An Analytical Comparison of Beethoven's Final Three Piano Sonatas: Opp. 109, 110, 111

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Abstract

In *William Shakespeare*, Victor Hugo said, "Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and that which cannot remain silent". This quote reminded me of the moment I experienced Till Fellner's performance of Beethoven's last three piano Sonatas at Princeton University in 2010. The experience, which cannot be expressed by words but through music, sparked the beginning of my curiosity about these pieces. During the concert, I recognized similarities between them which led me to explore the historical origins and theoretical analysis of these three pieces. This exploration deepened my understanding of Beethoven's late piano Sonatas and the significance of his late works. Beethoven opened up new pathways for future composers to creatively explore musical innovations through his example of pushing the traditional boundaries, by modifying old forms and through non-traditional choices of keys. His innovative composition techniques enabled him to express emotions beyond one's imagination. Beethoven's late works are windows into understanding the musical context of the early nineteenth century.

Keywords: Beethoven late works, Beethoven Piano Sonata Op.109-Op.111, Beethoven late sonatas, Transition to Romantic

Introduction

Ludwig van Beethoven is widely recognized as one of the greatest composers throughout the history of Western music, one who helped make the transition from the Classical era to the Romantic era. His works have had a great influence on both his contemporaries and his successors. Before his deafness occurred, he was considered a virtuosic pianist. His thirty-two piano sonatas have become part of the standard repertoire, widely studied and performed by classically-trained pianists. On October, 14, 2010, I attended a piano recital performed by Till Fellner at Richardson Auditorium, Alexander Hall, Princeton University, where he performed Beethoven's last three Sonatas: Opp.109-111. It was the first time I heard all of the sonatas performed consecutively. Regardless of the inspiring performer interpreting Beethoven's genius, there were moments that

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represented Beethoven's life experiences. The experiences cannot be expressed by words, but are communicated through his music. Moreover, I noticed the similarity of the pieces as a whole—there are similar moments and textures in each individual sonata, which also align when the pieces are studied or performed as a unit. The experience of Beethoven's subliminal experiences sparked my curiosity about the pieces. How is it that he drew on traditional elements of the Classical genre, while at the same time being innovative, and thus bridging what we now call the Classical and Romantic eras? By examining the last three sonatas written by Beethoven, this essay will demonstrate the ways in which he led the evolution of Western music from the Classical to the Romantic.

Historical Background

The origin of the last three sonatas provides evidence of the evolution of Western music from the Classical to the Romantic eras. Beethoven faced several impediments immediately prior to the composition of these three sonatas. The problem with Beethoven's lack of hearing – a disability that first occurred in 1796 – had given him difficulties not only in social communication but also had a great impact on his career as a musician. His hearing condition got progressively worse over time – in 1820 he was already completely deaf and had been using "Conversation Books" to communicate since 1818. Another obstacle that he faced in the swift completion of these sonatas was the hardship in his personal life caused by his struggle to obtain custody of his nephew, Karl. He competed to be his nephew's guardian since his brother's death in November 1815. Beethoven's problems with his hearing and the guardianship of his nephew became obstacles for him to produce new compositions; he finished nearly no works during these years. On April 8, 1820, he finally won the custody of his nephew, after he had been fighting for years.[2] His life was full of joy again, and the inspiration emerged for a new wave of his compositions. These late works that were written from 1820-1826 are referred to as Beethoven's masterpieces.[3] During 1820-1822, Beethoven also composed other pieces besides his three Piano Sonatas, Opp. 109 - 111. These works included the Credo and the Benedictus from the Missa Solemnis; eleven Bagatelles, Op. 119; and the Diabelli Variations, Op. 120. The dates on the aforementioned sketches provide evidence that the pieces were composed together. One can observe how each of these works influenced each other.

Although Opp. 109 - 111 were not published as a group like Op. 2, Nos.1-3 or Op.10, Nos. 1-3 or Op. 31, Nos. 1-3, circumstances surrounding the origins of the pieces supported the idea that Beethoven may have conceived of the pieces as a related group. Beethoven started sketches of Op. 109 in the summer of 1820, right after he won the custody of his nephew, Karl. The evidence of Beethoven's sketchbooks prove that the genesis of Op. 111 does reach back to June 1820, when Beethoven began to envision not only Op. 109, but all three of the last Piano Sonatas.

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[2] Peter J. Davies, *The Character of a Genius: Beethoven in Perspective* (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 2002), 240.

[3] William Kinderman, *Beethoven*, 2nd ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 308.

According to the sketches, Beethoven would have composed the second movement of Op. 109 during June 1820, before his publisher, Adolph Martin Schlesinger had requested three sonatas. On 20 September 1820, Beethoven wrote to his publisher that "the first sonata is quite ready save for correcting the copy, and I am working interruptedly at the other two."[4] He intended to sell them all together. However, Beethoven never fulfilled his commission. In fact, Op. 109 was published in November 1821 in Berlin, and Opp. 110 and 111 were composed in late 1821, and not published until 1823.

Table 1 Dedication of Beethoven's last three piano sonatas.

Op.109	Sonata no. 30, E	Maximiliane Brentano
Op.110	Sonata no. 31, A-flat	N/A
Op.111	Sonata no. 32, c	Archduke Rudolph; Antonie Brentano (London edition)

As I did more research about the dedications, there were a lot of documents referring to the relationship of the Brentano family and Beethoven. The composer was a frequent visitor and close friend of the Brentano family from May 1810. This relationship was apparent after Antonie Brentano, who was suspected to be Beethoven's "Immortal Beloved," and her children moved to Vienna in autumn 1809. In December 1821, Beethoven wrote a letter to Maximiliane von Brentano, Antonie's daughter, to whom he dedicated his Op.109. By this letter, it can also be observed that Beethoven had a strong relationship with the family:

> Vienna, 6 December 1821
> A dedication!!! – Now, this is not one of those which are abused wholesale. It is the spirit which holds together the noble and better people on this globe and which time can never destroy. This is the spirit which speaks to you now and which still brings back to me the years of your childhood as well as your beloved parents, your most excellent and intelligent mother and your father, so truly endowed with good and noble qualities, always concerned for the well-being of his children. At this moment I am in the Landstrasse - and see you all before me. And while I think of wonderful qualities of your parents, I have not the least doubt that you are inspired to be like them, and will be more so with each passing day. The memory of a noble family can never be erased from my heart. May you sometimes think kindly of me. My most heartfelt good wishes. May heaven forever bless you and all of yours.
>
> Devotedly and eternally,
> Your friend Beethoven.[5]

[4]Martin Cooper, *Beethoven: The Last Decade 1817-1827* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), 145.

[5]H.C. Robbins Landon, ed., *Beethoven: His Life, Work and World* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1992), 164-65.

Maynard Solomon wrote that "Beethoven intended to dedicate the other two sonatas, Op. 110 and Op. 111 to Antonie Brentano. But, a mix-up caused Op. 110 to appear in Paris without any dedication, and external pressures caused Op. 111 to be dedicated to the Archduke Rudolph. Beethoven therefore intended to dedicate all three of his final piano sonatas to Antonie Brentano and her daughter. The London edition of Op. 111 was actually published on 25 April 1823 with a dedication to Antonie Brentano."[6] Looking at his life in 1820 – the year he started to compose this set of sonatas provide a connection of the origin of the last three pieces.

Musical Elements Analysis

The musical elements of the last three sonatas provide evidence for the demonstration of the sonatas as instrumental in this evolution of Western music from the Classical to the Romantic. Beethoven faced several impediments immediately prior to the composition of these three sonatas. The last three sonatas, Opp. 109, 110 and 111 have common musical elements which represent Beethoven's late style (1816-1827): narrative approach, lyricism, and contrapuntal texture. Also, the pieces demonstrate Beethoven's use of trills and formal structures which tend to be loose in form but strict and traditional in fundamental ways. The climax usually contains fugue-like texture, which appears toward the ending of each work. Sonatas Opp. 109-111 are closely related to one another, almost interdependent, yet each one is a complete sonata in itself. They could also be seen as one gigantic sonata, or what Michael Spitzer refers to as a "tripartite meta-sonata," due to their commonalities.[7] They were often recorded and performed together by famous pianists, including Rudolf Serkin, Vladimir Feltsman and Sviatoslav Richter.

Table 2 Formal and Tonal Analysis

Opus/ Movement	Tempo Marking	Key	Form	Meter	Comments
109/I	Vivace, ma non troppo	E	Sonata	2/4	First theme, prelude, introduction
	Adagio espressivo	B E		3/4	Second theme, expressive, cadenza, recitative
109/II	Prestissimo	E	Sonata	6/8	Scherzo, restless, 2 parts and 3 parts canon
109/III	Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung	E	Theme and variation	3/4	Theme with 6 Variations Contain: Aria, 2 part and 3 part contrapuntal, Fugue and long trill

[6] Maynard Solomon, *Beethoven Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 181-82.

[7] Michael Spitzer, *Music as Philosophy: Adorno and Beethoven's Late Style* (Indiana: Indiana University Press, 2006), 124.

Opus/ Movement	Tempo Marking	Key	Form	Meter	Comments
110/I	Moderato cantabile molto espressivo	A-flat	Sonata	3/4	Introduction, Lyrical
110/II	Allegro molto	F	Scherzo and trio	2/4	Scherzo, End in F major
110/III	Adagio ma non troppo Fuga: Allegro ma non tropppo L'istesso tempo di Arioso L'istesso tempo della Fuga poi a poi di nuovo vivente-Meno Allegro Etwas langsamer Tempo primo	b-flat E a-flat A-flat g G-g A-flat		4/4 6/8 12/16 6/8	Introduction: Aria and Recitative Fugue Aria Fugue, subject; inversion of the first Fugue Variation on the Fugue theme
111/I	Meastoso Allegro com brio ed appassionato	C	Sonata	4/4	Introduction Fugue, Restless
111/II	Arietta, Adagio molto semplice e cantabile	C	Theme and variation	9/16	Lyrical Chorale texture in the theme which lead back to the last movement of Op.109

Some distinguishing characteristics that were revealed in the chart above include the fact that Op. 111 contains only two movements. Anton Schindler was puzzled about this odd compositional quality and asked Beethoven the reason for not including a third movement in Op. 111: "I asked, had he not written a third movement comparable in character to the first. Beethoven answered calmly that he had had no time for the third movement; that was why the second movement had had to be extended to such large proportions."[8] Due to the length and grand ending of the Beethoven's last movement of piano sonata – it is approximately seventeen

[8]Anton Felix Schindler. *Beethoven as I Know Him*, ed. Donald W. MacArdle, trans. Constance S. Jolly (London: Faber and Faber, 1966), 232.

minutes – it would be hard to imagine any movement that could have followed the theme and variations of Op. 111.

His use of sonata form is uniquely evident in these sonatas. The first movement of each sonata is in sonata form, exemplifying the role of the introduction at the beginning. In Op. 109, the Vivace presents the first theme of the exposition in the tonic key, contrasting with the *Adagio* in the dominant key. The *Vivace* and *Adagio* together represent what Spitzer calls "functional multitasking," which means that a section could be seen in more than one role.[9] For example, the *Vivace* section could be seen as the first theme group in sonata form or an introduction to the *Adagio*. It is clearly illustrated in Op. 110 that the first four measures serve as an introduction to the lyrical melody. In the first theme in measure 5, another introduction appears in the same sonata – the first section of third movement includes aria and recitative style, serving as a Prelude before the beginning of the Fugue section. In Op. 111, the *Maestoso* functions as an introduction until the main theme in the counterpoint presents a section labeled *Allegro con brio ed appassionato*. Abrogation of the development section is often found as well; the developments were eliminated at the core, and an emphasis was placed on the retransitions at the end of the development. The cores of the development sections tend to be more relaxed, rather than increasing in tension. They are more likely to function as a transition to proclaim the recapitulation. Beethoven masterfully expands the bounds of sonata form in these late works. There is more freedom in Beethoven's compositions than in the traditional use of sonata form. He changed tempo markings according to the section and function, but still composed within the sonata frame.

Theme and variation is a significant feature in this group of sonatas, both in form and texture. The third movement of Op. 109 is the only movement out of the entire work that could be labeled in the form of theme and variations. However, the aspects of variation appear in all three, especially in the first movement of Op. 110 and the second movement of Op. 111. The finales of Opp. 109 and 111 are both in theme and variations form. They contain extremely expressive melodies in chorale texture in the theme. The rhythmic drive increases after each variation. Nevertheless, more significant is the use of larger scales and the use of all aforementioned musical elements in Op. 111. Despite his proficient counterpoint technique that was shown, Beethoven's unique way of using trill passages in the final variations represents the victorious ending.

Beethoven's late works include enormous sections of contrapuntal texture. He was inspired by Bach's rich contrapuntal technique, and was interested in scores that he requested from the publishers Breitkopf and Härtel – friends who owned Bach's English and French Suites. There were also additional Bach scores from the library of the Archduke Rudolf and Raphael Georg Kiesewetter, which were accessible to him at the time. Most likely, Beethoven became familiar with Bach's works and learned from studying Bach's compositional technique. Beethoven was

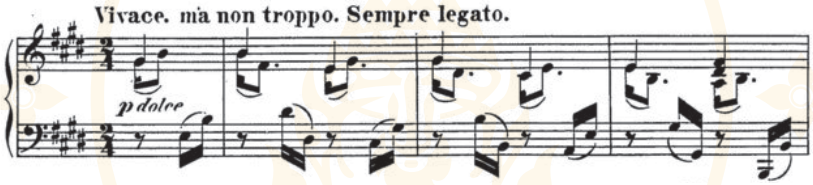
[9] Spitzer, *Music as Philosophy*, 125.

influenced by Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier and Goldberg Variations* at the time and the result of Beethoven's studying was the honing of the most significant musical elements that appear in his late works – fugal counterpoint technique. According to the chart, one can see elements of counterpoint in Op. 109, the second and third movements (variation 3, 4 and 5). Op. 110's third movement seems to combine the Adagio (which is recitative-like and could be seen as a prelude to the following fugue) and the Finale (fugue) resulting in one seemingly joint movement, and Op. 111's first movement after a long introduction.

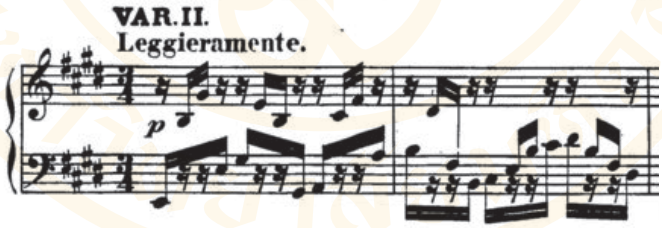
In addition to the formal elements, my initial curiosity about these three sonatas was derived from the observation that they use some similar compositional techniques. The following musical examples demonstrate parallel effects in this group of sonatas, such as hocket patterns (see examples 1, 2 and 3), the use of chorale (spiritual) writing (see example 4), and Beethoven's trills (see example 5).

Example 1 Hocket pattern in the first and third movements of Op. 109

Op. 109, I.



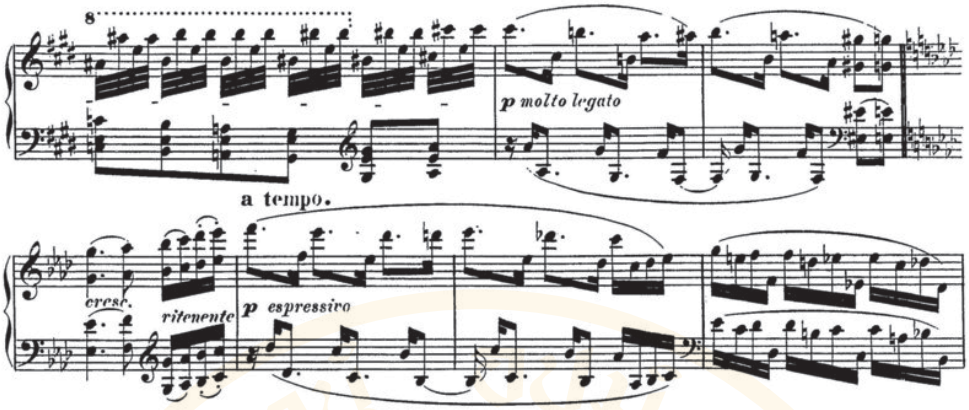
Op. 109, III. Variation 2



Hocket divides the melody into both clefs, and is captured in the flowing opening theme of Op. 109. This hocket pattern returns in the second variation of the last movement.

Example 2 Hocket pattern in the first movement of Op. 110

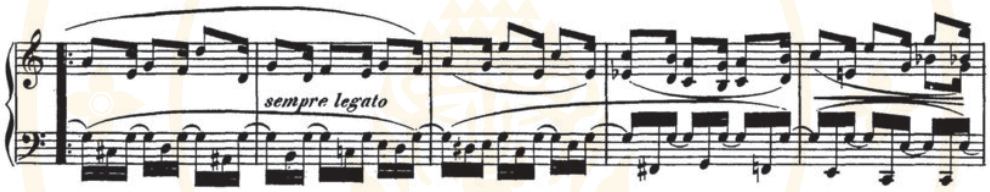
Op. 110, I.



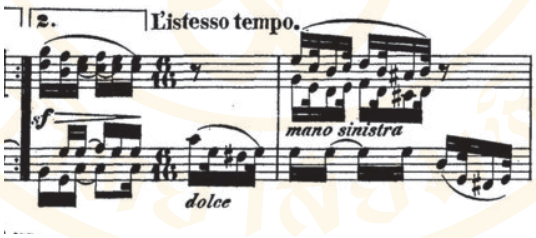
This musical moment brings back the memory from the first theme of Op. 109.

Example 3 Hocket pattern in the third movement of Op. 111

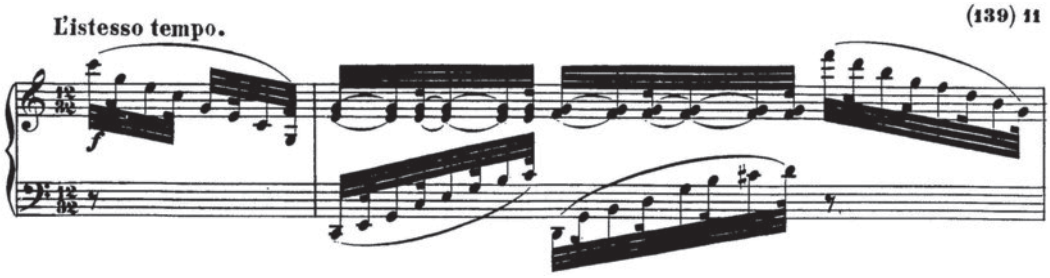
Op. 111, III: Variation 1



Variation 2, m. 33



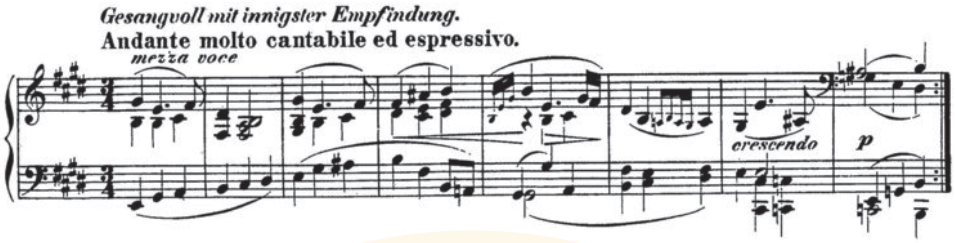
Variation 3, m. 49



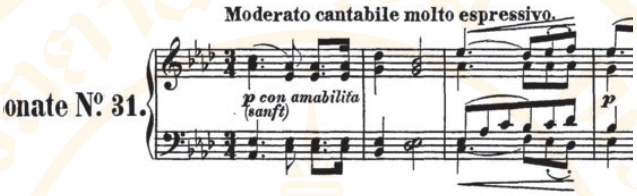
In Op. 111, Variation 1 shows a derivative version of the rhythmic pattern of Op.109's hocket, which later becomes the main figure for the following variations, 2 and 3, by increasing the rhythmic drive or subdivision.

Example 4 Chorale texture in the opening sections of Opp. 109, 110, and 111.

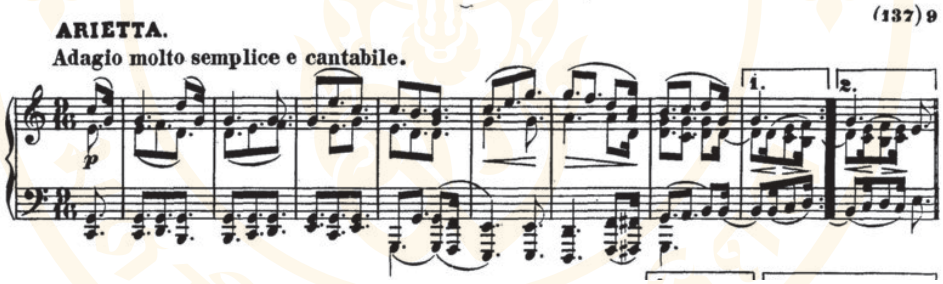
Op. 109, III: Theme



Op. 110, I: introduction



Op. 111, II: Theme

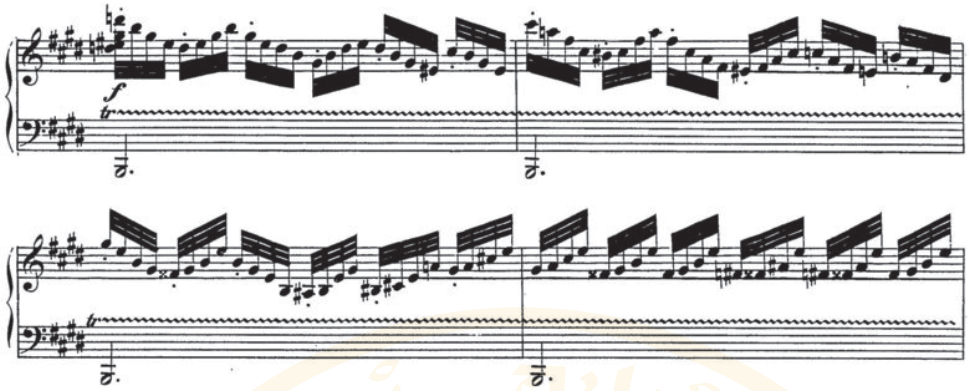


Chorale texture is another common aspect that often appears in Beethoven's slow sections. The textures are very much like hymns, especially the themes of Opp. 109 and 111.

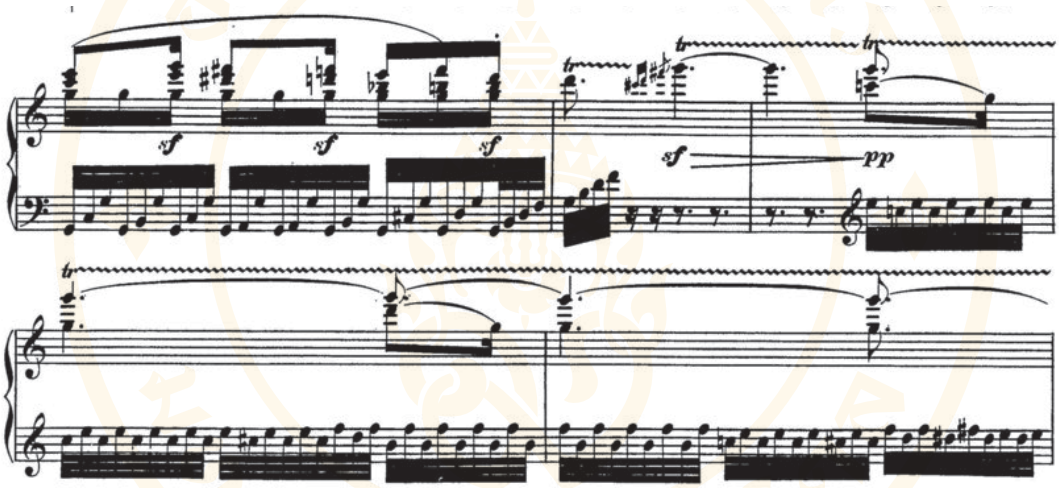
The themes from the theme and variation sections of Opp. 109 and 111 contain very beautiful melodic lines, and are aria-like. One can experience Beethoven's spirituality through listening to these sentimental compositions.

Example 5 The use of trills in Op. 109 and Op. 111

Op. 109, III. Variation VI (last)



Op. 111, final variation. Long dominant trills
from mm.160 until close to the end (11 measures)



Beethoven's unique way of using trills became another aspect of his late style. In the final variations of Op. 109 he uses a trill to sustain the dominant-pedal point; this trill lasts for 23 measures. This appears again in the last variation of Op. 111.

Beethoven's use of trills in his late style is unique – instead of using it for ornamentation he uses it to sustain the sound. The effect of those non-pianistic extended trills is hardly seen anywhere else except in his late style. In the spring of 1823, Beethoven said to Karl Holz about the pianoforte that it "is and always will be an unsatisfactory instrument."[10] Perhaps his way of using long trills was one of the techniques that he used to push away the limitations of the instrument.

Despite the fact that all three of the sonatas contain common elements – sonata form, theme and variations, fugue and long trills – the commonalities in Opp. 109 and 111 are particularly represented in the magnificent endings of the variations. While the contrast of recitative and fugue in the finale of Op. 110 seems to be highly influenced by *Missa Solemnis*, another work

10 Cooper, *Beethoven: The Last Decade*, 145.

which he composed at the same time, Sonatas Opp. 109-110-111 can possibly be seen as a large-scale A-B-A form.

In addition to the formal ABA structure that fused the relationship between the sonatas, Beethoven also considered tonal relationships. Matthew Bribitzer-Stull has traced the origin of the "Chromatic Major Third" and its influence in his article, "The A♭-C-E Complex: The Origin and Function of Chromatic Major Third Collections in Nineteenth-Century Music".[11] This system is evidenced throughout the nineteenth century compositional practice, and appeared in works of late eighteenth-century composers such as C. P. E. Bach through to Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven. However, the evidence for these keys' expressive significance and prevalence in Romantic-era compositions are shown in Schubert, Chopin, Liszt, Brahms, Wagner, Mahler, Franck, and Rachmaninov. This suggests that they typify the chromatic-third relationships that lie at the heart of nineteenth-century compositional practice.

In regard to the origin of these sonatas, it is clear that Beethoven had the intention to publish them all together, which explains the relationship of key choices, another example of chromatic third relationships in a larger framework. Moving up by major thirds and the rising-third cycle of E, A♭ and C exemplify Beethoven's habit, in the late style, of stressing scale degree 3 over 1. One can see how he emphasizes G# in Op. 109 in E major, which sets up the A♭ (enharmonic spelling of G#) in Op. 110. For the same reason, in Op. 110 he emphasizes scale degree 3 – which is C in the key of A♭ major – in preparation for C minor, the Key of Op. 111. The concept of a progression moving by major thirds had been developed over centuries, especially the A♭-C-E progression. From surface-level melodies to multi-movement connections, or even in a larger scale work like in Beethoven's Opp. 109-111, the A♭-C-E complex appears in almost every conceivable context, transcending the boundaries of genre, form, and tonal hierarchy.

Conclusion

Beethoven's innovation of traditional elements, such as sonata form, theme and variations, counterpoint and trills, enabled him to more freely express emotions. As Martin Cooper remarked, Beethoven "continues to use traditional forms, [but] he uses them in so personal a manner and in such unusual combinations that the effect is entirely new."[12] The modification of old forms related to larger structure and choice of keys opened up a new road for following generations of composers, especially Brahms. Beethoven's late works can be seen as a window into understanding the musical scene of the early nineteenth century.

11 Matthew Bribitzer-Stull, "The A♭-C-E Complex: The Origin and Function of Chromatic Major Third Collections in Nineteenth-Century Music," *Music Theory Spectrum* 28, no. 2 (Autumn 2006): 167-90.

12 Cooper, *Beethoven: The Last Decade*, 146.

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