

The art of hand-splitting: Vianna da Motta's contribution toward a better rendering of Beethoven's sonata op. 31/2

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Vianna da Motta's note-distribution in Beethoven's sonata op. 31/2 alters the composer's original notation in a significant manner. The discussion lies on whether these changes may help to emphasize the musical intentions or if by facilitating the execution of some passages, the musical result may be subverted. While some pianists simply object to this practice, others believe it may bring advantages in the sense that by reducing the technical difficulties of a particular passage one can better concentrate on the musical result. Through the analysis of some of the most relevant of Vianna da Motta's hand-splitting solutions it is concluded that they are an objective vehicle toward a better rendering of the work both technically and musically, providing at the same time fertile ground for further individual findings.

Keywords: hand-splitting; piano; performance; Vianna da Motta; Beethoven

Distributing notes between the hands in a different way than notated by the composer is a practice that is not unanimously accepted among pianists. Polini, Serkin, Arrau, and Eschenbach are totally against it, Barenboim acknowledges it in Rachmaninoff or Tchaikovsky but never in Beethoven, and Perahia, Brendel, Richter, and Stefan Askenase believe it to be a useful practice (Meyer-Josten 1989). Older pianists also disagree on this matter: Schnabel "objected violently to the constant hand-splitting of the pianists of the Liszt school" (Wolf 1972, p. 117), while Cortot believed namely in splitting the octaves at the beginning of Beethoven's op. 111. (Thieffry 1986). As a faithful heir of his masters Liszt and Bülow, the Portuguese José Vianna da Motta (1868-1948) was described by his former pupil and biographer João de

Freitas Branco as having the ability to discover the most “ingenious solutions which, once learned, seemed as Columbus’s egg.” Branco also emphasized the fact that “the distribution of the notes between the hands, changing some from the right to the left, or the other way around, facilitated a great deal the execution of particularly transcendental passages” (Branco 1987, pp. 111-112).

Vianna da Motta’s editorial work, particularly of Beethoven, reveals an extreme attention to performance details, notably through the introduction of numerous fingering alternatives in which hand-splitting suggestions play an important role (for a detailed analysis of da Motta’s unpublished edition of Beethoven’s op. 7, see Pipa 2004). His only printed edition of a Beethoven sonata was that of op. 31/2, issued by Sassetti in Lisbon, a work in which Vianna da Motta rearranges the text in order to overcome the difficulties of Beethoven’s writing. Another of his distinguished disciples, composer and pianist Fernando Lopes-Graça, noted that by the time the edition was released it caused a certain “degree of scandal, due to its scant respect for the orthography of the original text” (Lopes-Graça 1984, p. 20). This article analyzes some of the most significant of da Motta’s hand-splitting suggestions to op. 31/2 and how they may contribute to improve the performance of the work.

MAIN CONTRIBUTION

A case for hand-splitting

The main objection to changing a composer’s note distribution lies on the argument that it may alter the original musical intention. A classic case mentioned by Barenboim and Eschenbach is the beginning of Beethoven’s op. 106. Both pianists argue that the left-hand jump is essential to preserve the musical tension, therefore ruling out the possibility of playing the first b-flat chord with the right hand (Meyer-Josten 1989, pp. 53 and 105). Brendel, on the other hand, sees no reason why an even greater tension could not be achieved with the arrangement, finding it absurd to play the passage with the left hand only at the “fast and fiery tempo” claimed by Beethoven, according to Czerny’s account (Meyer-Josten 1989, p. 70). Stefan Askenase believes that if one can get greater confidence in playing the passage by arranging it, it may even help to emphasize the musical tension (Meyer-Josten 1989, p. 43). Cortot’s aforementioned advice to split the two octaves at the beginning of op. 111 is grounded on the wish to portray the strong and heavy character of the introduction, seen by the French pianist as an “appeal from Destiny,” where the octaves should “not be played too fast” and possess the “majesty of two marble blocks” (Thieffry 1986, p. 89).

It appears from these statements that the two sides of the argument present the same reason in the defense of their cases: both believe their position to be the one better to portray the composer's musical intentions. It seems clear, however, as Askenase argues, that by reducing the technical difficulties one should be more capable of focusing on the intended musical result.

Vianna da Motta's hand-splitting suggestions for op. 31/2

It is somewhat paradoxical that having profusely adopted hand-splitting alternatives throughout the entire sonata, Vianna da Motta does not suggest one for the first movement passage between bars 13 and 16, certainly one of the greatest challenges in the entire piece; partly due to coming very early in the work when the pianist is still adjusting to the performance. Written originally for the right hand alone, the articulation in every two notes could also be further emphasized by a division of the passage. Furthermore, the "deciso" and "impetuoso" character intended by da Motta would benefit from the added strength of this division (see Figure 1).

The next controversial passage begins in bar 21 of the same movement. da Motta's arrangement—playing the bass note of bar 22 with the left-hand thumb and silently changing it to the fifth finger while keeping the middle-voice triplets in the right hand until resuming them with the left hand on the third beat—is extremely clever. It avoids attacking the last note of the D minor arpeggio of the bass line with the left hand together with the triplet motive, which most likely would cause the first note of the triplets to be heavier than aimed for (see Figure 2). Schnabel objected to any arrangement of this passage (Wolf 1972), and that is reflected in his own edition where he takes both notes with the left hand as originally notated. He would, however, eventually praise da Motta's suggestion, as it undoubtedly separates the voices in an absolutely clear manner.



Figure 1. Beethoven Sonata op. 31/2, first movement, bars 13-16 (hand-splitting possibility).

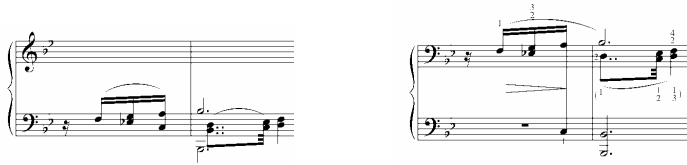


Figure 5. Beethoven Sonata op. 31/2, second movement, bars 8-9 (Beethoven's original writing and Vianna da Motta's hand-splitting).

Klindworth's revision of the 1919 Ricordi edition) in which he avoids the crossings by alternating the chords between the right and left hands. The second passage, starting in bar 51, avoids crossing the hands through the use of a clever device: the silent replacement by the left hand of the upper note of the first beat in every second bar, allowing the hands to interchange roles (see Figure 4). Again, Casella mentions Klindworth (or Henselt in the German translation, possibly a mistake) as the author of this modification.

In any case, these two passages reflect da Motta's concern for finding an easier and more effective way of performance. It is essential though that the interpreter preserves the balance of the parts when changing them from one hand to the other. This more comfortable manner namely implies an added control over the weight of each voice within the chords. Were this aspect to be neglected, any advantage attained through the avoidance of the hand-crossings would be lost.

One last example is revealing of Vianna da Motta's attention to the smallest details. The subtle introduction of the left-hand thumb on the C and the B-flat at the last note of bar 8 and the first of bar 9 of the second movement creates a smooth legato, impossible to achieve with the original distribution. The fingering in brackets in bar 9 is my own alternative in which the hand is kept in a more relaxed position (see Figure 5).

IMPLICATIONS

A simplified manner of fingering by dividing passages between the hands enables the performer to tackle a work with greater confidence by deliberately reducing the risks in particularly difficult passages. In this sense, arrangements should be encouraged as a means of rendering in the best possible manner the pursued musical result. Radical positions against this practice such as the ones held by some pianists can only result in an impoverishing of the range of possibilities in the process of searching for that result. In this sense, Vianna da Motta's edition of Beethoven Sonata op.31/2

presents solutions that, more than just making certain passages easier to perform, clearly aim at a specific musical enhancement of the work and may serve as a starting point for further individual findings in the pursuit of evermore stimulating and meaningful performances.

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