

City University, London

SUMMER RECITAL YEAR 2, 2021

Programme

Estelle Gilbert, piano

Tuesday 1st June, 12.25

ROBERT SAXTON

Hortus Cantus from Hortus Musicae Book 1 (2013)

York: University of York Music Press, 2014

‘Hortus Cantus’ (The Singing Garden) is the third piece in Book 1 of Robert Saxton’s twelve piece cycle *Hortus Musicae* which was originally commissioned for the 2013 City of London Festival. The composer describes the cycle as addressing the idea of the garden as a ‘sacred space’. He explains that the five pieces in Book 1 have ascending fifth pitch centres which together outline the pentatonic set E, B, G, D, and A.

The title of the overall cycle suggests a link to a much earlier work, *Hortus Musicus* (1687), a set of six sonatas by the Dutch composer Jan Adam Reincken (1623-1722). Reincken left little music behind and modern commentators have not been kind to him. However, J. S. Bach was sufficiently impressed by his music to arrange several of the *Hortus Musicus* pieces for keyboard, adapting one of them as his *A minor Sonata (BWV 965)*. *Hortus Musicae* is rich with literary and musical allusion, and a number of the pieces which comprise it, including ‘Hortus Cantus’, are characterised by strongly contrapuntal writing.

If the implied link with *Hortus Musicus* provides a temporal resonance, sonic resonance is most definitely a defining feature of ‘Hortus Cantus’. The composer describes the piece as:

A garden in which nature ‘sings’ ... in the manner of a ‘chorale prelude’ and ending with the *cantus firmus* transformed into bells.

In the liner notes accompanying a recording of his piano music, Robert Saxton describes himself as having mixed heritage with roots in Russia, Lithuania, Poland and England, and that this background is important to his compositional journey. With this in mind, I began to ponder the particular nature of the bells in *Hortus Cantus*. I found out that Orthodox bells are tuned to the interval of a seventh (rather than the octave found in English bells) between the upper and lower ringing tones, and that in ringing of an Orthodox carillon, rhythm is prioritised over melody. This piece is full of polyrhythms and intervals of a second, which can of course be reinterpreted as inverted sevenths.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

Sonata quasi una Fantasia in E♭ Major, Opus 27, No. 1(1801)

Bertha Antonia Wallner (Editor). Conrad Hansen (Fingering). Urtext Edition

Munich: G. Henle Verlag, 1952/1980

- *Andante*
- *Allegro molto e vivace*
- *Adagio con espressione*
- *Allegro vivace*

In Opus 27, this sonata, sometimes known as ‘the other one’, is paired with the better known Moonlight Sonata. Composed by 1801, it is unique amongst Beethoven’s piano sonatas in that the instruction *attacca subito* between movements makes clear that the work is to be played from beginning to end without stopping. The pianist and writer Charles Rosen ¹, amongst others, suggests that Mozart’s *Fantasia in C minor K. 457* may have provided inspiration, and the opening of Beethoven’s second movement, also in C minor, certainly hints at this.

Many writers observe that Beethoven never returned to this experimental form again in the piano sonatas. However, I feel that he did not dismiss it entirely. I had been playing *Opus 26*, the late bagatelles and the last work Beethoven ever wrote for the piano. Certain motifs felt familiar, insinuating themselves as ‘ear-worms’. I finally realised that a surprising number of ideas from the sonata resurface in the bagatelles, especially Number 3, which is essentially a *fantasia* in miniature.

The first movement, an *Andante* in E♭ major, is benign and gently insistent. A faster tempo is provided by the C major inner section, but this is essentially a static movement with a simple harmonic schema.

In contrast to the first movement, the outer sections of the *Allegro molto e vivace* are unsettled and unsettling. However, playfulness is not far away. The unlikely subject of horses appears a number of times in Beethoven’s life and letters: he was in fact presented with one in 1797 by Countess von Browne to whom he had dedicated a number of works ², and it seems that in 1814 he was later given an unusual commission by his principle patron, the Archduke Rudolph to whom he replied ³:

I notice that your Imperial Highness wishes to make an experiment on horses by means of my music. It is to see, so I perceive, whether the riders thereby can make some clever somersaults. Ha, ha, I must really laugh at your Imperial Highness thinking me of me in this matter; for that I shall be to the end of my life

Your most willing servant,

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

NB – The desired horse-music will reach your Imperial Highness at full gallop.

With this in mind, and in accord with the sense that nothing was ever wasted, I really do wonder about the galloping motif in the middle section. Whatever the case, this section suggests that the movement really does not take itself too seriously.

In the third and fourth movements, the soulful aria-like *Adagio con espressione* leads directly into the sometimes earthy playfulness of the *Allegro vivace*. This is a contrastive device which Beethoven uses in increasingly extreme ways in the later, bigger works: for example in Piano Sonata Opus 110⁴ where he places a *scherzo* movement based on the folksongs ‘I’m a bum, you’re a bum, we’re just a couple of drunks’ and ‘My cat has had kittens’ alongside a final movement which includes an *arioso* expressing a feeling of almost unbearable pain.

Misha Donat⁵ points out that Beethoven uses another device in Opus 27, No. 1 which appears in a number of his other middle-period works. This involves reprising earlier material in a later movement. Here, a shortened form of the *Adagio con espressione* appears towards the end of the fourth movement just before a rumbustious, almost throw-away coda that concludes the work.

References:

¹ ROSEN, Charles (2002). *Beethoven's Piano Sonatas: A Short Companion*. (Yale University Press), p. 153

² SWAFFORD, Jan (2014). *Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph*. (London: Faber and Faber), p. 200

³ KALISCHER, Dr. A. C., Ed. (1972/2013). *Beethoven's Letters*. (New York: Dover), pps. 164-54

⁴ SWAFFORD, Jan (2014). *Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph*. (London: Faber and Faber), p. 755

⁵ DONAT, Misha (2015/2019). Introduction to *Barenreiter Urtext edition of Sonata quasi una Fantasia in E^b Major, Opus 27, No. 1 and Sonata quasi una Fantasia No. 2 in C[#] minor*, p.