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Presents
FABIO BIDINI IN RECITAL

Many pianists contend that the early training of a young pupil remains incomplete without the obligatory study of at least one sonatina or exercise by Muzio Clementi. Despite a vast corpus of work beyond these pieces, Clementi's reputation as a composer of music for the concert hall has yet to escape the shadow of his enduring legacy as a pedagogue and composer of didactic pieces. Beyond *Gradus ad Parnasum* lies a wealth of imaginative and innovative music: nearly 110 piano sonatas, 20 symphonies, a piano concerto, several piano trios, and an abundance of capriccios, preludes, and dance miniatures. A true musical polymath, Clementi possessed a remarkable blend of artistic aptitude and entrepreneurial acumen. When he was not immersed in composing, performing, and teaching notables such as John Field and Frederic Kalkbrenner, Clementi occupied his time by managing a thriving piano manufacturing and music publishing enterprise, Clementi and Co.

The composer's *sui generis* musical style is best summarized by Howard Shelley: "imagine a missing link between [Domenico] Scarlatti and Beethoven, a composer whose outpouring of keyboard sonatas blends the crystalline clarity of the galant with the tone and textures of Romantic pianism. Miraculously, such a composer exists" – cue Muzio Clementi. Published in 1802, the ***Sonata in B minor, Op. 40 No. 2*** is the perfect embodiment of this description – a flavorful concoction of Scarlatti-like concision and brilliance with Beethovenian depth and theatrics. In contrast to most sonatas from the late eighteenth-century, Clementi structures his B minor Sonata in two movements. The choice of such an intensely somber and anguished key constitutes another intriguing deviation from Enlightenment sonata tradition. Neither Mozart or Beethoven wrote sonatas or concerti in B minor, and the work is Clementi's only sonata in the key. Both movements begin in slower tempi, oozing with pathos, and fraught with prolonged, aching dissonances and harmonic twists and turns. Out of the mourning, each movement then plunges into music of troubled energy and utmost passion.

Beethoven held Clementi's compositions in the highest regard, often performing the composer's sonatas in public and recommending them to students and patrons. Beethoven's assistant and lifelong friend, Anton Schindler, wrote, "Beethoven had the greatest admiration for [Clementi's] sonatas, considering them the most beautiful, the most pianistic of works…The musical education of his beloved nephew was confined for many years almost exclusively to the playing of Clementi sonatas. Among all the masters who have written for piano, Beethoven assigned to Clementi the very foremost rank". Beethoven regarded the sonatas as "truly beautiful subjects for performance". It is fitting, therefore, that two monumental sonatas by Beethoven follow the Clementi sonata on tonight's program.

The first of these masterpieces is the ***Sonata No. 21 in C major, Op. 53 "Waldstein"*** – published only three years after Clementi's B minor Sonata. Dedicated to Beethoven's friend and patron, Ferdinand Ernst Gabriel, Count von Waldstein, the work was aptly described by the nineteenth-century Beethoven biographer, Wilhelm Lenz, as a "heroic symphony for piano". Through a series of pulsing chords, the sonata murmurs into existence – like a locomotive chugging along in the distance. These chords then function as the primordial ingredient of the movement. Far from a fully fleshed-out tune, the material resembles a lost accompaniment searching for a companion melody.

For the middle movement of the Waldstein, Beethoven originally composed a charming, nine-minute andante. Believing the sonata to be too lengthy in this configuration, he retracted the movement, replacing it with the present "Introduzione". He later published the original movement as the free-standing "Andante Favori". The present movement acts as a brief introduction to the final rondo movement. Unsettling harmonic wandering pervades the first bars of the introduction. Upward melodic gestures seem to pose questions that are often left unanswered. Finally, a melody blossoms in the tenor range – a lovely but fleeting arietta.

As in the first movement, the Waldstein's final movement exhibits a pervasive rhythmic propulsion, although more buoyant. The movement's plentiful use of an expanded keyboard compass and unconventional pedal indications were undoubtedly inspired by the new Érard piano that Beethoven acquired in 1803. With these new innovations, the composer paints unprecedented, magical colors using resonance and harmony. A heavenly cloud of sound emanates in the movement's primary theme. Beethoven even occasionally requires the pianist to hold the sustain pedal through changes of harmony, creating an atmospheric haze of sonority. In the final bars, the music shifts from the ethereal to the triumphant, closing with a series of spirited fanfares.

Far from the balletic frolicking and capricious antics of the typical Classical scherzo, Frédéric Chopin's four scherzi explore pianistic strength and ardent lyricism – at once emotionally extraverted and volatile. Within the first bars of the ***Scherzo No. 2 in B flat minor, Op. 31***, the music traverses a gamut of moods, ranging from the hushed and ominous to the explosive and passionate. Robert Schumann compared the scherzo to a Byronic poem, "so overflowing with tenderness, boldness, love, and contempt". The scherzo juxtaposes vivacious rhythms and robust, pianistic textures with the intimate, delicate, and perfumed stylings of the Parisian salons that Chopin frequented – a work that truly epitomizes Schumann's perceptive reflection on Chopin's music: "canons buried in roses". Within the scherzo's iconic opening, Chopin crafts a theatrical interweaving of two elements: a whispered, sinister motive and an explosive, fiery gesture. Momentarily escaping the darkness, we then hear the presentation of an unreserved and impassioned lyrical theme in the radiant, relative major – a melody that sounds as though it has been lifted directly from the *bel canto* operas of Bellini or Donizetti. A serene, introspective chorale forms the middle section of the scherzo. With utmost elegance, the chorale undergoes a gradual metamorphosis, seamlessly transitioning into an intoxicating waltz. Through the gradual building of urgency, the waltz then spirals into a frenzied state that would leave any dancers whirling off the dancefloor. Following a brief reprise of material from the beginning of the composition, an exuberant coda ensues, catalyzing an exultant and euphoric conclusion.

Composed only one year after the Waldstein Sonata, the ***Sonata No. 23 in F minor, Op. 57 “Appassionata”*** represents another landmark of Beethoven’s middle period oeuvre. Despite its aptness to the temperament of the sonata, the composer did not attach the “Appassionata” title to the work. Rather, it was the German publisher, Cranz, who first introduced the programmatic title within an 1838 piano duet version of the work. A musical drama of Promethean proportions, the pianist and pupil of Beethoven, Carl Czerny, called the sonata “the most perfect execution of a mighty and colossal plan”. From the first notes, the Appassionata plunges the listener into a black, shadowy landscape. The movement is rich with extremes – full of deafening silences and nightmarish explosions of chords.

The second movement provides a fugitive moment of repose in the form of a set of variations on a chorale theme. l, a sense of melancholy, perhaps even recognition of inevitable tragedy, pervades the movement. Without pause, the music proceeds directly into the third movement – rather, the onset of the third movement shatters the nostalgic dream of the second movement through a series of chilling, stabbing chords. Czerny described the succeeding music as “the waves of the sea on a stormy night, whilst cries of distress are heard from afar”. These churning waves grow to colossal heights, culminating in the catastrophic coda. Here, Beethoven unleashes a fury of chaos: ruthless rhythmic drive, mighty chords, and light-speed passagework all relentlessly and tragically ending in the same minor key that the work began. According to Ferdinand Ries, a student and biographer of the composer, Beethoven conceived the materials of this final movement while on a walk in the mountains near his home. On their walk “Ries suddenly heard a shawm playing a beautiful melody; he called attention to it, but Beethoven couldn’t hear anything. For many hours [Beethoven] was preoccupied with his own thoughts, humming out phrases and singing aloud. When they returned home Beethoven immediately sat down at the piano and played what later became the last movement of the ‘Appassionata’”.

Isaac Foreman, June 2023