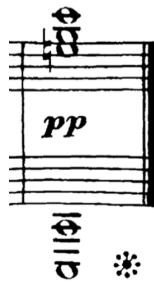


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On Listening to Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 32, Op. 111

The recording studio is tucked away on the second floor of the Woolworth Music Building, beyond the bustle of the offices, lobby, and library. I spend a lot of time there; it affords me the rare opportunity for complete silence and concentration. One late night, I was in the studio, listening to Beethoven's Piano Sonata no. 32. I pored over the score by the light of a single dim lamp, fancying myself some sort of brooding intellectual. As I listened to Alfred Brendel ford the sonata's ceaseless torrent, I circled moments in the score that stood out to me, scanning the music with an uninterrupted focus. When the ending of the first movement arrived, I marked the last measure, noting its maturity and finality, its decisive unambiguity, and the raised third which confirms the shift from C minor to C major. The silence in the studio was absolute.



The pause between movements was broken when Brendel began the Arietta. But suddenly, I was no longer following the score. I found myself face-down on the table, my head buried in my arms, filled with an overwhelming sense of sadness. Listening to Beethoven had, as it often does, inspired in me a profound feeling of privilege at having lived after the great master, to have the opportunity to be able to enjoy his music, to know and appreciate his work. But that feeling of privilege and awe was met by a sense of gravity, even futility. Beethoven somehow managed to

encapsulate our eternal feud with the inevitability of death in a single C major chord. Must we all be resigned to the fate of an eternal absence after a fleeting presence? As if to confirm the notion, Opus 111, the last of Beethoven's piano sonatas, ends in silence on a 16th note rest.



In studying Beethoven with Professor Scott Burnham, our class tracked the development of wandering variations and sleuthed for fugal expositions and episodes. We explored the theosophic and world-making ideas of a genius. We learned about his quirks and peculiarities, his loves and detestations, his trials and triumphs. We historically analyzed, emotionally editorialized, contextually criticized, harmonically theorized, conjectured, researched, and inquired.

But above all, we enjoyed. We became familiar with Beethoven's humor, his ferocity, his temper and his tenderness. The power of Beethoven's irrefutable legacy comes from his ability to speak across generations and to touch the heart of his listeners with true unbridled emotion and cosmic insight. The melodic shifts and harmonic progressions that define his richness and clarity perfectly express our lived experience without needing to put words to them. He provided endless opportunities for listeners and practitioners to appreciate and discover themselves through his music. This is why Beethoven has appealed to so many hundreds of theorists, composers, musicologists, and casual listeners since his passing.

Early the next morning, after re-listening to Opus 111, I returned to Woolworth to find some scholarly material on the sonata's ending. Looking for answers, I pulled six books from the 'Beethoven' shelves in the upstairs stacks. Each of those books had something to add to the conversation, some way of informing my experience as a listener. Eric Blom, for example, wrote on the notion that the ambiguity of the opening diminished chords doesn't make the "contrivance of suspense" any less remarkable, because we know how the piece develops, just as we might already know the plot of any great work by Shakespeare before the curtain rises (Blom, 236). Dennis Matthews detailed the sonata's embodiment of an "argument," between two "equally apportioned" movements that "contrast on all possible levels" (Matthews, 55). Joanna Goldstein highlighted Opus 111's irrefutable role as 'the last Classical sonata' (Goldstein, 79). Robert Taub confessed to the fear and drama associated with facing the piece when practicing it (Taub, 238). Kenneth Drake explored the technical difficulty of the sixteenth-note passages that involve quick hand position shifts, writing that "The pianist who does not risk shame will never move anyone" (Drake, 299). Dmitri Smirnov treated the eternal vitality and unsolved mystery of the sonata's main theme (Smirnov, 172).

Yet all six scholars seemed reluctant to comment on the piece's ending. Blom, as an afterthought, noted that the first movement "ends quietly" on the tonic major, and the second ends with "utter simplicity" (Blom, 239). Matthews, too, wrote that the piece's ending exhibits "the noblest simplicity" (Matthews, 56). Goldstein strove for more detail, writing that "The movement ends in C major on a chord which covers an expanse of five octaves, almost the complete span of Beethoven's keyboard," but did not say anything about that gesture's effect on our listening experience (Goldstein, 85). Drake and Smirnov said nothing at all of the piece's

ending. Only Robert Taub made any kind of emotional assessment: Of the first movement's ending, Taub wrote that "The final chord sounds hollow, for only the upper and lower registers are played. There is nothing in the middle. We are left suspended" (Taub, 244). But Taub does not write about the final chord of the Arietta, only the last chord of the Maestoso.

None of those scholars explored the sonata's ending with any kind of programmatic, spiritual, or emotional agenda. It seemed, most likely, that they were all in as much awe of the sonata's ending as I was. What could I possibly have to add about Opus 111's final gesture? What can one listener say about the final breath of the great composer's last piano sonata? At any moment in his music, Beethoven seems to have had the ability to reach out through the instrument, through the score, through the recording, and strip us of our day-to-day burdens. He consistently turns us toward more existentially unsettling questions: What impact will we make on humanity? How will we grapple with our own inevitable passing? When do we know the end has arrived? These questions are as open to answers as Beethoven's late music itself. The experience of discovering Beethoven's heroic expressivity has made a permanent impact on my life, and the ultimate resting gesture of Opus 111's finale encapsulates that impact.

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