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0521591368 - Beethoven: The 'Moonlight' and other Sonatas, Op. 27 and Op. 31

Timothy Jones

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## *Preface*

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'Everyone always talks about the C# minor Sonata!' exclaimed Beethoven in a moment of exasperation. And, confronted with the vast literature on this sonata, it seems that everyone has continued to talk and write about the 'Moonlight' from the composer's day to our own. Why add to that body of work? First, most of the material on the sonata is inaccessible to all but the most dedicated researcher, and there is currently no monograph on the work in English. Second, there has been much recent scholarly work on Beethoven's first decade in Vienna (1792–1802), and advances in our understanding of the composer's early career are bound to change the way we perceive the works he wrote around the turn of the century. In response, this study engages in a reassessment of the 'Moonlight' Sonata's place in Beethoven's work.

To do so it has been necessary to emulate the sonata and break with a tradition. Unlike the other Cambridge Music Handbooks this book focuses neither on a single work nor on a complete repertoire. My decision to discuss two sets of sonatas dating from 1801–3 has been motivated by historiographical as well as critical factors. The efficacy of perceiving Beethoven's life in early, middle and late periods has been challenged by Beethoven scholars in the last few decades, but it is still universally recognised that the years 1801–3 were crucial for his development as a composer. At the start of the nineteenth century, Beethoven had established himself as the leading piano virtuoso-composer in Vienna after a decade in the city, but had suffered a setback with the dawning realisation that the decline in his hearing was irreversible. At the same time, his music – which had always been perceived by his contemporaries as individual and difficult – became more original, cutting loose from classical models and pointing the way to later masterpieces such as the 'Eroica' and Fifth Symphonies, the 'Waldstein' and

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'Appassionata' Sonatas, and the Op. 59 String Quartets. By the end of 1802 fifteen of Beethoven's piano sonatas had been published, and five more had been composed:

	<i>Written</i>	<i>Published</i>
2	1793–5	1796
Op. 49	1795–7	1805
Op. 7	1796–7	1797
Op. 10	1796–8	1798
Op. 13	1797–8	1799
Op. 14	1798–9	1799
Op. 22	1800	1802
Op. 26	1800–1	1802
Op. 27	1801–2	1802
Op. 28	1802	1802
Op. 31	1802	1803–4

With the exception of Op. 49, these sonatas display a marked individuality that pushes at the generic and stylistic boundaries of the classical genre. But in two sets of sonatas from 1801–2 Beethoven was more radically innovative. In the two Op. 27 pieces he created a new subgenre, the fantasy sonata, by amalgamating late-eighteenth-century sonata and fantasy styles; and in the three Op. 31 sonatas he began to rethink fundamental aspects of classical musical syntax itself. The aim of this study is therefore to explore two contrasting ways in which Beethoven distanced himself from his classical heritage at this crucial stage in his career.

It is difficult to understand what Beethoven was trying to achieve in these works without first considering his Viennese milieu and trends in keyboard music during the 1790s. Chapter 1 gives a brief outline of the keyboard culture of Beethoven's day and discusses the aesthetic values held by the composer's aristocratic sponsors, and chapter 2 considers the changes of direction in Beethoven's career and music at the start of the century. Chapter 3 gives an overview of the genesis and after-life of the sonatas. The final three chapters address technical and critical issues in more detail: chapter 4 explores what the title 'Sonata *quasi una fantasia*' might have meant to Beethoven's contemporaries; chapters 5 and 6 give brief analytical accounts of the sonatas. Of course it is impossible in



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a Handbook to begin to do justice to works of such richness and complexity. My analyses are designed to suggest avenues for more detailed inquiry rather than as fully rounded readings of the sonatas. If their omissions infuriate you, then hopefully the provocation will be fruitful.

Due to limitations of space, music examples have been kept to a minimum. Readers will find it helpful to follow chapters 5 and 6 with a score. Many editions of the sonatas are heavily encrusted with editorial additions and alterations: references in chapters 5 and 6 are to the Henlé Edition of the sonatas, edited by Hans Schmidt. Throughout the text, specific pitches are identified according to the Helmholtz system, C–B, c–b,  $c^1$ – $b^1$ ,  $c^2$ – $b^2$ , etc., whereby  $c^1$  = 'middle' C. Where pitches are discussed in terms of their functions as scale degrees (their position within the scale of the prevailing key), they are signified by a number with a superscript caret: for example, G is  $\hat{1}$  in G, but  $\hat{3}$  in E $\flat$ . In the discussion of harmonic functions, upper-case letters denote major keys and lower-case letters minor keys. The abbreviation V/d means the dominant of D minor.

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