Disposal of Dynamics of Piano Sonatas—Analysis Based on Piano Sonatas of Ludwig van Beethoven

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Abstract

Disposal of dynamics has a direct influence on performance effect in piano performance, and different disposals of dynamics will result in different tone effects. Therefore, different disposals of dynamics are required when playing different music. In this paper, Ludwig van Beethoven’s piano sonatas are taken for example to discuss the countermeasures for disposing the dynamics for playing piano sonatas.

Keywords: Piano sonata, Ludwig van Beethoven, Disposal of dynamics

1. INTRODUCTION

Sonata which is composed of several movements is a kind of divertimento of instrumental music. Generally, a sonata consists of three to four comparable movements. Piano sonatas are mainly performed by piano, and the players need proficient playing skills to express the musical composition vividly. Moreover, piano sonatas are often performed at concerts, which is an important way to evaluate pianists’ performing competence. Disposal of dynamics has an important influence on the performance effect of piano sonata. Beethoven’s piano sonatas which are highly expressive in music vigorously enrich the connotation and expression range of dynamics.

2. Dynamics Change of Piano Sonatas

(1) Dynamic level of piano sonatas

The dynamic level of piano sonatas is volume level and the sound intensity of music. It is divided into several levels from weakness to strength. Beethoven composed 32 piano sonatas in total. His piano sonatas cover almost all dynamic levels as he used approximate 13 dynamic level clefs. Beethoven used the full names of terms to mark the dynamic levels when he composed piano sonatas. Hence, his 13 dynamic level clefs include all dynamic changes from ppp to ff. Unlike previous classic music, Beethoven expanded the dynamic range of piano sonatas tremendously, which is his important achievement in musical creation. No composer had done this prior to Beethoven, nor had anyone expanded the dynamic range of piano sonatas so comprehensively and systematically. The appearance times of Beethoven’s 13 dynamic level clefs are different in his piano music.¹ For instance, ppp, ff, f, p and pp are often used in Piano Sonata in C Major, Op. 1, Piano Sonata in F Major, Op. 1 as well as

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Piano Sonata in E Major, Op. 3. Beethoven’s piano sonatas composed in different periods are greatly different. His piano sonatas in the early and middle stages tend to be heroic, and his piano sonatas in the late stage which are more profound tend to depict inner feelings. His dramatic music style formed and became mature in his early and middle stages. Hence, he seldom chose middle dynamics when disposing dynamics; instead, he mainly reinforced sound tension, focused on music contemplation frequently and disposed the rhythmic impulsion highly intensively. In his late stage, Beethoven reached a new artistic realm in musical composition. By disposing middle dynamics frequently and making use of the left piano pedal, he created restrained and profound music style which was totally different from his previous style.

(2) Dynamics change of piano sonatas

In terms of disposal of dynamics of piano sonatas, Beethoven could make use of various dynamic clefs flexibly. He used many kinds of dynamic clefs in piano sonatas to explicitly manifest the decrescendo or crescendo positions as well as their duration. Beethoven expressed emotional change in piano music through such decrescendo or crescendo dynamics change. In this way, his music had more abundant connotation of dynamics change than baroque music. Disposal of crescendo is the most common in Beethoven’s piano sonatas, which is related to his heroically styled music as he had to create such music contemplation by using grand symphonic acoustics. Piano which is highly expressive can be used for expressing such change of dynamics and properly disposing the decrescendo or crescendo changing style, with which he could realize his symphonic thought. Beethoven’s music contemplation exceeded the expression range of piano. Hence, there are numerous unconventional dynamic changes in his piano sonatas, which require players to be proficient in playing. When disposing the dynamics of Beethoven’s piano music, a player, after playing a long note value, needs to imagine its crescendo music effect, so as to promote himself/herself to play the next note value at the accurate crescendo dynamic level, thus enabling listeners to feel such crescendo effect. There is a crescendo interrupted by p in Beethoven’s piano sonatas, which is Beethoven’s further expansion in music. Such musical layout extends musical development. This crescendo mainly refers to the following circumstance: when the crescendo approaches to climax, it is interrupted by p; then a new music theme appears. Beethoven controlled the dynamics flexibly and restrained passion or emotional expression rationally, which reinforced the profound connotation of his musical compositions. The most famous application of this method is Piano Sonata No. 29 in B-flat Major, Op. 1.

(3) Dynamic contrast of piano sonatas

As the greatest feature of Beethoven’s piano sonatas, dynamic contrast covers almost all his emotional connotation. Unexpected dynamic levels which are used for promoting the progress of the musical compositions are often found in Beethoven’s piano music. Many of his musical compositions are fluctuating and full of dynamic contrast. With intense fluctuation, his musical compositions are more meaningful and vibrant. Generally speaking, a single period is used for expressing a theme in piano sonatas. In order to avoid damage to the music image, the internal structure of a period is highly unified and seldom contains striking contrast. Beethoven broke through conventional musical structure and made use of intense dynamic
contrast in tonality, rhythm and harmony to enhance the contrast within a theme and facilitate contradiction, thus making the themes of his musical compositions more profound.\[^{[3]}\]\ Intense dynamic contrast is often found between theme and subtheme of Beethoven’s opuses, which shaped the music image more satisfactorily. Also, Beethoven would choose intrusive dynamic contrast to enhance the consistency and suddenness of progressing music. The music materials which enter all of a sudden highlight the musical conflicts and contradictions immediately, thus expanding the internal emotions of musical compositions.

### 3. Analysis on Disposal of Dynamics of Piano Sonatas Based on Beethoven’s Piano Sonatas

(1) Playing ways

In his piano sonatas, Beethoven often chose striking contrast to show inner contradictions, including confrontation between life and death as well as confrontation between intrepidness and cowardice. When playing a sonata which contains such striking contrast, a player needs to coordinate his/her physical strength to exert the finger strength flexibly. Furthermore, a player should pay attention to the transformation of strength at the shoulders, arms, wrists and hands and transform the strength at these parts quickly. This requires the players to practice as often as possible at ordinary times, focus on controlling finger strength when playing a weak chord, and exert arm strength as the case may be. Also, players should exert strength meticulously because the acoustics will be deficient if the strength is too weak, and the contrast effect will disappear if the strength is too strong. When playing a strong chord, a player needs to give full play to his/her shoulder strength and even all his/her strength by supporting with the hands and touching the keys neatly, so as to make the sound mellow and full, thus arousing resonance with the listeners.\[^{[4]}\] If an arsis appears at the second half beat or upbeat, it may predict a burst of passion. If an arsis appears without crescendo, it will form a striking contrast. Under this circumstance, a player had better not exert arm strength, but to make his/her fingers approach the keyboard, give full play to the wrists to move the fingers flexibly, touch the keys quickly and explosively for arsis, and reduce strength for the weak chord by naturally transiting from the previous chord.

(2) Overall disposal

When disposing the playing dynamics of piano sonatas, players need to pay attention to analysis on the overall music conception, musical structure, harmony as well as polyphony techniques. As an integral music element, playing dynamics cannot be split. Players should lay an emphasis on the integration to analyze the ways for disposing the dynamics, aiming at expressing the connotation of a piano sonata profoundly in its playing dynamics. Disposal of dynamics plays an important role in Beethoven’s piano sonatas. Unlike other composers, Beethoven deemed playing dynamics as an important structural principle and generally started a theme with p. For instance, *Piano Sonata in G Major, Op. 1*, the opus is dominated by p to f on the whole. However, there are striking contrasts between the dynamics at the beginning and the end of the opus as well as the dynamics between the periods. Beethoven often arranged dynamic contrast at the end of a period or the beginning of the next period when disposing the dynamics of recapitulation in sonata forms, with the development starting with p to crescendo...
and the recapitulation beginning with p. Meanwhile, he often reproduced and transited by using stable dynamics. Nevertheless, there were few stable transitions from development to recapitulation.

4. CONCLUSIONS

In a word, the disposal of dynamics of piano sonatas has an important influence on its music effect. Hence, players need to learn and practice carefully. Beethoven created innovative techniques for composing piano sonatas and developed skills for playing the piano. His piano sonatas which have great artistic position and value are important learning instruments for players. Players can improve their skills in playing the piano if they master the disposal of dynamics of Beethoven’s piano sonatas which are featured by striking dynamic contrast.

References