*‘Art truly is a Holy Saturday Experience.’* – Botho Strauß

Beethoven’s Second Last Sonata as a Musical Prayer

By Parvis Hejazi

Beethoven composed his 31st sonata Op. 110 in 1821, at a time by which he was almost completely deaf. A deeply spiritual man, Beethoven was also a humanist, fascinated by Schiller and the ideas of *Sturm und Drang* aesthetics. From his letters, but also from accounts of his friends we know of the great struggle Beethoven found himself in; an inner conflict between a promethean and a pontifical perception of the relationship between Man and God: on one hand, we think of Beethoven as the encapsulation of Schiller’s notion of the *genius*, the Prometheus seeking to reach the transcendental destiny of mankind through his own seemingly supernatural potentials. The Beethoven who speaks to us through the famous 9th Symphony, but also through the 3rd, the *Eroica*, his opera *Fidelio* or the *Hammerklavier* Sonata Op. 106 clearly suggests such a view of the world, reflecting on his mentality. This is an image conflicting heavily with the suffering artist and humble Christian, who through his own constant confrontation and struggle with the limitations of this world, quietly shares his prayers with us in works such as the Missa Solemnis or the piano sonata Op. 109. The following sonata, Op. 110, in A-flat major, is perhaps not only a psychogram of the composer, but also one of the strongest testimonies of his faith. It sits between the two sides of the complex genius that is Beethoven.

As I sit in my conservatory, quarantined in my home in the historical centre of Bremen in North West Germany, I am reading, playing and thinking this music as a Christian. I am hearing it as a bold story, so typical for Beethoven: as the story of someone reflecting on what ties them to this earth, but also full of longing and hope for the rapture and the resurrection; for the world beyond – I am hearing it as a musical prayer.

In the first movement I can hear this very conflict: the opening choral, followed by a simple melody in A-flat major has something shallow about it. Perhaps they resemble the beautiful songs of praise our protagonist remembers from the Sunday morning service at church that he likes to visit. They are precious and delightful, but although they may point towards heaven, they are still very much from this world, written and sung by sinful people with their earthly worries and shortcomings. But suddenly the broken triads open up a new world of wonder at the presence of the divine; I find it somewhat like incense going up in the air, just as prayers rise from our mundane spheres to the source of all beauty; the face of the Lord who is origin and destiny to all humanity. At this point we are completely in the ether to speak with Hegel, in order to return after a ravishing climax to an earthly, Promethean euphoria at the heights of our human potentials, just in order to be followed by the uncertainty, doubts and fragility introducing the development section.

The second movement is called *Scherzo*. But the jokes told here are not ones evoking the light bubbles of laughter one might in spirit hear floating around a café in Vienna where Beethoven spent most of his life. Instead, the kind of laughter we hear is one of hysterical despair at the distortion of the world. Our protagonist has seen that the seeming heights of human potentials shining through in the first movement only lead to dead ends. He is so troubled by this world, that he wants to go, but is not yet ready to – it is a very painful movement, suddenly disrupted by its final cadence, surprisingly resolving in an f-major chord, leading *attacca* into the third movement, one of the most formally complex sonata movements ever written.

Here, our protagonist has left the natural world, but is not yet in heaven. Instead, he experiences separation from God; Christ’s *‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’* is said on behalf of all humans, of all people in the abyss of suffering for the consequences of human capabilities. God the Father sacrifices his only son for the salvation of the world. He dies and descends to hell. The Kingdom of God has not yet been completed. There is and will be suffering in this world. But the message behind the despair evoked by the words *‘My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?’* is that God comes *with* us into the abyss of suffering, to then be able to speak the wonderfully mellow words from John 19:30: *‘It is finished.’*

Back to Beethoven: our protagonist reflects on his life, he is being judged, or, rather, judging himself. In a truly heart-breaking *Arioso dolente* he sings out his pain, not with a bold and operatic voice, but quietly and simply. His Promethean, worldly status symbols do not count anything anymore, he is on his pontifical journey to full communion with his creator. This is the first time that he can be truly himself: a puritan cadence to A-flat minor finishes the *Arioso* and our protagonist finds himself in heaven, experiencing a peace and calm he could have never imagined before. In this first fugue, I find that he marvels at the beauty of the Lord, as the *Arioso dolente* returns. But it is of a different nature than the first one: when in the first one he, our protagonist, is crying at the foot of the cross, he now looks, nourished by the joy of heaven upon the despair of the world. He knows of God’s good plan for us and looks with compassion on our suffering planet. The second fugue, introduced by the sudden and majestic G-major chords at the end of the *Arioso* is a single, ravishing climax to the coda, when our protagonist is finally joined by all the angels and saints in a glorious:

*Sanctus, sanctus, sanctus Dominus Deus Sabaoth.*

*Pleni sunt coeli et terra gloria tua.*

*Hosanna in excelsis.*

*Benedictus qui venit in nomine Domini.*

*Hosanna in excelsis.*

I find, especially in these difficult days, this sonata can lead us through the time of Lent and Good Friday, preparing our hearts and minds for the resplendent message of Easter. At the moment, we are, in a terrifying way confronted with our human shortcomings. But God comes with us, into the darkness of our abyss; and he is with us all the way, all the way to Calvary, all the way to rise again as we will. For me, this work is a musical anticipation of Karl Barth’s words: *‘As theologians, we must speak of God. We cannot speak of God. Thus, we must give glory to God.’*

Bremen, on the 3rd of April 2020. PH