NOTES ON THE PROGRAM by Eric Bromberger

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)
Sonata in F Major, Op. 10, No. 2 (1796–98)
Sonata in A-flat Major, Op. 26, Funeral March (1801)
Sonata in F Minor, Op. 57, Appassionata (1804–06)

Beethoven composed the three piano sonatas of his Opus 10 in the years 1796 to 1798, just as he was beginning his first set of string quartets. The **Sonata in F Major, Op. 10, No. 2,** is the shortest and most relaxed of the three, and it's the only one in a major key, with Beethoven using the same F Major that he reserved for some of his most genial and open music, like the *Pastoral* Symphony and *Spring* Sonata.

One feels Beethoven experimenting a bit in this sonata, as it has no true slow movement. The opening *Allegro* is in sonata form (comprising an exposition, a development, and a recapitulation), but it's a sonata-form movement without the usual conflict or even a sharp contrast between its themes. More striking are the repeated patterns of three notes used as cadences to these themes. One of these brings the exposition to a grand close, and then Beethoven does something surprising: He uses this three-note pattern as the basis for the development, seemingly forgetting about themes from the exposition. (This isn't an entirely original development, as Mozart had sometimes done the same thing.) The development plays with these patterns of threes, and then there's another surprise: The recapitulation retrieves the sonata's opening material but returns it in the "wrong" key of D Major. The surprise is brief, however: some graceful side-stepping gets us solidly back to F Major, and the movement rushes to a dramatic close on the falling three-note pattern.

The *Allegretto* has something of the formal shape of the minuet—it's in ternary form—but Beethoven chooses not to make the repeats literal: He writes out the return of the opening material so that it's quite different and much longer than it is in its opening appearance. This movement lacks the downbeat pulse of the minuet, and its dark key of F Minor and restrained energy give it an unusual character. The D-flat Major trio proceeds along chordal themes, and the varied return of the opening is done very nicely, particularly in the syncopated rhythms of its final page.

The finale, marked *Presto*, gets off to an effervescent start with a bubbly little tune that seems almost mindless in its short phrases and repetitions, but Beethoven goes on to do some wonderful things with it. Its contrapuntal treatment at the beginning at first disguises the fact that this movement is in sonata form, and while the tune's steady pulse of four eighth notes continues relentlessly, Beethoven varies the effect of that pulse throughout the movement, taking it through different keys, registers, and dynamics. That bubbly little tune just keeps tapping away, finally powering its way right through the sudden cadence and leading to an ending that leaves audiences smiling.

When Beethoven arrived in Vienna in November 1791, he knew he still had much to learn. He'd established his reputation in Bonn as a virtuoso pianist and promising composer, but now, as he was about the turn 21 years old, he recognized that the principal task ahead of him was to master sonata form. Toward that end, he studied with Salieri, Albrechtsberger, and Haydn, and throughout the 1790s he composed sonatas (for

piano, violin, cello, and horn), two concertos, a set of six string quartets, and finally his First Symphony. The symphony was premiered in 1800, and at that point, having mastered sonata form convincingly, Beethoven began to experiment with it.

One of the features of sonata form is that it (usually) opens with a dramatic movement based on conflict and resolution. This makes for an effective beginning, but that movement then establishes the tone for the entire work and dominates it. Beethoven wondered if it might be possible to de-emphasize the importance of the first movement and shift the expressive weight of a sonata to its later movements. Toward that end he composed three piano sonatas in 1801: the Sonata in A-flat Major, Op. 26, and the two sonatas of his Opus 27. Beethoven described each of the latter as a "Sonata quasi una fantasia," warning listeners that they might think the new works were so free that they should be described as fantasies.

That same experimentation marks the **Sonata in A-flat Major, Op. 26**: It begins not with a sonata-form movement but with a relaxed set of variations marked *Andante con variazioni*. Set in 3/8 time, the agreeable theme falls into even, four-bar phrases, and Beethoven offers five melodic variations (the third in a minor key) before concluding with a brief coda. The fast movement comes second in this sonata: it's a brief scherzo marked *Allegro molto* whose energetic outer sections are set off by a chordal trio marked *sempre legato* (indicating that it should be played continuously or smoothly, with no breaks or pauses between its notes).

The most striking movement in this sonata is its third, which Beethoven titled *Marcia funebre sulla morte d'un eroe* (*Funeral March on the Death of a Hero*). The idea of a funeral march in memory of a fallen hero would find its finest expression in Beethoven's *Eroica* Symphony, begun two years after this sonata, but here we already sense the fascination Beethoven had for such music. This ternary-form movement doesn't match the intensity of the funeral march of the *Eroica*, but it's suitably dark and atmospheric. Some listeners have made out the sound of tolling bells and muffled drums in its quiet dotted rhythms, while the outbursts of its brief central episode may look forward to the *Eroica*.

A brief aside on this third movement: Beethoven would go on to write greater funeral marches, but he felt a continuing affection for this movement. When he was asked to provide incidental music for a performance of the play *Leonore Prohaska* in Vienna in 1815, he orchestrated this movement as part of that music, and at his own funeral in 1827, a brass band played an arrangement of this movement as the composer's casket was carried through the streets of Vienna.

The sonata's concluding *Allegro* is a rondo that glides along its steady pulse of 16th notes, and Beethoven has the theme flow seamlessly between the pianist's left and right hands. The pleasing rondo tune is interrupted by more turbulent episodes, but spirits remain generally relaxed, and the sonata moves gracefully to its conclusion on a single note: an A-flat deep in the pianist's left hand that's marked *pianissimo*.

Between May and November 1803, Beethoven sketched his Third Symphony, the *Eroica*, which was on a scale that had never been imagined. The Third was nearly half an hour longer than Beethoven's Second, and it thrust the whole conception of the symphony, and sonata form, into a new world—one in which music became a heroic struggle and sonata form became the stage for this drama rather than an end in itself. It was a world of new dimensions, new sonorities, and new possibilities of expression, and with the *Eroica* behind him, Beethoven began to plan two piano sonatas. These sonatas, later nicknamed the *Waldstein* and *Appassionata*, would be governed by the same impulse that shaped the *Eroica*.

While Beethoven completed the *Waldstein* Sonata quickly, he didn't finish the *Appassionata*—the **Sonata in F Minor, Op. 57**—until early in 1806 due to his work on his opera. The nickname *Appassionata* appears to have originated with a publisher rather than with the composer, but few works so deserve their nickname as this one. There are moments in this music where one feels that Beethoven is striving for a texture and intensity of sound that's unavailable to the piano—that he's reaching for what his biographer Maynard Solomon called "quasi-orchestral sonorities." That said, Beethoven clearly conceived of this music in terms of a pianistic, rather than an orchestral, sonority.

The ominous opening of the *Allegro assai* is marked *pianissimo*, but it's alive with energy and the potential for development. As this long first theme slowly unfolds, the four-note motto that will later open Beethoven's Fifth Symphony is heard deep in the left hand, and out of this motto suddenly bursts a great eruption of sound. The movement's extraordinary unity becomes clear with the arrival of the second theme, which is effectively an inversion of the opening one, and there's even a third subject, which boils out of a furious torrent of 16th notes. The movement develops in sonata form, although Beethoven doesn't repeat the exposition, choosing instead to press directly into the turbulent development. The opening rhythm is stamped out in the coda, and, after so much energy, the movement concludes as the first theme descends into near inaudibility.

The second movement, a theme and four variations marked *Andante con moto*, brings a measure of relief. The theme—a calm chordal melody in two eight-bar phrases—is heard immediately, and the tempo remains constant throughout, though the variations become increasingly complex and ornate. Beethoven insists that the gentle mood remain constant; in the score, he keeps reminding the pianist to play *dolce*, and even the swirls of 32nd notes near the end remain serene.

The sonata-form finale, marked *Allegro ma non troppo*, bursts upon the conclusion of the second movement with a fanfare of dotted notes, and the main theme—an almost moto-perpetuo shower of 16th notes—launches the movement. The searing energy of the first movement returns here, but now Beethoven offers a repeat of the development rather than of the exposition. The fiery coda, marked *Presto*, introduces an entirely new theme.

Beethoven offered no program for this sonata, and it's best not to guess what external drama was being played out here. The musicologist Sir Donald Francis Tovey, while trying to take some measure of this sonata's extraordinary power and its unrelenting conclusion, noted that "there is not a moment's doubt that the tragic passion is rushing deathwards." That may be going too far, but it's true that this sonata ends with an abrupt plunge into darkness.

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