

The sunny side of Beethoven!

Every music lover associates the name Beethoven principally with the tragic sounds of the Fifth Symphony, the titanic struggle of the Eroica or the monumentality of the Ninth. In short: with sombre music. When considering chamber music, we are tempted to think of the progressive complexity of the late string quartets or of the great piano sonatas. His name seems so inextricably bound to the inexorable and the all-overwhelming that you would almost forget that the master from Bonn composed a great deal of music with an airy tone. What is striking about the lighter and entertaining side of Beethoven is that almost all of this music was composed before 1801 - thus still during his Classical period - and that there was often a wind section involved. Just like Mozart, Beethoven wrote enchanting pieces for wind sections, the Octet for example, and in the Septet of 1799, set up on a larger scale yet still most delightful, we hear the sunniest side of Beethoven.

Along with the Septet, the Quintet opus 16, composed three years earlier for the piano and wind section, is perhaps the most important work stemming from Beethoven's first period. The piece was probably commissioned by a group of Prague wind instrument players with whom the composer may - although this is also uncertain- have performed Mozart's Quintet in E flat, KV 452, during a concert tour that year. However it may be, Mozart's work - which the Hexagon Ensemble also recorded on CD (Arsis, AC 10-99067-2) - was in any case the example on which Beethoven modelled his famous Piano Quintet in the same key. There is a lot to say about the similarities with Mozart's opus, but the differences are no less striking. Whereas Mozart was known for his pure chamber music, Beethoven seems to have written a piano concerto for merely a few instrumentalists. Furthermore, Beethoven's music was composed on a larger scale, particularly the first part which covers approximately half of this piece. The slow, majestic introduction clearly betrays the influence of Haydn, one of Beethoven's tutors. Both here and further into the opening section, during the development, the music has an almost symphonic impact and yet here, more than in any of his other earlier works, Beethoven seems to have taken an advance towards the nine symphonies that he would later write. Just as in the first movement, the lyrical andante is of a more complex nature than the corresponding movement by Mozart. This Quintet is rounded off in an exceedingly light-hearted manner with a playful Rondo.

The first documented performance of opus 16 is that of April 1797 in Vienna, during which Beethoven took the piano part upon himself.

Beethoven's apprentice Ferdinand Ries noted in later years that Beethoven gave an elaborate improvisation of the theme after the fermata before the first repetition of the Rondo theme. Beethoven continued with the inserted cadence for so long that the four members of the wind section became confused several times and put their instruments to their mouths in vain, something which clearly irritated the famous hobo player Ramm. Ries' anecdote once again underlines the concertante movements of the piano part. Just as the previously mentioned Septet, the Quintet would enjoy great popularity. This piece was performed very regularly whilst Beethoven was alive, including during the farewell concert of Beethoven's good friend Shuppanzigh who left for Russia in 1816. The pianist at this performance was the well-known composer and virtuoso Karl Czerny. After the concert this colleague received an angry letter from Beethoven, who - almost twenty years after his own extra cadence- could not bring himself to agree with the many embellishments which Czerny had added. Another controversial performance of opus 16 during Beethoven's lifetime took place during the first years of the nineteenth century and included an appearance by the famous horn player Johann Wenzel Stich, better known by the Italian term of his name: Giovanni Punto. Punto (1748-1803), alias Stich, was the most celebrated horn player of his time and innumerable composers, including Mozart, wrote solo pieces for him. There were few who mastered like him the art of putting one's hand in the bell of the horn to form tones so that tones other than the natural ones could be played (after all, at the time horns were not yet equipped with valves). Punto's music-making made a great impression on Beethoven, so much so that he

wanted to perform with him. He wrote the horn sonata in F, opus 17, especially for their joint concert on 18 April 1800. Yet again according to Ferdinand Ries, Beethoven wrote the sonata only one day before the concert. But that did not diminish its success. From the signal-like motif, with which the horn opens the work, right through to the final movement with the jagged coda, the sonata made a considerable impact on the audience at the première and the whole piece had to be played again. After this triumph, Punto succeeded in persuading Beethoven to travel to Budapest with this piece in May 1800 and they also gave several performances after this. After the untimely death of Punto in 1803 the work became one of the prominent pieces in the horn repertoire.

Besides the light notes and the classical form, Beethoven's early works have in common the fact that they were usually commissioned. It is therefore predominantly occasional music. All these characteristics apply to the early Trio in G, WoO (Werke Ohne Opus or Work without Opus) no. 37, composed by the 16-year-old Beethoven in 1786, years before he moved to Bonn from Vienna. The piece owes its curious composition of piano (the manuscript refers to a 'clavicembalo'), flute and bassoon to the person who commissioned it. Beethoven wrote the trio for the Von Westerholt-Gysenberg family. Count Von Westerholt-Gysenberg himself played the bassoon, his son the flute and his daughter Maria-Anna was taught piano by the young Beethoven. Maria-Anna must have had an advanced technique, judging by the piano part. The opening movement consists of a broadly composed, varied and particularly lively discourse of the three instruments. In the second movement, with magnificent cantilenas brought into the flute and bassoon parts, the lyrical qualities of Beethoven's early work come across well. The final movement consists of a series of variations. It is exactly in these variations that the occasional character of this work is found. Father, daughter and son Von Westerholt-Gysenberg naturally wanted to show what they were capable of in this work and with this in mind Beethoven brought a solo element into the fourth, fifth and sixth variation, in which the bassoonist, flautist and pianist could give their best. The Trio in G may not be one of Beethoven's most important works but together with the splendid horn sonata and the masterly Quintet this work gives a good impression of Beethoven's Classical period.

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