Moonlight Reflections: A Performance History of the First Movement of Beethoven's *Piano Sonata Quasi Una Fantasia,* Op. 27 No. 2

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Abstract

The popularity of Beethoven's *Sonata Quasi una Fantasia*, Op. 27 no. 2, commonly known as the "Moonlight Sonata," traces back to Beethoven's day. In the roughly 200 years since its composition, the culture of piano performance has changed dramatically. The sonata, for example, was an exclusively domestic genre in Beethoven's day and is now a cornerstone of the public recital.

Due to its unwavering popularity, the performance history of the Moonlight Sonata is remarkably rich and well documented. Through an analysis of written documents, editions, and audio recordings, this study examines the evolution of piano performance as focused through the lens of this perennial favorite. This analysis reveals the development of what we may call a textual approach to performance and concomitant narrowing of the parameters of interpretation.

While this textual approach has resulted in some phenomenal artistry, the authority with which it is presented has discouraged many performers from exploring new ways of engaging with canonic repertoire. Performance practices are dependent on aesthetic and social values and are thus always mutable. The author hopes that the results of this study will bolster the efforts of artists and scholars who are interested in exploring new ways of presenting and performing canonic repertoire such as the Moonlight Sonata.

Keywords: Beethoven, piano sonatas, performance practice, performance history

Introduction

One can well imagine a jazz player scratching their head over the fuss that classical musicians kick up over textual fidelity. As noted by historian Gary Giddins,

> Implicit in the liberties [Louis] Armstrong took, and in the rise of jazz itself, is the assumption that musicians are superior to the songs they perform—a radical stance by classical principles, where a performance is evaluated by its fidelity to the text. In jazz, performance is the text.[1]

Performance liberties are a perennial concern for classical performers. What kinds of liberties are acceptable? To what degree (if any) can a performance reflect the artistic personality of the performer? The textual focus of classical music separates it from most, if not all, other musics. However, if we turn back the clock 200 years or so, we find a classical music culture quite similar to that of jazz today. Haydn, Mozart, and their contemporaries treated scores as blueprints—tools for for the activity of music making—not as inviolable texts. How did we get here from there? When and why did did classical performers become so concerned with textual fidelity?

Of all the various ways music history can be parsed and sifted, one valuable approach for addressing these questions is to trace the performance history of a single work. Not only does this method highlight the role that performance plays in reception, but it helps elucidate connections between performance practices and the social contexts within which they are embedded. The evolution of performance rituals and practices are of interest not only to performers, but increasingly to scholars as well. In recent years, the discipline of musicology has moved beyond a composer-centric paradigm, and performance history has burgeoned into a vibrant area of scholarship.[2]

Beethoven's music has remained both popular and influential from the time it was created until the present. As such, it is an ideal subject for a study of performance history. Beethoven is historically situated on the cusp of two major changes in performance culture: i) a division of labour between performance and composition, and ii) a shift in concert programming from contemporary music to historical masterpieces.[3] This paper examines the performance history of one of Beethoven's most enduring pieces: the first movement of the *Sonata Quasi Una Fantasia*, Op. 27 no. 2, commonly known as the "Moonlight Sonata."

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1 Gary Giddins, *Visions of Jazz: The First Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 89.

2 Within the domain of piano performance alone, Kenneth Hamilton, *After the Golden Age: Romantic Pianism and Modern Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008); Neal Peres Da Costa, *Off the Record: Performing Practices in Romantic Piano Playing* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012). For a broader analysis of changing performance styles, see *Robert Philip, Early Recordings and Musical Style* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992); CMPCP: AHRC Research Centre for Music Performance as Creative Practice (founded in 2009), http://www.cmpcp.ac.uk/

3 William Weber, *The Great Transformation of Musical Taste: Concert Program from Haydn to Brahms* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008); and José Antonio Bowen, "The Conductor and the Score: The Relationship Between Interpreter and Text in the Generation of Mendelssohn, Berlioz, and Wagner" (PhD Diss., Stanford University, 1994).

Nineteenth-Century Amateurs and the Moonlight Sonata

The first performances of Beethoven's *Sonata Quasi Una Fantasia* Op. 27 no. 2 took place in the domestic arena. The word "performance" itself is somewhat problematic in this context. "Performance" suggests a kind of formality, or at the very least, an audience. In the early nineteenth century, amateur and professional musicians alike played piano sonatas for their own enjoyment. Consider, for example, the following account provided by Charlotte Moscheles, the wife of the composer and pianist Ignaz Moscheles,

> The appearance of a new work by Beethoven was always an event for Moscheles, and the beginning of the year [1822] was made memorable by the publication of the two new sonatas (op. 109 and 110). Moscheles studied them with the greatest zeal, was quite absorbed in their beauties, and played them before his art brethren, and in particular to his friend Auguste Léo whom he credits with a genuine understanding of music, and a graceful turn for composition. Around Léo was collected a circle of Germans whose musical centre was Moscheles, and who were unanimous in their reverential homage of Beethoven.[4]

While sonatas such as Op. 109 and 110 would have appealed primarily to connoisseurs of high art, Op. 27 no. 2, and the first movement in particular, enjoyed a wider audience. "Everybody is always talking about the C-sharp minor Sonata," Beethoven is reported to have said, adding with evident irritation, "Surely I have written better things."[5]

The most obvious reason for the first movement's appeal is the lack of technical demands. Other "easy" sonata movements were similarly popular in the early nineteenth-century. For example, an advertisement from Charles Mitchell's Music Circulating Library published in London in the 1810s listed the comparatively simple Op. 14 sonatas as works which should be requested well ahead of time to "prevent disappointment and delay."[6]

However, the first movement of Op. 27 no. 2 is musically unlike anything in Op. 14. The music features a plaintive dotted figuration in the soprano voice; a slow, dignified bass line, and an unbroken, hypnotic string of triplets in the middle. These elements come together to create a somber, funereal mood.[7]

Many composers have found inspiration in this movement. Chopin's nocturnes and the third movement of Robert Schumann's Fantasia Op. 17 come to mind. Schubert's *An Den Mond* D. 193, a setting of a poem by Ludwig Hölty, is perhaps the most strikingly similar composition (figure 1).

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[4] Charlotte Moscheles, ed., *Recent Music and Musicians as Described in the Diaries and Correspondence of Ignaz Moscheles*, trans. A. D. Coleridge (New York: Henry Holt and Co., 1879), 40.

[5] Alexander Wheelock Thayer, *The Life of Ludwig van Beethoven* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 1: 322-23

[6] Alec Hyatt King, "Music Circulating Libraries in Britain," *Musical Times* 119 (1978): 135.

[7] In fact, the dotted rhythm of the melody and the steady and slow bass line are musical elements typical of the lament. See Timothy Jones, *The "Moonlight" and Other Sonatas*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 78-79.

Figure 1. Franz Schubert, An Den Mond, mm. 1-4. From Schubert's Werke, Serie XX: Sämtliche Lieder und Gesänge, No.69 (Leipzig: Breitkopf & Härtel, 1894-95).

The striking similarity between Schubert's An Den Mond and the first movement of Op. 27 no. 2 demonstrate that as early as 1815, at least some artists were associating this particular movement with nocturnal images. Czerny would later described the movement as "a nocturnal scene, in which a mournful ghostly voice sounds from the distance."[8] The poet Ludwig Rellstab felt the movement conjured up the image of moonlight reflected off of lake Lucerne. It is Rellstab who is generally credited with—and blamed for—the popular name "Moonlight Sonata." Critics and scholars have griped about the name since the early twentieth century, pointing out, quite correctly, that the name does not come from Beethoven. However, as Sara Clemmens Walz convincingly argues, the name, while inauthentic, is nonetheless meaningful. Associations between this sonata movement and moonlight ran deep in the collective imagination of nineteenth-century artists.[9]

By the mid-nineteenth century, this movement stood out as one of Beethoven's most popular creations. In the 1840s, the pianist Charles Hallé reported that Beethoven's chamber and piano music was not yet well known in Paris, aside from "two trios, the Kreutzer and the so-called Moonlight sonata."[10] About 20 years later, J. W. Davison noted that "next, perhaps, to the one in A-flat, Op. 26, and the Sonata Patetica [sic.], the 'Moonlight Sonata' is the most widely known and popular of all the works that Beethoven wrote for the pianoforte."[11]

Arrangements

During the first half of the nineteenth-century, mutability and flexibility characterized amateur performance practice. People generally did not find anything strange, for example, about arranging a favorite piece for the instrumentalists who were present. It was quite common for domestic music to include optional parts, often for violin or flute, so that whoever wanted to could join in on the music-making. It was expected that these extra parts would be arranged or adapted as the players wished. For example, in discussing an arrangement of a selection from Beethoven's Serenade, Op. 25, a writer for *The Musical Library* described how,

[8] Jones, "Moonlight," 43.

[9] Sarah Clemmens Waltz, "In Defense of Moonlight," *Beethoven Forum* 14, no. 1 (Spring, 2007).

[10] Charles Hallé, *Life and Letters of Sir Charles Hallé: Being an Autobiography* (1819–1860) with Correspondence and Diaries, ed. C. E. and Marie Hallé. (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1896), 95-96.

[11] James William Davison, *Mr. Charles Hallé's Beethoven Recitals* (London: Chappell and Co., 1862), 108.

> in the absence of a flute or violin, the accompaniment may be played by a third hand [on the piano], occasionally omitting a note or two, or by taking an octave higher such notes as interfere with the regular piano-forte part.[12]

Underpinning such practices was a general sense that a musical work—or more properly, a score—was a tool to be used, rather than an art-object in itself. There are even examples of such works by Beethoven, such as, for example, Op. 105, a collection of folk songs with variations. These song arrangements, composed on commission for the folk song collector, George Thomson, feature ad libitum parts for flute or violin.

The numerous arrangements made of the Moonlight Sonata in the nineteenth century attest to both its popularity and to the permissive attitude musicians then took towards musical scores. Table 1 lists some representative examples. The list includes chamber music, religious songs, and four-hands arrangements. Arrangements played an important role in nineteenth-century musical life. In the case of Beethoven's piano sonatas and other solo works, they transformed the playing experience from a solitary to a social one.

Table 1. Example Arrangements of Op. 27 no. 2.

Arrangement Type	Movement(s) Included	Arranger	Publisher	Publication Date
string quartet	second	unknown	Simrock	1822
orchestra	first	Narcisse Girard	unknown	1835
piano with optional parts for violin and cello	complete	unknown	W. Paxton & Co.	1838
song, "An elegy on the death of Felix Mendelssohn"	first	R. Andrews	unknown	1847
Kyrie Eleison for Soprano, Contralto, Tenor & Bass	first	Ferdinand Rahles	Ewer	1849
piano and violin	first and second	Louis Liebe	Fleury	1856
piano four hands	complete	Louis Köhler	Litolff	1860
string quartet	first	Eugene Gruenberg	Schirmer	1893
organ, violin, and piano or harp	first	Clément Loret	A. Durand	1898

[12] "Serenade," *Musical Library Monthly Supplement*, no. 20 (Nov 1835): 1.

Playing arrangements together at home for fun and listening to a proper performance in the concert hall are complimentary activities. It is telling that in the nineteenth-century, concert-goers were routinely referred to as "amateurs." No distinction was made between those who regularly attended concerts and those who played music at home for fun. This is because the two were in fact the same. In the age before recordings, if you enjoyed music, you naturally played for yourself at home, in addition to attending concerts.

While he would have certainly objected to shoddy arrangements, we know that Beethoven was not against arrangements of his music in principal. He made several himself, including one of the piano sonata Op. 14 No. 1 for string quartet, and he personally approved of several others. Table 2 lists works that Beethoven either arranged himself or approved arrangements of.

Table 2. Arrangements made or approved of by Beethoven.

Arrangement	Original Work
String Quintet Op. 4	Wind Octet, Op. 103
Piano Trio Op. 63	String Quintet Op. 4
Piano Trio Op. 36	Symphony No. 2, Op. 36
Piano Trio Op. 38	Septet Op. 20
Cello Sonata, Op. 17	Horn Sonata Op. 17
Cello Sonata Op. 64	String Trio Op. 3
String Quartet in F major Op. 14 No. 1	Piano Sonata Op. 14 No. 1
Piano Concerto Op. 61a	Violin Concerto Op. 61

The First Public Performances of Op. 27 No. 2

Franz Liszt was one of the first artists to perform the sonata Op. 27 no. 2 in public. In 1835, Liszt programmed it on a concert at the Hôtel de Ville in Paris. For the first movement, Liszt opted to replace Beethoven's original with an orchestral arrangement, which he conducted before sitting down at the piano to play the second and third movements. While this might seem strange from a modern vantage point, it made a lot of sense at the time. In 1835, sonatas were still not considered appropriate for a public concert. Liszt had to grapple with how to make the contemplative and somber opening movement suitable to the concert hall. An orchestral arrangement was one way to accomplish this.

Even when Liszt performed the first movement of the sonata on the piano, which he frequently did, he added all kinds of effects to please audiences. According to Berlioz, these included trills and tremellos, as well as wild accellerandos and ritardandos.[13]

Ignaz Moscheles performed many of Beethoven's piano sonatas publically, including Op. 27 no. 2, on his Historical Soirées of 1837-39. Moscheles was a far more conservative than Liszt and thus hued closer to the letter of the score. However, even the most conservative artists of the nineteenth-century were not nearly as textually faithful as modern-day concert pianists.[14] In order to illustrate the trend towards greater textual fidelity, I will discuss two specific performance practices: tempo modification and pedaling.

[13] William S. Newman, "Liszt's Interpreting of Beethoven's Piano Sonatas," *The Musical Quarterly* 58, no. 2 (April, 1972): 194.

[14] Elissa Miller-Kay, "The Virtuosity of Interpretation: The Performance History of Beethoven's Sonatas in London, 1800-1880" (PhD Diss., New York University, 2016): 256-63.

Tempo Modification

Evidence from various written sources, including reviews, performance treatises, and editions, suggests that tempo was treated far more freely throughout the nineteenth-century than it typically is today. This finding is supported by early twentieth century recordings of Op. 27 no. 2, many of which exhibit a higher degree of tempo flexibility that is now common. Joseph Hoffmann's 1936 recording is an excellent example.[15]

One of the most authoritative sources we have on how Beethoven wanted his music played is Czerny's treatise *On the Proper Performance of all of Beethoven's Works for the Piano*. Czerny advises that in the middle of the first movement of Op. 27 no. 2, the performer should crescendo and accelerate in measures 32-35 and then get slower and softer in measures 36-39.[16]

While tempo modification did not disappear in the twentieth century, it did become more constrained.[17] This change reflects not only an increased reverence for the composer's intentions, but the increased historical remoteness of the composers as well. As composers such as Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven, receded into history, their intentions became equated with the letter of the score. In the second half of the twentieth-century, competition culture amplified this trend. As Hung-Kuan Chen, a competitor in the Van Cliburn competition in 1989 told one reporter,

> there are some tempo changes in the first movement of the 'Appassionata,' but no one much observes them…If you make a good, big sound and get the runs and scales right, you'll do O.K.[18]

Competitions generally reward conventional players and punish controversial ones. Thus, those who play more or less in strict time tend to do well while those that take risks with tempo modification divide the jury and are more likely to be eliminated.

Pedaling

At the beginning of the first movement of Op. 27 no. 2, Beethoven instructs, "This whole piece must be played very delicately and without dampers."[19] Czerny interprets Beethoven's marking here to mean that the pedal should be changed with each new harmony.[20]

Charles Hallé, another well-respected classical pianist and acknowledged Beethoven expert, agrees, as evidenced from the pedal markings in his Pianoforte School (Figure 2). This is, in fact the approach to pedaling practiced by all pianists I am aware of up through the 1980s.

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[15] Joseph Hofmann, The Complete Josef Hofmann, Vol. 6: The Casmir Hall Recital (Marston Records 52014-2, 1836-41).

[16] Carl Czerny, *On the Proper Performance of All Beethoven's Works for the Piano*, Vol. 4 of *Complete Theoretical and Practical Piano Forte School Op. 500, trans. J. A. Hamilton (London: R. Cocks & Co., c. 1839), 49.*

[17] Peres Da Costa, *Off the Record*, 251-308.

[18] "Can a Pianist Sway a Competition Jury?" *New York Times*, May 25, 1989.

[19] "si deve suonare tutto questo pezzo delicatissimamente e senza sordino"

[20] Czerny, *Proper Performance*, 49.

Figure 2. Measures 1-5 of Beethoven's Piano Sonata Op. 27 no. 2, first movement. Hallé's Pianoforte School (Forsyth Brothers, 1880).

Towards the end of the twentieth century, a few pianists began experimenting with keeping the dampers raised throughout the movement. These artists argue that Beethoven's instruction should be understood literally. Thus, "without dampers" is taken to mean "without any pedal changes whatsoever." Malcolm Bilson recorded such a performance on a fortepiano in 1997.[21] Bilson's tempo is relatively slow (quarter-note = 56), and the dynamic level never rises much above pianissimo. The slow tempo, soft dynamic, and relatively short decay of sound on the fortepiano help to minimize blurring created by the sustained pedal.

More daringly, András Schiff does not change the pedal at all on his 2007 recording on a modern Steinway concert grand.[22] In Schiff's recording, the blurring is intense.

Performance practices are sometimes presented as a moral imperative, especially where Beethoven is concerned. In a pre-concert lecture, Andreas Schiff explained that he didn't change the pedal even once because "Beethoven is a great enough composer that you have to take him very seriously."[23] Implicit in Schiff's statement is the moral imperative of respecting Beethoven's intentions. We are far from the world of arrangements and of Liszt's added tremellos. Even Czerny's suggested accellerando and ritardando in measures 32-39 would likely be considered indulgent by many concert artists today.

[21] Malcolm Bilson, Ludwig van Beethoven: The Complete Piano Sonatas on Period Instruments (Claves Records CD 50-9707/10, 1997).

[22] András Schiff, The Piano Sonatas, Volume 8: Opp. 109, 110, 111 (ECM New Series 1945/46`, 2007).

[23] "András Schiff: The Lectures," *The Guardian*, http://music.guardian.co.uk/classical/page/0,,1943867,00.html.

Conclusion

Performance history teaches us that performance practices are always changing. We must be careful not to privilege our own perspective and assume that modern-day performances are superior to those of the past.

As this study illustrates, both amateurs and professionals in the nineteenth century took a freer and more creatively involved approach to performance and interpretation than is typical today. Arrangements of Op. 27 no. 2 provide evidence of a utilitarian approach to musical scores, while the nocturnal programmatic associations speak to a high level of creative license at the conceptual level. Most nineteenth-century performers and critics had no problem with understanding Beethoven's composition through images and stories. Whether they came from Beethoven himself or not was secondary to their evocative power. Both arrangements and programmatic associations fell out of favour in the twentieth century and, concomitantly the bounds of interpretation narrowed.

While a textually faithful approach has resulted in some phenomenal artistry, it has also had an unintended stifling effect. Artists who want to try something different generally meet with resistance. We run the risk of "loving Beethoven to death," which I would define as performing in a manner so faithful to score as to squeeze the life and vitality right out of the performance. It is instructive and creatively stimulating to examine the performance practices of nineteenth-century amateurs, and of concert artists such as Liszt and Czerny. I argue that a careful examination of the musical score should be the beginning, not the end, of interpretation.

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