

The first movement of beethoven's sonata op.31 no.1

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This sonata was composed around 1802, a point at which Beethoven experienced the crisis of encroaching deafness. From then on, the composer started to introduce innovative and bold ideas within classical framework in his musical composition to expand the expressiveness of his music. His novel approach was evident in his formal and harmonic arrangement in the first movement of Sonata Op.

31 No. 1. Distinctive harmonic departure from the classical sonata form convention fills the movement with drama. In classical sonata form convention, tonality is to be established in the first theme with no ambiguity so as to make contrast with the second theme, which is normally set in the dominant. In the first movement of Beethoven's sonata Op. 31 No. 1, however, such clarity in tonality is to be questioned.

As shown in Fig. A, after stated in the tonic -G major, the first theme is repeated in full with tonicisation in F major in the exposition (mm. 10-21). The whole step down from G to F suggests a descending direction which would lead towards the "real" home key to the listeners. However, the immediate return of G major demolishes this expectation and confirms G as the home key, posing bold surprise in the very beginning of the music. The listeners are deceived in a sense that their expectation is not fulfilled. The tonicisation also creates tension which needs to be resolved by returning to G major.

The tonal ambiguity created by the tonicisation is innovative with respect to classical sonata form convention. Fig. A The second theme in the exposition is supposed to be in dominant in classical sonata style. In this piece,

nevertheless, the composer placed the second theme in a more remote key area- the mediant (B-flat major). As shown in Fig. B, the arpeggiando passage in the transition (mm. 38-45) seems to establish the dominant- D major, preparing the use of the dominant in the second theme.

However, the listeners are once again tricked as the restatement of the first theme in G major quickly leads to a modulating passage, reinforcing the dominant of the mediant (B) The sudden shift to B major(m. 65) and the light character of the second theme (Fig . C) contrasts sharply with the weighty first theme in the home key. This arrangement is wakening as Beethoven tried to make his listeners believe he was using traditional harmony for the second theme by introducing the D major passage but dawn them with realization when he abruptly stated the theme in the mediant. Fig. B Fig. C

Recapitulation in the classical sonata convention usually indicates double return i.

e. the return of home key and the return of themes. The second theme is supposed to be set in the home key, in this case, G major. However, the composer once again showed his determination in experiencing innovative harmonic writing in this movement. The second theme (Fig. D) in the recapitulation does not simply return to G major. Instead, it is set in E major (mm.

217-224), the submediant of the home key in the beginning, building a surprising elevation of both the key area and the lightness of the music.

When the second theme returns to G major (m. 233), the listeners may as

well consider it as the resolution of the tension created by the E major. Yet, the composer did not think along the same line. The tonicisation in b minor (Fig. E) (mm. 248-252) poses a question : Did the composer want a double return in the recapitulation or not? At the times of the composer, it is a norm to set the second theme in the recapitulation in the home key with clarity.

His innovative idea of suggesting harmonic ambiguity here most likely makes the listeners taken aback and excited. The listeners may be lured to find the exit of the maze created by the harmonic ambiguity. Fig. D Fig. E The perfect cadence of G major (Fig. F) in mm. 254-255 suggests final return to G major after wandering in E major and b minor.

Nonetheless, the cadence is “ deceptive” in the sense that it does not lead back to G major. Instead, it goes back to b minor again. Tricky he might be but the composer was not bold enough to end the second theme in the mediant minor key. He preserved the harmonic integrity by finally returning to the home key-G major (Fig. G) in the closing section of the second theme (mm. 265-275). Fig.

F Fig. G The return to the home key can be seen as a relief from the “ dissonance” produced by the passages of second themes in E major and b minor. Yet, the tonality on G major is not distinctive enough to induce a home-returning emotion in the listeners. Therefore, the composer restated the opening of the first theme in G major and continues with arpeggiando passages (Fig. H) (mm. 288-295) establishing the dominant of the home key. The coda (mm.

295-324) consists only simple harmonies (Fig. I) of the tonic and dominant seventh, reassuring the listeners the sense of finally returning home. Fig . H Fig . I Employing remote keys and tonicisation seem not sufficient for the composer to display his ability to expand the expressiveness of his music. Thus, Beethoven employed the technique modal mixture through out the second theme in both exposition and recapitulation. For instance, the second theme in the exposition starts with B major harmony (mm.

65-69) (Fig. C). With a descending scale, the second theme swiftly changes to b minor (mm. 72-79) (Fig. J). It creates abrupt change in the mood from a sweet dance-like major passage to a stormy minor one. From measure 72, b minor persists throughout the second theme except occasional point of major harmony (mm.

82 and 99) (Fig. K) Fig. J Fig. K The same technique is more thoroughly employed in the second theme in the recapitulation. The first statement of the theme makes use of both E major and e minor harmony (Fig. D) while the closing section of the return of the second theme employs both G major and g minor harmony. (Fig.

G) The rapid changes from major to minor and vice versa dramatizes the passage of the second theme in both appearances and bring on conflicting emotions in the listeners. The conflicting musical gesture also suggests the personal trauma the composer was going through. Facing his encroaching deafness, Beethoven might probably have expressed his own emotional struggle and perplexity. The use of remote keys and modal mixture worked

hand in hand to surprise and stirs the emotions the listeners. Apart from harmonic innovation, the composer made formal departure from the classical sonata convention. Usually the first theme is stated in full in the recapitulation to emphasize the feeling of double return. However, in this movement, the first theme in the exposition is stated twice while it is only stated once (Fig .

L) (mm. 192) in the recapitulation. The first theme materials are also used as transitional passage, preparing for the modulation in the second theme. Fig .

L It can be attributed to the composer's will to emphasize on the more expressive second theme. By shortening the first theme, the colorful second theme naturally stands out and plays a crucial part in expressing the innermost emotions of the composer and stirring the same sentiments in the listeners throughout the movement. Another interesting arrangement is the placement of the transition in the recapitulation.

In most conventional sonatas, the transitional materials are used to link the first theme and the second theme in this movement. This holds true in the exposition in this movement. However, such transition is nowhere to be seen between the first theme and the second theme in the recapitulation. Instead, the transition is placed after the second theme. (Fig. M) (mm. 278-294) The rapid change of key areas and the use of modal mixture in the second theme passages may account for the " displacement" of the transition.

The transition here functions as a tool to make the return of the home key smoother as it is characterized by its tonic harmony and bridge the second

theme with the coda. Even the closing section of the second theme is distinctive with modal mixture, wandering between G major and its parallel minor. Without the transition, the abrupt return to G major established in the coda seem awkward. The tension built in the listeners can be relieved gradually by the tonic transition of considerable length and the coda. Thus, the position of the transition between the second theme and the coda can be justified as an innovative way to balance the dissonance (non-tonic passage) and the consonance (tonic passage). Fig. M To conclude, Beethoven made use of innovative harmonic and formal departure from sonata form convention to expand the expressiveness of his music and arouse sentiments in his listeners in the first movement of his Sonata OP.

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