

The Trouble with Categories

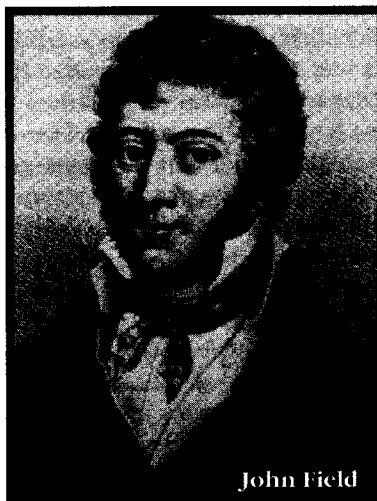
BY JOSEPH SMITH

On first reading through Field's nocturnes in my teens, I was astonished to encounter a cheery rondo entitled *Noontide*. (This piece ends with twelve accented notes, chiming the hour.) I was captivated by Field's perversity in designating this piece a nocturne (when logic would demand that it be called a "diurne"). Liszt, the editor of the volume, at once acknowledged the problem and rationalized it away by referring to the "white nights" of summer in Russia, where Field spent his adult life. Years later I learned to my disappointment that Field himself in fact never designated the piece a nocturne—some publisher must have done so. In this instance, it is therefore easy to agree that the piece has no claim whatsoever to be included among the nocturnes.

But what about the E-flat "Nocturne" in six-eight time (H. 30)? Similarities to Chopin's most famous Nocturne, Op. 9, No. 2—including key, compound meter, and accompaniment pattern—have caused many to consider it a particularly characteristic example of the nocturne. In fact, though, Field called the piece a "romance," not a nocturne. Is there a distinction to be made? Since I find the resemblances to Chopin's example to be superficial, I would like to argue, yes—that the lilting, clearly defined rhythm and absence of improvisational filigree caused Field to choose the title "romance." But I can't argue this convincingly, because Field published several pieces as "romance" in one version, "nocturne" in another. The piece may not be a nocturne, but it would be a foolish consistency to exclude it from a volume so named.

Other problems arise in the numbering of Field's contributions to the genre. The Liszt edition was the first attempt to publish the collected nocturnes. Liszt¹ can hardly be blamed for omitting two unequivocal nocturnes, since he probably didn't know of their existence—one was published exclusively in England (H. 55), the other in Russia (H. 63). But because Liszt's edition codified the official canon, these two remain little known. (Internal evidence strongly suggests that both the Peters and Universal editions were based on Liszt's—Peters even included *Noontide*.) There were discrepancies in the numbering of the Field's nocturnes in his own time. Then the Liszt edition adopted its own questionable numbering, and other editions have made still other choices. So there is really only one safe way of designating a Field nocturne: the H number, after the catalog by Cecil Hopkinson.

The designation problem actually extends to many important composers. Let's take Beethoven's piano sonatas—by tradition, there are thirty-two. Consider,



John Field

however, that the two "Op. 49" sonatas, sold to a publisher behind Beethoven's back by his brother (to Ludwig's anger and disgust) are included in the numbering. On the other hand, Beethoven's three sonatas dedicated to the Kurfürsten of Cologne, composed around the age of twelve, are excluded. Is this because the later Op. 49 pair possesses an opus number—albeit a misleading and unauthorized one? Or is the reason aesthetic? The Op. 49 pair are judged to fulfill their

modest goals, whereas the early three do not. What about the sweet and intimate "easy sonata" dedicated to his friend Eleonore von Breuning (WoO 51)? Only two movements survive, with the final bars of the second movement completed by Ries. (Evidence suggests that Beethoven completed the work, and that the manuscript of the finale has simply disappeared.) Arguably, these movements surpass those of Op. 49 in intrinsic interest. Yes, this sonata is incomplete, but so is a certain well-known symphony in B minor by Schubert—and it has a number!

If I had the chance, would I choose to renumber the Beethoven sonatas, by including the questionable four—or by excluding Op. 49? No—the resulting confusion and inconvenience to those who use the present numbering—in short, everybody—would outweigh the advantages of re-accessing the canon. But can one doubt that the Von Breuning sonata deserves to be better known, and would be, if it were a numbered sonata?

This issue's delicate and grave *Siciliano* is Field's reworking of the slow movement of his fourth concerto. (Notoriously loath to compose, Field often escorted pieces from one medium to another: the earlier F major nocturne, H. 40, became the slow movement of the sixth concerto, and an episode in the first movement of the seventh concerto became the G major nocturne, H. 58.) Should the *Siciliano*, like the E-flat *Romance*, be included among the nocturnes? The editor of the wonderfully thorough and scholarly variorum edition of the *Musica Britannica* series, Robin Langley, nicely skirts the issue. The volume (which does include both the *Siciliano*, and the "romances") is entitled *Nocturnes and Related Pieces*. ■

Dover Publications recently issued Joseph Smith's edition of works by Field (Favorite Nocturnes and Other Works, ISBN 0-486-44159-8).

¹It is ironic that Liszt should have become the editor of Field, since it was the vehement and bravura style of the young Liszt and others that caused Field to be regarded as passé in his last appearances outside of Russia. Field, on the other hand, hearing Liszt for the first time, is supposed to have whispered, "Does he bite?"

H. 28

Poco adagio

18

8va

Red.

23

sfz

28

33

Red.

38

sfz

42

44

46

50

54

pp

The editor suggests the following as a means of adapting Field's original pedal effects to the modern piano.

14

pp

mp

8^{va}

2^{da}

etc.

21

(*mf*)

ppp

8^{va}

sostenuto (middle) pedal

etc.