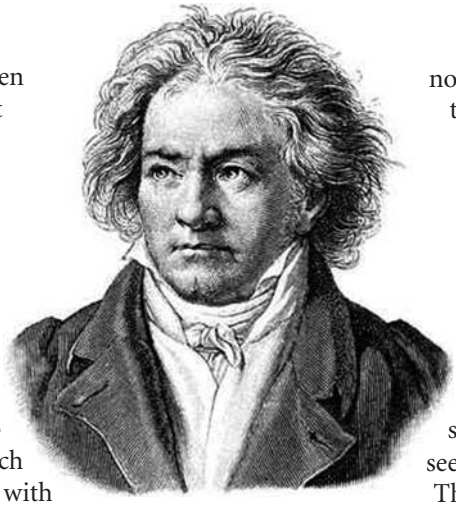
Beethoven Waltz in D

BY JOSEPH SMITH



Are you surprised that Beethoven composed waltzes? So was I! It was when I was recording my CD of piano waltzes (Brioso 142), and editing a companion print volume for Dover Publications, that I looked through Beethoven's work list and found he had composed two. (Two pieces designated "waltz," that is. Obviously, Nos. 3 and 9 of the Bagatelles Op. 119 are waltzes in everything but title. The tempo marking of No. 3 acknowledges it as a "German dance," which was used more or less interchangeably with "waltz" in the classical era.)

The waltzes were written to order. Beethoven could often treat his friends with unaccountable rudeness and irascibility, but he could also be surprisingly obliging on occasion. One favored recipient was Carl Friedrich Müller, an actor who, on becoming an invalid, could no longer perform; to earn money he decided to issue a Collection of 40 New Waltzes contributed by well-known composers. For this publication, designed to celebrate the New Year, Beethoven composed his E-flat Waltz (WoO 84). Publishing must have moved faster then than now—Beethoven composed it in November, and the publication appeared in December 1824. Müller followed it up the next year with Welcome a Second Time! New Year's and Carnival Edition as a Continuation of the Popular Musical Gift, Fifty New Waltzes. This year, Beethoven produced a set of Ecossaises (WoO 86) and the present Waltz in D (WoO 85). From a reply written into a "conversation book" (friends wrote their half of the conversation into a notebook for the deaf composer) we infer that Beethoven even expressed interest in the success of the project.

The waltzes have never been well known, but the set of Ecossaises once enjoyed popularity through Busoni's "concert transcription." This transcription overpowers the modest original dance, and Busoni's impetuous recording of it overpowers the transcription. The result sounds more "Beethovenate" than Beethoven's original!

The Waltz in D may not initially strike the eye as particularly interesting: it is a mere sixteen bars in length, contains only a single chromatic alteration (repeated once), and the right hand flows in an unbroken stream of sixteenth-notes throughout. Did it really need a Beethoven to compose this? In fact, though, the eye and the ear can sometimes differ in their reaction to a piece of music. As heard, the right hand is not a series of single notes, but two voices, their notes sounded alternately in two registers—a "compound" line. The relationship of the two voices proves to be varied and sophisticated—sometimes, the lower voice is on the beat and the upper is syncopated, sometimes vice versa. The slurring is varied throughout—sometimes six notes are joined, sometimes four followed by two, sometimes none. In the second half, the voices are spaced so far apart that the upper one seems to levitate over the lower one.

These three pieces have long been omitted from "complete" collections of Beethoven's piano pieces. For instance, the editor of the Henle's Urtext acknowledges that he has excluded dances. Yet the same volume includes Beethoven's E-flat minuet (WoO 82), revealing the arbitrary nature of these categories—after all, when Beethoven composed this piece, the minuet was still a social dance, albeit an old-fashioned one.

It seems to be a universal impulse to place a special significance on "last" works—to suppose that they contain some special message. In the case of Beethoven's piano works, the Diabelli Variations richly fulfills this expectation: no other single piano work offers as complete a representation of Beethoven's range of musical styles, moods, and keyboard techniques. One feels that it ought to be Beethoven's final piano work, and it is usually cited as such. But due to Müller's "Welcome a Second Time!" Beethoven's last works for piano are in fact the Ecossaises and the Waltz in D. Dare we compare the present waltz to the monumental Diabelli Variations? Well, yes! Beethoven chooses to end the variations not with a fugue, not with a virtuosic variation, but with a gentle dance—a minuet. For the most part, this disembodied dance, marked "dolce" (sweetly), hovers in the treble range. The D major Waltz, likewise marked "dolce," lies exclusively in the treble. It lacks the strongly rhythmic character of functional dance music, despite its appearance in Müller's collection. It may be only a tiny, unpretentious scrap of music, dashed off as a favor. But it is also late Beethoven—a spiritualized waltz, just as the Diabelli Variation is a spiritualized minuet.

See *Beethoven's Waltz* on page 7.

Joseph Smith's newest CD, Piano Barcarolles from Venice to the Mississippi, is on the Brioso label (No. 155).

Waltz in D

WoO 85

Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)