Beethoven's Minuets

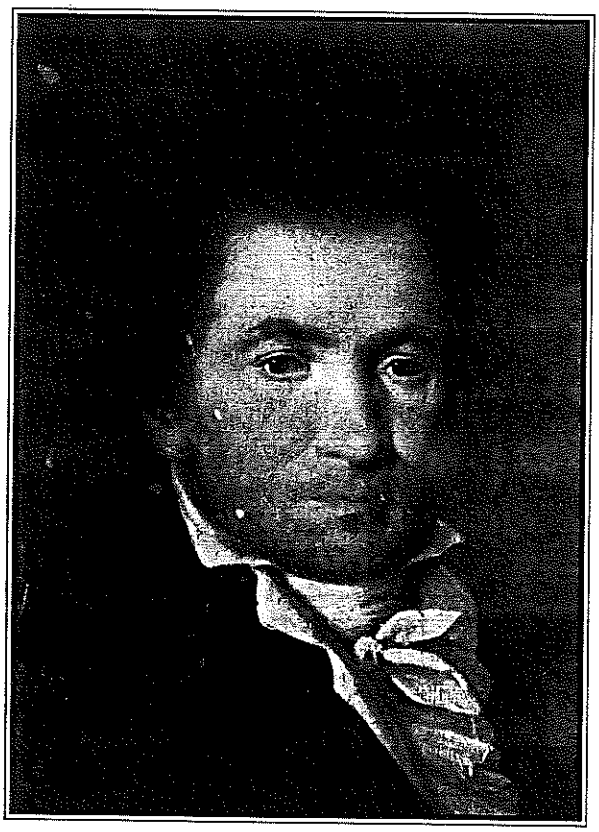
By Joseph Smith

In this issue's Letters column, reader Rosemaree Holden requested information about Beethoven's Minuet in E Flat (WoO 82), which is printed here. The piece is not particularly well known, but it is represented in serious editions of this composer's short pieces. His Minuet in G, however, one of the most famous minuets ever—ubiquitous in teaching anthologies—never appears in scholarly editions of Beethoven's short pieces. I always wondered why.

Was it possible that the Minuet in G was not really by Beethoven? If so, it would not be the first piece misattributed to a famous composer. (Think, for instance, of the pieces that Bach copied into Anna Magdalena's notebook but did not himself compose.) But this minuet is indeed worthy of Beethoven: despite its relative simplicity, it displays admirable resourcefulness in deriving varied material from its basic motifs. It sounds like Beethoven.

When I finally came upon a source including its "work without opus number" number, it was simple to track it down. It turns out that it is the second of the Six Minuets (WoO 10). These were composed for orchestra, but the orchestral version has not survived, only the composer's piano transcription. In other words, it is a "piano piece" by default. This group was published in 1796, around the time of Beethoven's Op. 2 sonatas, and in fact, the trio of the Minuet in G and the trio of the moody minuet from the F minor Sonata, Op. 2, No.1, strongly resemble one another. The Minuet in G betrays its orchestral origin in a single spot: the series of legato sixths at the end of the minuet proper. They sound terrific—their grand sonorousness probably contributed to the piece's immense popularity—but under the fingers, with its demand for quickly and quietly sliding the thumb while the hand is extended, the passage just doesn't *feel* like Beethoven's early piano writing.

Because the dance appeared so much earlier (in the court of Louis IV in the 1660s), it is easy to forget that the minuet continued to be actually danced throughout the eighteenth century. About the same time as the Minuet in G, for instance, 1796, Beethoven also composed minuets for the annual ball of the *Gesellschaft der bildenen Künstler*—a commission regarded as an honor for the young composer.



Ludwig van Beethoven

By the time Beethoven composed his Minuet in E flat (around 1805), the French Revolution had decisively terminated the court, and the minuet, instead of a living dance, was a souvenir of a vanished past. It is unlikely that the Minuet in E-flat was intended for dancing. A piquant touch is the way Beethoven manages to sneak back into the opening strain at bar 26 without warning. The three-bar phrases that begin the trio pay tribute to the French minuet's original structure of steps.

Composed at about the time of the Minuet in E flat, Beethoven's Sonata Op. 54 begins with a movement in minuet tempo. (The obliging minuet has served Beethoven as finale in Op. 49, No. 2, and as slow movement in Op. 31, No. 3, but this is the first and only time it opens a Beethoven piano sonata.) Beethoven seems to take a vandalistic pleasure in cutting off the elegant minuet strains with sections in rough, clattering octaves and sixths.

In 1823, Beethoven chose to conclude his last major work for piano, *33 Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli*, with a tribute to the past: a Baroque largo, a fugue, and finally, an extended "Tempo di Menuetto moderato." This exquisitely delicate minuet seems all the more ethereal in the context of the monumental, dense work. How strange that these variations reverse history: in life, the minuet was replaced by the waltz—here, a blatant, jolly waltz is transformed into an idealized minuet! ■

See both Beethoven Minuets on the following pages.

Joseph Smith will be performing at New York's Alice Tully Hall at Lincoln Center on May 7 at 8 PM.