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THINKINGMUSIC

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The first instalment of a new series in which a wide range of musicians reflect on the performance of works they love. **Jeremy Siepmann** here considers some of the challenges in the first movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No.29 in B flat, op. 106 - the so-called "Hammerklavier"

The 'Hammerklavier' is one of the greatest dramas ever conceived, in any medium. No work has come closer to obsessing me. I study it, I teach it, I put it away - but always it draws me back. It is inexhaustible. Forbidding, unforgiving, humorous (albeit in the most Olympian manner), almost unbearable in its loneliness and the depth of its spirituality, tragic and transcendent, it is perhaps the most universal sonata ever written. I must give due warning at the outset that some of what follows may not be immediately clear without a copy of the music to hand, but the optimum number and extent of musical illustrations would far exceed the space available. Many, however, (perhaps even most) of the following reflections and observations are of general as well as specific application, and if they do no more than provoke thought or encourage exploration they will have done their job.

The work has traditionally been regarded as the Everest of piano music: huge, implacable, rarely conquered and infrequently attempted, its greatness beggars description (even comprehension), its difficulties defy solution. Or so the legend use to have it. For many generations it was regarded by many musicians and listeners alike as the Great Unapproachable among Beethoven's piano works. When I first heard it as a child of eleven, in an unforgettable and impromptu performance by Rudolf Serkin, after dinner, I was solemnly informed by an apparently omniscient elder that there were only six people in the world who could play it. Why six, and who they were, was not divulged. Serkin was obviously one of them. It never occurred to me that I might one day be another, and that I would be not one of six, but of thousands. Statistics aside, however, it remains a work, more than most, which is best appreciated from the inside out. It is first and foremost a piece for players, though it taxes many to the limit of their capabilities. Whether it's also a piece for audiences is another matter. The intensity of its emotional force, the integrity and toughness of the intellect which contains it (only just), demand more than a passive response. In a sense, the only way of coping with the experience is to participate in it; yet in doing so one continually runs the risk of missing the forest for the trees, or the other way round. It's the old problem of parts versus whole, on an epic scale.

It could be argued that the most intractable problems of the 'Hammerklavier' are problems of balance: the balancing of beats and offbeats, of beats in a bar, of bars in a phrase, phrases in sentences, etc. etc., all the way up to the problem of balancing whole movements in the final, epic structure. The wider the context, the greater the challenge. It's almost a cliché of mine that context alters content. Indeed to a certain extent context could be said to determine content, or at least the meaning attributed to it. One's view of the nature of the conflict in the first movement of the

'Hammerklavier', for instance, must ultimately be influenced by one's view of the nature of the conflict in the last. That there's conflict in each seems beyond dispute, but is it the same or different in kind? Is it dramatically or psychologically sound to cover the same ground with new tracks, or are the movements themselves opposing forces? Do we come full circle or do we travel ever outwards? Needless to say, as with all great works, there's plenty of scope for opposing views - or it might be better to talk of opposing intuitions, if only because they, unlike the intellect, tend to spring directly from the spiritual substance of the music. (It may be true, as Stravinsky said, that the sin against the letter is a sin against the spirit, but by no means does it follow that observance of the letter ensures fidelity to the spirit).

So what help does Beethoven give? As usual, he gives rather more than many players care to recognise (it dents their self-esteem to realise quite how much of their work the composer has already done for them). But he starts by confounding us with a metronome marking (minim=138) traditionally dismissed as impossible. A few have tried it, fewer still consistently – but no-one emerges unscathed. A brave but doomed minority, suspecting a slip of the pen, have even tried it at crotchet=138. Most of the rest of us opt for something between 92 and 116. My own somewhat controversial feeling, after years of experimenting, is that it's not ultimately tempo which is the crux of the matter at all, but pace: the subjective impression of movement. And pace is a matter of rhythm, not of the metronome. In the very opening fanfare, for example, Player 'A' may take a relatively fast tempo and Player 'B' a relatively slow one, but by shortening the rest between the two bursts of sound and maximising dynamic contrasts, Player 'B' can create the impression of a faster pace than Player 'A', who may lengthen the rest and minimise dynamic contrasts within the fortissimo. And players who take identical tempi can convey deeply contrasting impressions of pace through their respective treatments of the upbeat. Most, in my experience, take the composer at his word, playing it short and relatively light, and allowing the juxtaposition of single-note upbeat and chordal downbeat to make its point (unleashing, in the process, a tremendous impression of energy and momentum). Yet there are some players, even great ones (Arrau and Barenboim, for starters) who inexplicably lengthen the upbeat to twice its written value, giving it all the resonance it will bear and imparting a degree of monumentality which nothing in Beethoven's text would seem to suggest. It cannot be stressed too much: Tempo is not the main issue. Rhythm is. And it's the balancing of rhythmic contrasts, more than any other, which poses the greatest challenge to the interpreter.

The first major contrast confronting us here isn't between fortissimo and piano but between fortissimo and silence. This is symptomatic of the extremity and suddenness of the contrasts which characterise the movement, and of Beethoven's acute perception of the rhythmical power of silence (silence as accent; the tension of suspended sound - which also characterises this movement). The second rest, expanded by a fermata, enhances the brilliance and power of the opening (at the same time allowing the rhythm, on which the vast bulk of the movement is based - and the equally germinal pattern of descending thirds - to make their imprint on our memories), as well as creating a tension, a will to move on, which is answered, and partially resolved, by the following (piano) phrase. Thus it's a grave sin against both letter and spirit to ignore the rest and shift the fermata to the final chord of the opening fanfare, as some pianists do. But it's also a mistake, if not a sin, to go to the opposite extreme and over-make Beethoven's point for him, as do those who play the afterbeat with a *sfz* staccato, or shift the fermata to the penultimate chord, creating an artificial suspense before the confirmation of the answering third (and I've heard great pianists do both). The pattern of falling thirds is unarguably a central structural factor in the movement as a whole, but this sort of headlining of the player's analytical perceptions, particularly in the opening bars, strikes me as egregious, and at the very least, discourteous to Beethoven (who in any case makes his big points over the heads of his interpreters). His marks are sufficient to their purpose. (The trouble with overtly didactic performers, it often seems to me, is that they so easily get the anatomy on the wrong side of the

flesh). Above all, this music relies for successful performance on its rhythmic vitality; but players who get hung up on motivic signposting are more likely to obscure than to enhance that vitality.

More important to the performance of this movement than falling thirds is the rhythmic integrity which unifies and invigorates it. Almost every section derives from the rhythm of those opening two bars, or is a literal expansion of it; witness the domination of the Second Group by its opening rhythm (itself the climactic expansion, in the opening bars, of the initial motif:

Bars 84-86 etc. : [EXAMPLE]
Bars 76-78 etc. : [EXAMPLE]
Bars 69-70 etc. : [EXAMPLE]

The metrical unit is often not the crotchet or minim suggested by the time signature at all, but the bar, or even two-bar group. Indeed the *alla breve* time signature refers to phrases (in which the bars themselves function as beats), and it could be argued that one of the virtues of Beethoven's metronome marking is precisely that it enables the listener to grasp this fact. The principal danger here isn't that the unity of the whole will be lost through the profusion and diversity of its parts, but that the diversity and integrity of the parts will be lost through too uniform a treatment by the performer, who may inadequately distinguish rhythm from metre.

A notable casualty is the transition to the Second Group. To insist here on a regular two in a bar - or worse yet, to allow four in a bar, with its diddle-diddle pairing, is to elevate the letter over the word. It may look like a plethora of quavers, but it must never sound it. Underlying the whole passage is the short-long rhythm of the opening; harmonies are built up in fragments and then sustained in a long breath. Yet a remarkable number of players allow metre to reign triumphant, with the result that the searching fluidity of the transition is artificially stabilised, and the contrast with the genuine stability of the Second Group is lost (an essential aspect of the drama of sonata style drowned by the pitter-patter of tiny beats).

If the transition is in danger of being submerged in a sea of sameness, the Second Group itself is at risk from a surfeit of variety. Again Beethoven is perfectly equal to the task in hand, and again many players seem loth to admit it. When, at two points of minor structural significance, he wants a slight *rubato* (bars 65 and 69), he writes *poco ritard*. Yet many players substitute *molto* for *poco*, over-making minor points at the expense of bigger ones to follow (the performer must cultivate the wisdom of foresight). When Beethoven broadens the rhythm, effectively halving the pace (bars 75 etc.), he prepares the ground to great dramatic effect by an urgent, written out acceleration in the bar before [EXAMPLE]. Yet many play against it by anticipating the broadening with a great heralding *ritardando*. But this, in any case, is wisdom (?) after the event: and it greatly reduces the plaintive power of Beethoven's broadening. Why, in the broadening itself, carry coals to Newcastle by indulging in big, sighing *rubatos*, as many do? The incidental beauty of the coals is no argument. They are foreground details of relatively minor significance and obscure the larger purpose.

The potential loss here is threefold: the broadening [bars 75 et seq.] is easily obscured through an excess of rhythmic events; the crescendo, which serves to enhance the expansion of the chord precisely by overruling metrical distinctions and imparting to it a feeling of growth, may be scarcely felt; and the contrast between the smooth, prolonging quavers of the chord (long slur) and the two, accented, upbeat pairs which follow is likely to be blurred.

The closing theme [bar 100] brings an illusion of calm and assurance which contains the seeds of the conflict (hinted at earlier, but too soon for us to grasp its portent) which will soon destroy it and cast a shadow over the rest of the movement, even to the extent of altering mysteriously our perceptions of the Exposition on its repetition: the semitonal tension (flat vs. natural) which culminates in the subterranean B minor challenge in the Recapitulation.

The first problem posed by this theme is how to get into it. Nothing in the headlong upward rush of quavers which precedes it prepares us for what is to come. The transition must be

made in the space of a crotchet upbeat [bar 99]. Should we incorporate the upbeat into the preceding crescendo, arriving at the theme subito piano? Or should we suggest a diminuendo and allow a slight expansion of the beat?

The theme itself is deceptively simple. One might be forgiven a first impression that it is remarkable not for itself but for what happens to it, and indeed this impression is conveyed by a majority of performers. Yet what a magical thing it is! And the more soaringly, even serenely we play it, the more powerfully can we convey the violence of its dissolution [bars 112 et seq.]. The passion and shock of this moment are tremendous - especially if we haven't watered the effect through too eloquent an expansion in the Second Group (whose eloquence is intrinsic if one actually plays it as Beethoven wrote it).

We now come to a crucial moment in the psychological balance of the piece: the return from G major to B flat and the repeat of the Exposition - a shocking manifestation of the semi-tonal tension which haunts the entire work. It seems to me a fatal mistake to omit the repetition, yet inexplicably some great artists (Kempff, for instance) have chosen to do just that. It's also a mistake, sad but not fatal, to warn of the impending flat [bar 119] by approaching it with an expectant ritardando which can only lessen its impact.

With the start of the Exposition repeat a new problem arises: the opening no longer marks a beginning but a return; the territory ahead is no longer virgin, but familiar. Do we hear or play it in the same way now that we know what lies ahead, and behind? Doesn't the mere fact of repetition alter our perceptions? I think it does. But the question remains: to what extent should the performer reflect this altered state in performance? More than one great pianist has taken the liberty of doubling the pouncing upbeats at the octave, transforming the opening challenge into a massive self-assertion of B flat which brooks no questions.

The next dramatic shock comes in the same place as the last one: the heroic transcendence of B flat in the second ending of the Exposition. The bulldozing octaves which lift us beyond it, to the B natural we once confidently expected, are now reinforced, not only by accenting rests but by sforzandi as well. It's precisely the precedent of the first ending, however, that gives this moment its heroism, and all the sforzandi in the world can't make dramatic sense of it if you've ditched the first ending and the Exposition repeat. Without the B flat first time around, all this thunder and lightning about a perfectly commonplace B natural signifies nothing, indeed becomes almost ridiculous. And the further rise to D, with its determination to remove itself still further from the B flat, is rendered weak and pointless.

All fugues make exceptional demands of the performer and the fugato which forms the main part of the Development [bar 138 et seq.] is no exception. One problem confronting us at outset is that of the rhythmic identity crisis: Is the minim C in the subject [bar 139] an afterbeat or an upbeat? Is it the crotchet rest in the opening rhythm made manifest, adding new emphasis to the descending third? Or is it an extended upbeat to the A flat (a descending third ascending, with its origins to be found on page 1 (bars 17-18 etc.)? Or is it both? Is there an intended ambiguity? Intended or not, the ambiguity is inescapable. The ear can scarcely avoid hearing it as an afterbeat (backward-looking); the eye cannot escape the conclusion that it's intended as an upbeat (forward-looking).

What to do? Tradition, if not Beethoven, has sanctioned a detached touch throughout, save only where the slur connects the minim to its crotchet. This clarifies the issue of the slur, but rather at the expense of the subject as a whole, which prior to our awareness of the minim neither requires nor greatly benefits from the treatment. The A flat, in any case [bar 140], is accented by its context: a short first beat, approached by a wide upward leap from a long upbeat preceded by a small downward skip (!).

One of the commonest dangers in all polyphonic music (but not only there) is what I call contagion of purpose, whereby the demands of one voice are met in all voices at once, though the others may be, and usually are, making quite different points, which warrant no such response. One result, since the same point is likely to be made by each of the other voices in succession, is

the sort of **dreadful metronomic regularity of rhythm** which has given fugue a bad name. In bar 159, for example, the minim appears simultaneously in the alto and bass voices. If consistency demands that it be accented (despite the fact that it's making its 14th appearance in 21 bars, by which time we might be expected to have taken the point), the accent must on no account spread to the F in the soprano or the D of the tenor, whether through inadvertent contagion or because they represent yet another falling third. It's axiomatic in music (or should be) that too many accents spoil the breadth, and this is a perfect example. If the F and D are accented, inadvertently or otherwise, the long reach of the A flat of bar 159 to the B flat two bars later will lose its point. This section is fairly riddled with such pitfalls. In bar 169, and in similar bars subsequently, the overlapping of functions which keeps the music moving requires the sforzando to apply principally if not exclusively to the right hand. It's surely vital that momentum and integrity be preserved until Beethoven's own, deliberate fragmentation in bars 173 etc.

The 20-odd bars following the dissolution of the fugato, dominated by the pouncing upbeat figure of the opening, represent the momentary triumph of metre over rhythm. Such wholeness, movement and direction as this passage has derives from its harmonies and its latent melodic structure. This is pulse, not breath. The breathing, and the rhythm, with its myriad subtleties, return in bar 201 (with the reappearance of the Exposition's closing theme) and the change must be effected rhythmically, not merely by a reduction in sound.

The theme itself differs in several important respects from its first appearance in the Exposition. This time it's anticipated: Beethoven stills the turbulence before the theme itself arrives. The quieting, reiterated D's [bars 197-200] give way to a disquieting and unearthly chromatic shift upwards to D sharp on the upbeat, the theme thereby arriving in the unexpected key of B major (or is it?). The semitonal tension now anticipates the theme, and the melody is now passed back and forth between the soprano and the alto. The semitone shift here is its own emphasis. It needs no help from us.

The fortunes of the theme are again dominated by the half-tone tension, but now in a gentler form, emphasised both by the continuous cantabile quavers and the marking *espressivo*. The *espressivo* wanderings are brought to an abrupt halt by the sudden *forte* reappearance of the opening motif in the bass, now in F sharp, and within a few bars we're hurtled into the Recapitulation. It's a great point of controversy whether Beethoven meant An or A sharp in the final two bars of this lead-back. And though much cogent analytical argument has been mounted on behalf of each, most players end up obeying their aesthetic intuition, whatever analysis may tell them.

The Recapitulation offers similar problems to those posed by the repeat of the Exposition, though they are marginally less subtle owing to the fact that the material itself has altered. The lead-in to the great build preceding the B minor climax for instance, is extended to twice the length of the analogous passage in the Exposition, and is rhythmically and contrapuntally busier. The increase in both urgency and length now make it much harder to bring off: the tendency to build too much too soon is very strong, and too much bringing out of detail will distract from the purpose of the forward drive.

There is a small controversy connected with the great B minor climax, one of the most awful and threatening moments in all of music [bars 266-7]. Is the pedal to be held through the rest under the fermata, keeping the black resonance of the chords ringing in our ears? Or is the resonance answered by a terrible silence, akin to that at the movement's beginning? If we keep the pedal down, the effect may be duly awesome, but the absence of the rest can make the rebirth of movement premature, no matter how long the chord is held. Bring the pedal off for the rest, and one feels the silence and hardly dares breathe. Or one can strike a balance, holding the sound of the chord longer than written but then holding the silence too. The effect of this can be overpowering.

After the silence, as though dazed and still in shock, the movement begins again, almost limping - an effect which can be enhanced by a slight tenuto applied to the early upbeats until it

hits its stride just prior to the quavers of the transition). Successfully brought off, the Recapitulation should be an almost wholly new experience, familiar material emerging as fundamentally changed by what has happened to it. The beauty and the tragedy, the feelings of doom and resilience conveyed in the closing passages are of an order to make one tremble - yet the sonata has only begun.