Ludwig van Beethoven – Piano Sonata No. 28 in A Major, Op. 101

(Written 1816)

The 32 Piano Sonatas by Beethoven are one of the best testaments of the close-knit relationship between a composer's life and his music. Living a life of struggles which most notably included his gradually impaired hearing, Beethoven in his late period had come to write in a style that is better described as a seclusion of a sound world that he holds dearly in his imaginations. The late sonatas are characterized by an unprecedented sense of experimentation in form, color and style, and a demonstration of Beethoven's interest in counterpoint of the past century.

I. Etwas lebhaft, und mit der innigsten Empfindung. Allegretto, ma non troppo

With an opening movement that might as well be the most docile and intimate of all the sonatas in temperament, there is at the same time an unmistakable sense of self-questioning and self-dialogue that reflects Beethoven's innermost psyche at this point of his life. The music is shrouded in an ambiguous tonality where its tonic is often suggested, but deliberately eluded and never signified until towards the end, and the usual sonata form has its structural boundaries blurred and compressed, making the movement unbelievably compact.

II. Lebhaft, marschmäßig. Vivace alla marcia

The second movement, in place of a Scherzo, is a lively march of uncompromising rhythmic drive and angularity, featuring violent contrasts of character, outrageous tonal modulations, and gritty humour. The middle section (Trio) is written almost always in strict canonic imitation, as if Beethoven was testifying his mastery of academic counterpoint.

III. Langsam und sehnsuchtsvoll. Adagio, ma non troppo, con affetto

&

IV. Geschwind, doch nicht zu sehr, und mit Entschlossenheit. Allegro

In the third movement Beethoven transports us into his inner world of sheer coldness and reflection, where glimmers of hope seem to shine through in vain. Eventually this hope prevails, but not before we reminisce the tender melodies of the beginning of the piece. Then, in a jubilant and uplifting manner, as if to shrug off all dark clouds amassed just a few moments ago, the finale launches in great optimism. Like the rest of the sonata that preceded, this movement is full of imitative contrapuntal writing that is unmistakably Bachian.

Although the joyous and whimsical fourth movement takes place in a tightly knit sonata form, the entirety of the development section compromises of a difficult, obsessive, and unrelenting fugato. At the penultimate moment of the fugato, Beethoven puts the breakthrough in keyboard compass (range) in the spotlight – a low E (quoted *"contra E"* in the score) written to sound like a deep organ pedal – which was an unprecedented range for pianos at the time, and the lowest note available when this sonata was written. Pianos with a low E were just on the

verge of becoming the norm, and Beethoven himself was most certainly a very proud owner of this crucial note.

Nikolai Medtner – *Sonata-Skazka* ('Tale-Sonata') in C Minor, Op. 25 No. 1

(Written 1910)

I. *Allegro abandonamente*
II. *Andantino con moto*
III. *Allegro con spirito*

"I repeat what I said to you back in Russia: you are, in my opinion, the greatest composer of our time."

— Sergei Rachmaninov (1921)

Perhaps relatively overshadowed by his more well-known, older contemporaries like Alexander Scriabin and Sergei Rachmaninov, the Russian composer Nikolai Medtner unfortunately never quite got the recognition he deserved during his lifetime. Now becoming more prevalent as an important pianistic composer, his most appreciated works including his 14 Piano Sonatas and 38 *Skazki* (often equated as 'tales' in English) are the pinnacle of Russian romanticism.

While adhering to many aspects of a traditional sonata form, Medtner's magical storytelling stems from his intelligent transformation of thematic material, which is often shrouded within thick counterpoint, intervallic and rhythmic modulation, imaginative sounds, as well as compelling and nostalgic melodies. In the middle of the great restlessness and abandon of the first movement – whose theme is mainly compromised of a murmuring trill – it's hard to miss the elegiac played in the left-hand in the first movement's second theme, which eventually soars in triumph and heroism in the Coda. Medtner's use of thematic juxtaposition evokes further sense of remembrance, as the seemingly unending woven line of sheer beauty in the second movement is reminisced later amidst the third movement, which is a menacing, hot-blooded march, with snares rolling energetically and brasses sounding brashly.

Einojuhani Rautaavara – Piano Sonata No. 2 "The Fire Sermon"

(Written 1970)

I. *Molto allegro*
II. *Andante assai*
III. *Allegro brutale*

Possibly the most successful successor of Sibelius in the advancement of Finnish music, Rautaavara's substantial output has immense stylistic coverage resulting from his gradual

maturation as a composer, as he has managed to put a wide array of techniques and styles through his own lens and musical language. Throughout his lifetime, his style has constantly evolved from different focuses such as neoclassicism, serialism, neoromanticism and mysticism. The 1970s during which this work was written in could be described as Rautaavara's most prolific period, during the same period he would write *Cantus Arcticus*, a work for recorded bird tapes and orchestra that would later become one of his most notable.

The first movement's rustic but motoric quasi-bulgarian rhythms (symmetrical 3-2-3 eighth notes) remain almost *moto perpetuo* throughout, while rhythmic accentuations and biting harmonies give the music a driving energy. Towards the end of the movement Rautaavara makes use of sympathetic resonance to create an otherworldly lingering sound. The second movement is a kaleidoscope of polytonality, extended harmonies, and mirror harmony. The finale, marked *"Allegro brutale",* is a savage fugato which features a restatement of previous themes and is a subtle homage to J.S. Bach (the B-A-C-H motif in German features the sequence of notes Bb, A, C and B♮).

Frederic Chopin – *Andante spianato et grande polonaise brillante* in E-Flat Major, Op. 22

(Written 1830)

The Polish pianist and composer has always found his heart closest in the dances of his homeland: Mazurkas and Polonaises. Written around 1830, Chopin wrote the *Grande polonaise brilliante* in E-Flat Major for piano and orchestra prior to the introductory *Andante Spianato*, which was added as an afterthought some 3 years later. Despite originally being meant for combined forces, it is often performed as a solo piano work with the pianist also playing the orchestra interludes.

The introduction was the only time Chopin has used the descriptive term "*spianato*" (roughly meaning "smooth") throughout his music. The rocking ostinato figure and sparkling single-line melody – a common characteristic of Chopin's *cantabile* writing, much owing to his respect for *bel canto* opera – creates a serene soundscape incredibly contrasting to the polonaise to come. A brief and simple mazurka interjects the movement before its closure, and a *tutti* fanfare transitions the work into the flamboyant, aristocratic dance. The extremely flourished and ornate configurations represent the hallmark of the "brilliant" style; like most of Chopin's writing, it is incredibly pianistic. Composed in his final months in Warsaw, the exuberant polonaise as a dance he has being ever proud of would have been a befitting parting message to his homeland.