Piano Sonata In The Classical Era Essay, Research Paper

The Piano Sonata in the Classical Period

The piano sonata was an important part of music during the Classical period . It characterizes the Classical era’s new trend of musical form.

Originally, the sonata was made up of several dance movements, but then in the Classical era, it changed to a fast-slow movement style, each of the movements being composed in one of the forms popular during the Classical period. These consisted of sonata-allegro, ternary, rondo, and theme and variations. Down through history many things characteristic of the sonata have remained the same: “most sonatas have been instrumental music, without voice parts, absolute music without program; concert or divisional music, without social function; solo or chamber music for one to four players, without or multiple performance of the parts; cyclic music, in two to four movements rather than one; and broadly conceived music, exhibiting some of the most extended designs of absolute music”(Newman 479). The sonata is a genre of chamber music, which increased in popularity during the classical period. Generally, it was played by and written for amateur musicians who “practiced and performed for polite society in the comfort of their own homes”(Wright 196). Sonata means “something played” as opposed to the term cantata, which is “something sung”. Also during this time the Alberti bass developed and the keyboard sonata evolved from harpsichord and clavichord and finally, to the piano (Newman 485). The sonata was still used at court, some in the church, and barely at all in the theatre. These three functions are mainly ones of the Baroque era and during the Classical period the sonata took on distinctly different functions. The sonata was “a diversion of the amateur or dilettante, a launching vehicle for the professional composer and performer, a training resource for the student; an occasional item in private and public concerts; and a conventional music accessory in the church”(Newman 486). Mostly those who simply loved to play, amateurs who entertained in their homes or other gatherings also played the sonata. The second important function of the sonata was a way for composers to become known. “Every musician who aspired to join the company of composers working for the public generally began his career with keyboard compositions, namely with solo sonatas”(Newman 487). The third important function was the sonata was used to teach musicians about the art of music. The sonata also played an important role in church music.

The first composers significant in the development of the sonata were Haydn and Mozart. Not much is known about Haydn’s piano sonatas, although out of all his works the string quartets and piano sonatas stand apart from the others. Haydn’s first works for the keyboard are ” sonata like” and were intended for teaching use (Larson 336). After these he had fourteen sonatas, seven of which are unknown. For whom the sonatas were written is also unknown. They are not easy pieces to play and show little amounts of baroque concerto characteristics. Also, they exhibit “Haydn’s originality and independence of fashion”(Larson 336).

Mozart, one of the sonata’s first great composers, had short keyboard compositions, which dated back to his early childhood. These musical compositions are “somewhat mechanical in their textures (with heavy reliance on sequential patterns; much here seems to represent the attentive boy’s exploration of harmonic and textural possibilities”(Plath 687). The sonatas which were written in London share many of the same characteristics, but show a great advancement, including a “remarkable grasp of the principles of J.S. Bach’s symphonic style”(Plath 687). Mozart composed a number of sonatas for the church. These were written for three part strings with the organ continue. These pieces were also very short originally. But later, Mozart had the forms lengthened to fit the masses for which they were written. His last church sonatas had larger orchestral forces.

While in Vienna, Mozart produced his greatest piano sonatas. Most were written as a group and certain elements are a lot like Bach’s sonatas. Mozart composed more great sonatas while on a trip to Mannheim and Paris. He wrote piano sonatas for the Cannabich’s daughter Rosa. Mozart commented that he designed the Andante to depict her. In this piece the contrasts in dynamics, and a sense “expressive affection” are clearly noticeable (Plath 697). The next sonata produced an atmosphere similar to that of the first one. But there are several differences too. “The lines are less elaborate and the work as a whole is a more brilliant and expansive cast”(Plath 697). When Mozart was in Paris, he composed six more piano and violin sonatas. These pieces reflect the local style and are extreme and very expressive. One to be considered is his only piece composed in E minor, “with its paired textures and hesitant wistful manner representing a world of delicate sensibility, its concluding minuet in particular, a rondo or an elegant, pathetic melody of a French cast with a gentle second episode in E major providing harmonic balm”(Plath 697). Mozart’s last sonatas were thought to be written for the Prussian princess between 1789 and 1791, but whether or not he was commissioned to do the job remains in question.

Another composer who made great contributions towards the sonata was Muzio Clementi. Clementi was an acclaimed composer of many keyboard pieces. His sonatas became very popular, probably due to his many public concerts. Clementi’s compositions consisted primarily of sonatas and keyboard pieces which extended “from the simplest gallant writing to the rhetorical passion of the romantic piano music”(Plantinga 487). Clementi’s early to middle sonatas contain intense dynamics and melodies ranging up and down the keyboard. These elements are characteristic of elements in Beethoven’s early works a decade later. Also included in Clementi’s works is “an enduring fondness for uncompromising counterpoint, for two part running figurations, and for various kinds of virtuoso passage work”(Plantinga 487). These sonatas show Clementi’s mastery of the technique used in the sonata. They also include movements, which exhibit an understanding of stable structure. The movements show advancements in structural integrity and a successful assimilation of the widely divergent techniques used in previous sonatas (Plantinga 487).

Clementi’s later sonatas are known for their moderness, technical mastery, experimental form, and extensiveness. In 1802, Clementi published a set of three large-scale sonatas. “They are technically demanding and experimental in form. All three of these sonatas are notably long; all show multiple themes and extended stretches of passage work only tenuously related to those themes, creating an effect of prolixity new to Clementi’s music”(Plantiga 488).

In his late years of composing, Clementi had a reputation that rested almost solely on his ability to write works for the piano. He was sometimes referred to as “father of the pianoforte sonata”(Plantinga 489). Awareness of Clementi’s talent and his influence on other great composers of the sonata, such as Beethoven, has increased throughout music history.

Haydn, Mozart, and Clementi set the stage for one of the greatest composers, Ludwig van Beethoven, who also contributed to the development of the piano sonata. During his early years, he established his reputation as a great pianist and composer for the piano. In this time, Beethoven produced one of his most famous works, the Sonate Pathetique. Sonate Pathetique possessed, as did other sonatas of the period, “a certain intellectual and imaginative quality”(Kerman 379). During this time, Beethoven also wrote sonatas in four movements instead of three.

His late period works, such as the Piano Sonates in E Minor contained a new feature of intimacy and delicacy (Kerman 385). Also growing interest in folk music moved Beethoven to seek a “a new basic level of human contact through basic song, as though without sophistication or artifice”(Kerman 385). This period contained a point of evolution for the sonata. Beethoven revealed through his use of a new type of variation that the different parts express a greater individuality and a completely different view of the original theme. “The theme seems transformed or probed to its fundamentals, rather than merely varied”(Kerman 385).

Beethoven’s last great sonata was the Sonata in B Flat, otherwise known as The Hammerklavier. Written from 1817 to 1818, it also represented a huge point of change in Beethoven’s style. “The Hammerklavier paradoxically represents a reaction, in that Beethoven reverted to the traditional four-movement pattern in place of the fluid formal experiments of the sonatas of 1814, and turned away from their tone of lyrical intimacy”(Kerman 387).

The sonata began as a four or five movement genre. Then, during the classical era, it evolved into a fast-slow-fast movement style and eventually developed into music composed solely for the keyboard. Generally, amateur musicians, who were trying to gain a reputation, or who were simply performing for the pleasure of small groups performed the sonata. Composers, such as Haydn, Mozart, Clementi, and Beethoven played key roles in the development of the piano sonata.

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