many of the markings in his music are open to interpretation and dispute, you should at all times work on the basis that the whole score is prescribed. Slurs, dynamics, tempi etc, etc,. If he says play fast, he means play fast!

We know through his sketches that he was a meticulous, fanatical worker and it is inconceivable that he left anything to chance.

*

In the Sonatas, Beethoven covers the whole range of expressive possibilities. Crucially, this is not done merely by contrasting material, but by letting the material evolve. Development is not simply a matter of compositional devices and techniques for Beethoven. His development treats the material organically. The material itself - first subject, second subject and so on - almost always, is of itself evolutionary, changing. Transforming(!) itself, before our eyes and ears long before the development section has officially arrived.

It is this characteristic that led in time to what I call his "monocoque forms"; the completely seamless formal structures that characterise his later works.

This integrated character that typifies his output was the very stuff of musical revolution. Indeed, Beethoven was the most revolutionary of all composers, and did more than any other composer to change the very nature of music, (closely followed by Liszt - see my later articles,).

*

Beethoven composed with flair and panache. Frequently his material is instantly catchy. Look for "the hooks". Look also for the flamboyant touches, he loved sounding good. There is no doubt at all, in my mind, that a reincarnated Beethoven would have enthusiastically embraced electronic synthesis and the new technology of the recording studio.

*

Although Beethoven has given pianists their best music; his best was reserved for the string quartet.

This observation leads us to another key element which characterises his music : counterpoint! The increasingly perfect synthesis of harmonic and contrapuntal techniques is plain to see as you follow his compositional development. The juxtaposition of Fugue with melody topped harmonic material in Opus 110. is just an obvious "in your face" example. This technique, though not always explicit, is an ever present element in his later works.

Look how many of his pieces are in four parts. All his work studying/doing Bach Chorales was in a good cause!

Then, look at his increasing use of variations. He was able to absorb all the best that the past had left into his own language by the time he was ready to write his late, great masterpieces.

*

Do not under value his early music. Here you will find the start of a trail that contains/traces the very same musical material that was to provide the basis for his last works. He was, literally, practising for future pieces all the time.

As you progress, chronologically, through his oeuvre, you can grow alongside him in his quest for expressive perfection!

*

Beethoven was a king of rhythm. His ability to write and develop the rhythmic structures that are integral to all his music, on both a micro and macro level, makes him the true precursor of Stravinsky and Boulez.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I am not a great fan of the "Three Period" notion. No one is like that! It is much too arbitrary to limit him to this simplistic invention of some historians. I am sure that this has led to many anaemic, mechanistically classical performances of his early music. There is simply no way that his first sonata (Opus 2, No. 1) is Mozartean or Haydnean (sic).

I do not think he was a tragic figure. He was just isolated by his greatness and, quite simply, could not be bothered with those whom he saw as fools!

FURTHER READING

Beethoven - His Spiritual Development by J.W.N,Sullivan

BEST EDITION

G. Henle Verlag

Agosti's is also well worth having

Schnabel's is interesting, but is so infused with S's own interpretations that you can't see through to the music.

Associated Board is O.K-ish.

BEST RECORDINGS

Freidrich Gulda for everything

Emil Gilels for The Waldstein

Claudio Arrau for Opus 101

Gilels and Radu Lupu for the Concertos

Hungarian String Quartet for the Quartets

