

Hammerklavier Sonata

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Music, history and theology are closely intertwined, because there is only one God and all men were created by him to go to him. History relates their actions amongst one another according as they go to him or not, while music expresses the harmony or disharmony in their souls as they make their history towards him or not. The music of Beethoven (1770–1827), taken as dividing into three Periods, is a clear illustration.

His First Period containing the relatively tranquil works of his masterly apprenticeship to Mozart (1756–1791) and Haydn (1732–1809), corresponds to the last years of pre-Revolutionary Europe. The Second Period containing most of the glorious and heroic works for which Beethoven is best known and loved, corresponds to the French Revolution's spreading of upheavals and wars throughout Europe and beyond. The Third Period containing profound but somehow puzzling masterpieces, corresponds to Europe's attempting after the Congress of Vienna (1815) to re-construct the old pre-Revolutionary order on post-Revolutionary foundations – a puzzle indeed.

As Beethoven's Third Symphony, the "Eroica" (1805), by first giving full expression to his heroic humanism of a new world, was the pivotal work between the First and Second Periods, so his 28th Piano Sonata, the "Hammerklavier" (1817), was the pivotal work between the Second and Third Periods. It is a huge piece, lofty, aloof, admirable, yet strangely inhuman . . . The first movement opens with a resounding fanfare to be followed by a wealth of ideas in the Exposition, a climactic struggle in the Development, a varied Recapitulation and an again heroic Coda, features all typical of the Second Period, yet we are in a different world: the harmonies are cool, not to say cold, while the melodic line is

rarely warm or lyrical. The brief second movement is hardly more friendly: a stabbing quasi-Scherzo, a rumbling quasi-Trio. The third movement, Beethoven's longest slow movement of all, is a profound and almost unrelieved lament, in which moments of consolation merely highlight the prevailing mood as of a resigned hopelessness.

A pensive introduction is needed to make the transition to the Sonata's last movement, normally swift and uplifting, but in this case swift and grim: a jagged main theme is worked over, slowed down, turned back to front and upside down in successively ungainly episodes of a three-part fugue. To the slow movement's raw grief is responding raw energy in a musical struggle more brutal than musical, with the exception again of one brief melodic interlude. As in the "Grosse Fuge" string quartet movement, Beethoven is here foreshadowing modern music. "It is magnificent," the French General might have said, "but it is not music."

Beethoven himself climbed down from this Mount Everest of piano sonatas to compose in his last ten years some more glorious masterpieces, notably the Ninth Symphony, but they are all somehow overcast. The hero's uninhibited exultation of the Second Period is a thing mostly of the past. It is as though Beethoven had firstly basked in the godly old order, secondly stridden forth to conquer his human independence, but thirdly been driven to ask: What has it all meant? What does it mean to make oneself independent of God? The horrors of modern "music" are the answer, foreshadowed in the "Hammerklavier." Without God, both history and music die.

Kyrie eleison.