The evolution of the Sonata: from late Beethoven experimentation to Chopin's romantic grandeur

Programme notes by Simone Damiani

Beethoven (1770 – 1827) : Sonata op.109 n.30 in E major

The legendary pianist Alfred Cortot, during one of his masterclasses at the Ecole Normale de Paris, described this Sonata by simply playing three chords: E major, E minor, E major.

His view of the work basically consisted in a motion which, eventually, brings us back to E major.

The first and second movements of this composition could be seen as a prelude to the third movement, the focus of the piece and almost a new journey on its own.

In the first movement, Beethoven explores form by alternating improvisatory figurations, found in the very opening, and declamatory moments rich in dynamic contrast.

The peaceful ending of the first movement is abruptly interrupted by the stormy “Prestissimo": the fortissimo opening clearly indicates that the journey is far from over, and palpable tension is kept throughout the movement, in loud and soft moment alike. This movement ends as abruptly as it starts, letting the following silence prelude to the beginning of the final movement.

A theme with a slight sarabanda feeling is presented with a tender and peaceful melody, described by Beethoven as “Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung" (songfully, with utmost feeling).

The set of six variations on this theme brings the performer and the listener through an impervious path characterised by sudden changes of mood from a variation to the next.

The last variation presents the most transformative nature among all, bringing the music towards a climax which only gradually comes down to simply restating the theme. The composer’s choice is deliberate, as it aims to a new perception of the theme after witnessing its journey of transformation.

Chopin (1810 – 1849) : Sonata op.58 n.3 in B minor

Completed in 1844, during Chopin's years of full maturity, the Sonata in B minor is a monumental statement of Chopin's approach to this classical form inheritance.

The work presents the typical Sonata feature of characterisation through contrasts and it is structured in four movements.

The first movement, marked "Allegro Maestoso", begins with a distinctive powerful gesture, which returns in the piece, variously transformed.

This "Allegro Maestoso" has been described by pianist Olga Scheps as encompassing the main styles dear to Chopin: the music ranges from romantic grandeur, to nocturne like atmosphere, to extreme lyrical moments.

The second and third movements, despite being very different from each other, bring immediately the listener to a completely different sound world, far away from the formal structure previously encountered.

The second movement is a quick etude-like scherzo, followed by a long Largo third movement, which after a dramatic beginning falls into a nocturnal atmosphere of solemn meditation, presenting an even more alienating soundscape than the previous movement.

Chopin quickly brings the listener back to reality announcing the last movement with striking chords pre-announcing an impetuous, presto (ma non troppo) agitato movement.

This Rondo does not seem to carry much joy or positivity in the music, characterised instead by relentless energy and a sense of inevitability: the movement, incapable of finding any rest, ends with an increasingly exciting climax leading to a triumphant B major final chord.

Tchaikovsky (1840 – 1893) : Nocturne op.19 n.4 in C sharp minor

Tchaikovsky composed the 6 Pieces for piano, op.19, between October and November 1873, when he was already a fairly experienced composer for piano.

The Nocturne became soon the most popular piece of the set, bringing the composer to transcribe it for cello and orchestra.

Marked "Andante sentimentale", this composition reflects the true nature of a Nocturne and shows its character as being far from an open declaration of mood, closer instead to an intimate but intense confession.