

An Interpretation Suggestion for the First Movement of Beethoven's Piano Sonata No. 23 in Accordance with Faith Motif

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Abstract

5th symphony of Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) imbedded in the history of music also as the faith symphony after the explanation of the composer related to what he had intended to express in this work. Faith motif being associated with this symphony was also observed in other works of the composer. In this study, faith motif and the elements affecting the creation process of faith idea are presented, musical meaning of this motif is analyzed and the relation of faith motif with Piano Sonata No. 23 is evaluated. In the last section of the study, an interpretation suggestion was presented to the first section of Piano Sonata No. 23 on the basis of faith motif.

Keywords: L. v. Beethoven, Fate Motif, Fifth Symphony, Piano Sonata No. 23, Interpretation, Analysis, Suggestion.

1. Introduction

There is no more fascinating personality in music history than Ludwig van Beethoven. With this spiritual giant and fighter for the rights and dignity of the musician in the court society of the European aristocracy, we have the true beginnings of modern pianism (Gerig, 2007, p81). His different personality is reflected in his music, his innovative approaches and musical ideas that were beyond his era made him one of the most important composers of the history of music. Beethoven's attempt to transform his ideas into musical expression describes what kind of a composer he was. Examples of the basis of the leitmotif concept, which is encountered theoretically in the 20th century music, and his ideas which can represent the expressionist approach are seen in his works. Although these examples were subjected to criticism in his lifetime and were not understood enough, Beethoven has become a source of inspiration for successor composers with these approaches.

2. 5TH Symphony OP. 67 (1808) And Faith Motif

Beethoven's 5th symphony is one of the most popular and the most misunderstood works in the history of music. Since the expressions constituting the music were not suitable for the naïve and ordinary audiences or it did not reach ideal audiences, the critics of the period interpreted this symphony as "roaring cataracts with nonsense" (Tovey, 1972, p.38). This shows that the composer's pursuit of expression in the music and his deep ideas did not become integrated with the audiences and it did not make sense enough from the perspectives of the audiences. Even Beethoven's works which are still popular today were criticized similarly at that time and his music was found strange most of the time. Instead of these impatient criticisms, it would be more correct to pay attention to statements, which represent and tell the deepness of his music in a realistic way in order to understand Beethoven's music. Anton F. Schindler who was known to be one of Beethoven's closest students always talked about his works and composition in glowing words, and he stated his admiration to 5th symphony with these words;

Among the hundreds of compositions written by many masters, no work bears out more fully than Beethoven's C minor symphony the maxim that every true work of art is a realization of the divine, whose purpose it is to confer the loftiest blessing on man by the enlightenment of the earthy and the spiritualization of the sensual as well as by the sensualization of the spirit. What a marvellous union of pathos, majesty, mystery, and grandeur is contained in those four movements! What a life of poetry this work unfolds before our senses, allowing us to see into its depths (Schindler, 1996, p. 147).

Schindler's this interpretation covers all the four sections of the symphony and it presents a more concrete data related to the deepness of the music expressed. The composer's statement after the performance of the work strengthened Schindler's. By referring the introduction motif of the first section of the symphony, Beethoven presented us the key to what he intended to express in his music by saying "Thus Fate knocks at the door" (Schindler, 1996, p. 147).



Figure1: Beethoven's Fate Motif – 5th Symphony Measures 1-5

After this statement of the composer, this symphony became the focus of interest of critics and musicians and it tried to be studied and interpreted meticulously. In this process, the researchers tried to find an answer to the question where Beethoven fell in the idea of fate or what the source of this idea was. Today, although we do not have a final result, it is considered that the source of inspiration for the idea of fate is a love poem written in that period. This poem which was Italian originally was performed on a song contest and it was considered that Beethoven was influenced this poem below and created the source for the musical idea in 5th symphony (Schindler, 1996, p.147).

“O let me rest in peace
In the darkest night of death!
Thou should'st have felt this sadness
While yet I drew life's breath.
Vanish and let my shadow
Sleep th' eternal sleep.
My ashes draw no warmth from
The hot tears thou dost weep! (Schindler, 1996, p. 148).”

Based on this poem, it is possible to estimate what the emotions of the composer were; however, it is quite hard to understand what kind of a relationship this has with his own fate. At this point, it would be more realistic to think that Beethoven formed the perception of fate on the basis of his own life or personalized the phenomenon of fate on the basis of his life again.

This fate motif heard in the introduction section of symphony first constitutes the musical construction of the first section. In other words, the first section of the work was created on this motif. The structure of the motif is quite minimal and Beethoven tried to describe the action of knocking the door of the fate by using music. Therefore, rather than being melodic, the motif is encountered as a rhythmical figure. As it can be seen in the figure below, each eighth note represents the correspondence of the action of knocking on the door; long notes represent the stopping point before the following action.



Figure 2: Beethoven's Fate Motif, Its Structure and The Representation of The Activity of Knocking The Door 5th Symphony Measures 1-5

The approach to turn an idea into a musical structure is seen in the first quarter of 20th century in a more clear and theoretical way. Based on the information we have today, it will not be wrong to say that the fate motif bears the properties of being a leitmotif. Of course the fate motif is far away from the well known leitmotif structure; however, it has the properties of the exact correspondence of this as an idea. Moreover, fate motif's being presented in the works of Wagner (Tovey, 1972, p.39), who is known to use the leitmotifs in an apparent way, justifies this. Additionally, the researches that has been done show that the rhythmical figure called as fate motif also presents in other works of Beethoven such as Piano Sonata No. 23, Piano Concerto in G Major, Op. 74 Quartet and Violin Concerto (Tovey, 1972, p.39).

Based on all these findings fate motif should not be thought only as a rhythmical figure. When the poem

which is the source of inspiration for fate idea and the musical expression of 5th symphony where this idea occurred in a work for the first time take into consideration, fate motif expresses musical correspondence of an intense emotion and thoughts related to a very specific subject rather than a rhythmical figure. Additionally, being observed of this motif in Beethoven's works composed after 5th symphony brings along the probability that fate idea had preserved its existence all his life and was a situation that affected him in accordance with his belief.

3. Piano Sonata No. 23 Op. 57 (1807)

Piano Sonata No. 23 is one of the most well known works of piano literature. This sonata, which has a significant place both in music education and in the repertoires of professional pianists, has been an irrevocable section of today's stages both in terms of its technical difficulty and its musical expression. This sonata was exposed to criticism although it was liked at the period when it was composed, it has been called *appassionata* by the audiences and the performers in time (Gültek, 2007, p. 103) and it has preserved its fame with this name up to present day.

3.1. Piano Sonata No. 23 and It's Relevance of the Fate Motif

Composition process of Piano Sonata No. 23, which was published in 1807, shared the same process with 5th symphony which is the first work where fate motif was used. In this process, when it was considered that Beethoven was under the influence of fate idea or he composed a symphony expressing fate; it is possible to think that the piano sonata which was composed in the same period was affected by the same idea. When the first section of sonata is analyzed by taking this interaction into consideration, fate motif can be seen clearly as a rhythmical figure. When the musical expressions and tone dynamics are taken into consideration, it is also possible to say that fate motif is reflected in the expression of the first section as a realistic idea. The effect of these ideas and musical expressions on the audience is told in a very remarkable review of that period;

"Everyone knows Beethoven's method of composing a major sonata; and in all of them, in his most multitudinous ways of presenting bizarre material, Beethoven generally adheres to the same method. In the first movement of this sonata he has once again released many evil spirits similar to those already familiar through their appearance in other major sonatas. But truly, this time it is worth to the trouble of fighting to overcome not only the extreme difficulties of the piece but also the repugnance that one frequently feels over forced waywardness and eccentricity! (Schindler, 1996, p. 138)."

One of the two contradicting themes stated in this review is the theme with the same rhythmical properties with fate motif which is heard right after the introduction of the section and played with bass voices.



Figure 3: Presentation of Fate Motif in Piano Sonata No. 23.

Sonata No.23 Op. 57 Measures 6-15

This theme also represents the fate motif again with its movement towards basses and musical characteristics. This motif is encountered in different places and with different ways throughout the section.



Figure 4: The presentation of Fate Motif in Piano Sonata No. 23
Sonata No. 23 Op. 57 Measures 55-63



Figure 5: The presentation of Fate Motif in Piano Sonata No. 23
Sonata No. 23 Op. 57 Measures 135-136

Due to the form structure of the section, the motifs above are seen in the same way in the réexposition section. Additionally, this motif also appears in the passage to the coda section and in coda.



Figure 6: The Presentation of Fate Motif in Piano Sonata No. 23, Before Coda
Sonata No. 23 Op. 57 Measures 242-246

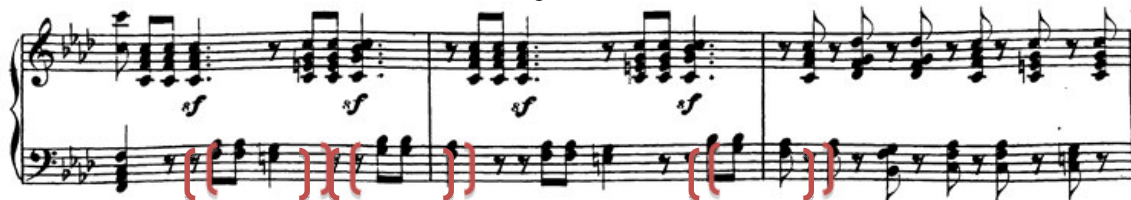


Figure 7: The Presentation of Fate Motif in Piano Sonata No. 23, Before Coda
Sonata No. 23 Op. 57 Measures 256-258

The other motif heard in the beginning of the section is a motif which moves to the opposite direction, and which is the opposite of fate motif in terms of both as a theoretical and musical expression. This is the correspondence of the second theme which creates the situation we evaluated as repulsion.



Figure 8: Piano Sonata No.23, The Motif which Moves in The Opposite Direction of Fate Motif
Sonata No. 23 Op. 57 Measures 13-14

We encounter this second motif in a responding manner almost every time right after the fate motif is heard. What is clear about this motif is that it provides a maintenance for the music with a characteristic which creates an explosion after that. When the general musical structure of the section is analyzed, it is seen that these two contradicting structures create a repulsion towards each other whenever they meet.

4. An Interpretation Suggestion For The First Movement Of The Piano Sonata No. 23 In Terms Of Beethoven's Fate Motif

Imagination for an interpreter is an element which affects the quality of interpretation of the work to be interpreted directly. The issues such as the composer of the work, the period it is composed and the conditions of that period present the keys related to how the interpretation should be to the interpreter; however, that does not and should not mean everything for an interpreter. As it is known from the statement of Ignaz Moscheles (1794-1870), neither Beethoven were explaining himself about his works; nor he let other people to talk about this subject in his presence; his students needed to find out the emotions and thoughts that they wanted to express via their imagination (Herriot, 2002, p.22). Of course the signs which are put on the notes by composer are determinative and leading for the interpreter but, it is almost impossible to find out what the music is telling just by depending on the notes. The reason why is that the composer transfers the music a composes to the paper from his own point of view and he does not need to explain every thought. At this point, interpretation becomes the section of this activity and the imagination of the interpreter completes the thoughts that are not displayed in the notes. In other words, the interpreter should look for the things which are not written there by going beyond the notes via his imagination. Based on this thought, it will not be wrong to interpret Piano Sonata No.23 on the basis of fate motif.

In order to interpret this sonata on the basis of fate motif; the fate motif, the contradicting motif and what it corresponds should be determined. Fate motif expresses a demand, adopting or a reality that incommodes in terms of musical expression; the other motif reflects an approach that rejects the demand and does not accept existing reality. When their usage was analyzed, the fate motif dominates the section generally and this two contradicting structure do not always encounter explicitly. The second motif usually seems to be used as a response to fate motif. However, musical reflections of these two contradicting motifs lead the music even if they are not heard clearly. Therefore the contradiction throughout the section occurs on the basis of these two motifs. The effect of to the section maintains a mood that creates aggressiveness, tension and fear; the other motif counters this with a calmer and a relatively happy character. This contradiction which occurs as a natural consequence of the music that is intended to be expressed, expresses the existence of two different thoughts as well as theoretical or musical reflection. Fate motif and the other responding motif are the resulting reflections of these two different thoughts. Hence, the formation of the musical expression in the section occurs with an expression created by the conflict of two different thoughts and their struggle to bring into existence.

Initial sentence of the sonata presents a deep musical expression till the trill which is in the end. Musical character of the sentence is the first presentation of a contemplative and dramatic subject whose existence creates a discomfort. A demi-tone sharpen sentence right after that is the same with the first sentence but its musical character reflects a more energetic and positive mood. This expresses that the discomforting situation expressed in the first sentence is not accepted and the second sentence opposes that. The presentation of these two sentence is the contradiction heard in the section. Being minor of the first sentence and major of the second sentence creates this contradiction theoretically. Later, the return to trill in the end of the first sentence again and combining this to the fate motif present the explanation of the discomforting subject in the first sentence.



Figure 9: Piano Sonata No.23, 1st and 2nd sentence structure, Fate Motif Combination
 Sonata No. 23 Op. 57 Measures 1-11

The motif which comes right after the fate motif and responds it represents the correspondence of not adopting and the sudden forte tone in the following creates a certain rejection idea.



Figure 10: Piano Sonata No.23, Fate Motif and Rejection Movement
 Sonata No. 23. Op. 57 Measures 12-15

Musical development up to this point, is the first example of the contradiction that dominates the section generally. Following themes are the reflections of these two characters or they are formed as the sub-meanings of them. The first example of this is the trios related to the fate motif. They are not the same as the motif structurally; however, its musical expression reminds the fate motif. The tension it creates, music's being anxious and fearful; and also theoretical similarities with the fate motif present the expression of fate idea in a different way in this passage of the section.



Figure 11. Piano Sonata No. 23, The Reflection of Fate Motif
 Sonata No. 23 Op. 57 Measures 26-29

Being in the major tone of the passage right after that and its presenting a calm character is the reflection of sentence that responds to the fate in the beginning of the section. They are different from each other basically, but their musical expressions tell about the same thought. This theme, which stops the tense atmosphere of the section for a short while and causes the fate reality to be forgotten, reminds an unwilling adoption or a calm resistance. The contradiction here is not in terms of tone or theory but it is the response of theme to the discomforting thought by the use of peace and tranquility.



Figure 12. Piano Sonata No. 23, The Reflection of the Fate Motif Contradiction
Sonata No. 23 Op. 57 Meters 36-38

However, this calmness does not last for long and the tension reoccurs when the following trill is heard. As a result of this, the point, where the tense music reaches, is again the magnificent theme where the fate motif exists. (See: Figure 4). The effect of the fate thought in that passage of the section lasts for longer through the existences of trios which follow and remind the fate theme. What is experienced at this point is that the contradicting response also gets longer in conjunction with the length of this effect. This situation causes contradicting response to be stronger and determinant musical character and makes the themes which are happy and peaceful in the beginning of the section more severe and persistent.



Figure 13. Piano Sonata No. 23, Musical Character of Contradiction of Fate Motif Change
Sonata No. 23 Op. 57 Measures 113-119

Being persistent of this contradicting response increases the musical dynamic by prolonging the resistance situation. Consequently, the contradiction in the section is transferred from piano tone to the forte tone and changes towards the deepness and chaos created by the themes which have the capacity to push each other. However, Fate motif takes the place of the persistent contradicting response and presents itself in the increasing dynamic of the section through forte tone (See: Figure 5). The music enters the réexposition passage through the following trios and the first sentence of the section along with them. Same musical dynamics preserve their existence in the réexposition passage, as well. From this point on, the change in the musical expression happens before the coda. The most persistent and so-called aggressive resistance in the section is seen in that part. This corresponding resistance, which is peaceful and starts in a major tone, towards the mood reflected by fate motif has an increasing dynamic here as it has in the other parts of the section. This resistance continues till the fate and its corresponding motif which are heard clearly again just before the coda.



Figure 14: Piano Sonata No. 23, Resistance Beginning before the Coda
Sonata No. 23 Op. 57 Measures 216-218

All these increasing resistances conclude by being combined to the fate motif sooner or later. No matter how long it gets, no matter how persistent it is, this result does not change and determines the direction of the musical expression till coda. As oppose to this, the most powerful rejection happens in the introduction of coda and causes this expression to end in an ambiguous way. In other words, neither of the themes dominates.

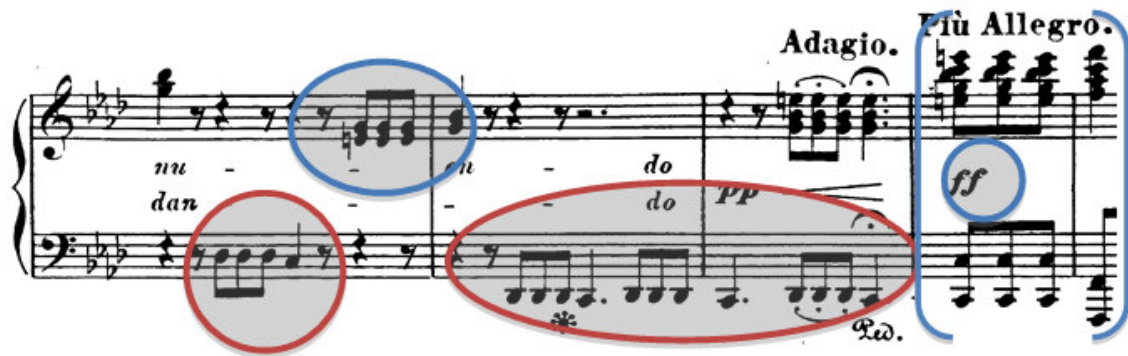


Figure15: Piano Sonata No. 23, Introduction to the Coda and Rejection
Sonata No, 23 Op. 57 Measures 216-218

This equality is observed in coda passage. The contradiction between the fate and the rejection as a minimal reflection of all section helps the desired music to be ambiguous and conflicted till the end. Therefore, the section ends with a moody musical expression which occurs with the effect of an unconcluded, tiring conflict.

5. Conclusion

Fate and the contradicting motif, the musical continuity created by the reflections of these two motifs are formed in the hands of the interpreter in the end. On the basis of this approach, the interpretation of two contradicting thought in the composer's mind is related to how the interpreter gives the meaning to these thoughts. There is a fate motif in the section and this means different things for different interpreters. Similarly, the meaning of the corresponding motif of fate can be different. What is important at this point is not what the truth can be, instead, how acceptable and interesting the interpretation is. As a consequence, it is not possible how Beethoven perceived fate. Obtained findings are only enough for us to deduce. The result of this makes us think that Beethoven questioned the idea of fate in a way, he could not accept it but also he was aware that rejecting it was impossible. This idea affects directly not only the musicality of the section but also the quality of the interpretation which is effective throughout the sonata.

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