

BEETHOVEN'S 14TH PIANO SONATA

A Confidential Confession of Intimations of Deafness or A Threefold Response to Tragedy – Grief, Denial and Rage

Sonata No.14 (Sonata quasi una fantasia) in C# minor, Op.27 No.2 (*Moonlight*)

1. *Adagio sostenuto* (Grief)

2. *Allegretto* (Denial)

3. *Presto agitato* (Rage)

This essay presents a mixture of fact and personal speculation, and invites the reader to forget everything that he or she has heard or absorbed about the romantic association between 'moonlight' and Beethoven's 14th piano sonata. All that is asked is that the reader should bear in mind that this work was composed by a musical genius who was facing the certainty of progressive and irreversible deafness and who had not yet found himself able to confide this tragedy to his closest friends in Vienna. The tragedy also struck at the foundations of Beethoven's livelihood, derived substantially from the patronage of a social circle of aristocrats.

Once the possibility of such a tragic provenance for this sonata is entertained, its three disparate movements fall into place as integrated expressions of the three main acute responses to tragedy - grief (*Adagio sostenuto*), denial (*Allegretto*) and rage (*Presto agitato*). However, to appreciate this interpretation, it is necessary to sweep away the widespread view of this sonata - conditioned by a number of extraneous factors - that has led to what I believe are significant established departures from the composer's original intentions, particularly in the performance of the first movement.

Firstly, the sonata's dedicatee, Countess Giulietta Guicciardi, was erroneously declared by Beethoven's biographer Anton Schindler to be the composer's mysterious 'Immortal Beloved' after Beethoven's death. Secondly, the nickname 'Moonlight' has been associated with the sonata since at least a few years after Beethoven's death, though its widely held attribution to the German poet, Ludwig Rellstab (1799-1860) is somewhat confused (see the illuminating article by Waltz, S.C., 2007, *Beethoven Forum*, vol.14, pp.1-43, accessible at <http://bf.press.illinois.edu/14.1/waltz.html>). Despite the fact that the 'Immortal Beloved' hypothesis relating to Countess Guicciardi was subsequently proved false, and the sonata's dedication to her was in any case accidental and originally unintended, the work became nonetheless firmly linked in the popular mind with romantic images of moonlight. This misleading image has been almost universally reinforced by the manner of performance conditioned under the all-pervasive influence of the 20th century's most famous champion of Beethoven's piano sonatas, Artur Schnabel.

There are four major instances in which the Schnabel edition (for example, that published by Edizioni Curci, Milano and emulated in many other editions and almost all recorded performances) differs crucially from the original score of the first movement as plainly visible in the Autograph (see the images viewable on the Internet from the Digital Archives of the Beethoven-Haus, Bonn) and as given, say, in the Henle Urtext edition.



Ex.1a Henle Urtext edition and Autograph



Ex.1b Schnabel* edition

*The examples contained in this account record the main dynamic alterations given in the Schnabel edition; other directives peculiar to the Schnabel edition are not included. Also note that the first page of the Autograph containing the title and measure 5 remains missing.

Firstly, while Beethoven gives an overall *pianissimo* (*pp*) directive at the outset of this movement, and reinforces it with the words *sempre pp e senza sordino*, he also marks the specific entry of the melody at measure 5 with its own *pp* sign immediately adjacent to the first melody note on the treble staff. This is also done in the recapitulation at measure 42 (treble staff - see Ex.1a) and where the left hand takes the same melodic fragment in the *coda* (bass staff). I interpret this to mean that the melody should *not* sing out too clearly from its accompaniment – that it should be subdued, perhaps even 'difficult to hear' as might be experienced by a person who was going deaf, or as might be wished when uttering a confidence. On the other hand, Schnabel adds *diminuendo* and *triple-piano* (*ppp*) signs to the general accompaniment immediately prior to the entry of the melody, suggesting the traditional *cantabile* rendition of the right-hand melody (see Ex.1b).



Ex.2a Henle Urtext edition and Autograph



Ex.2b Schnabel edition

(*This 'hairpin' contains Schnabel's directive *espress., ma sempre pp e semplice.*)

Secondly, the repeated chromatic melodic fragment of measures 15-19 (and measures 51-55 in the recapitulation) is supported by a pair of *crescendo-diminuendo* 'hairpins' that are placed centrally in the accompaniment within the confines of a single measure

for each of measures 16 and 18 in the Urtext edition and Autograph. As given, they cannot be intended to cause a 'swell' of tone in the melody itself (Ex.2a). Schnabel replaces each pair of centrally located 'hairpins' with two pairs, one applied to the melody and commencing half a beat earlier in the previous measure, the other applied to the bass octaves within the measure (Ex.2b).

Thirdly, the pairs of 'hairpins' given in each of the four measures 28-31 determine swells that climax at the fourth half-beat in the Urtext edition and Autograph (Ex.3a) while Schnabel directs that they should climax at the second beat (Ex.3b).

Ex.3a Henle Urtext edition and Autograph

Ex.3b Schnabel edition

Fourthly, a great discrepancy emerges over the four measures beginning at measure 62. In the Urtext edition and Autograph (Ex.4a) there is a pair of 'hairpins' given to the right-hand accompaniment alone through measures 62-63 while the left-hand melody remains subdued at a *pp* dynamic. The passage is repeated at measures 64-65 but with the pair of 'hairpins' now given to the left-hand melody alone, thereby providing the only instance in the entire movement where this melodic fragment is intended to stand out from the accompanying texture. By contrast the Schnabel edition eliminates this distinction by placing both pairs of hairpins non-specifically between the staves (Ex.4b).

Ex.4a Henle Urtext edition and Autograph

Ex.4b Schnabel edition

The four departures from the Urtext edition and Autograph quoted here may all be fairly described as sitting more comfortably with the nickname of this sonata, regardless of whether or not that was what Schnabel intended. It is therefore not surprising that generations of pianists, influenced by the nickname, the romantic images and Schnabel's changes, have come to play this movement so slowly as to make impossible the realisation of the *alla breve* pulse called for in Beethoven's time signature. This directive requires the pulse of the music to be felt as *two* beats in the measure, not *four*, and this will not be projected to the listener unless these two beats are fast enough to be perceived as such. It is no coincidence that standard metronomes offer no speed lower than 40 pulses per minute. In Beethoven's time, they probably went no lower than about 50 pulses per minute, judging by Maelzel's 1815 model pictured in *The New Grove* (edited by Stanley Sadie, 1980). This suggests that slower pulses might be below the physiological range of human musical appreciation.

With these considerations in mind I choose to take the opening *Adagio sostenuto* at a pulse of around 40 minims (half-notes) per minute and I try to eliminate, wherever possible, any emphasis on the second and fourth half-beats (quarter-notes). I believe that this, together with adherence to the dynamics given in the Autograph or the Henle Urtext edition shown in Examples 1-4, supports an interpretation of this entire sonata as Beethoven's confidential confession to the keyboard of the 'intimations of deafness' which, at the time of writing this work, he had not yet confided to his closest friends in Vienna. Thus, the sonata's apparently disparate movements become psychologically linked together under this view, each reflecting in turn three of the primary emotional responses to tragedy – grief (*Adagio sostenuto*), denial (*Allegretto*) and rage (*Presto agitato*).

It has to be admitted that this interpretation must remain forever speculative. However, if we ask ourselves, "Is there any single work from this period that might encapsulate Beethoven's tragedy in musical terms?", i.e., that forms a coherent 'tone poem' concerning the tragedy, then I think there is no possible answer other than *Op.27 No.2*. And, if this answer is wrong (as well it might be, as a statement concerning the composer's conscious intentions), then we have to conclude that Beethoven left no such work at all from this acute time of turmoil, even though it is widely felt that his tragic 'character building' circumstances coloured much of his output for the rest of his life.