

JUST A MINUET

What's in a name? *Joseph Smith* reports

The phrase 'Minuet in G' is likely to recall one of three pieces – the famous examples by J S Bach, Paderewski and Beethoven. In fact, these quite unrelated pieces have more in common than their genre and key: all three have something a little sketchy about them. None is quite what it seems.

Bach's minuet (BWV Anhang 114) is from the *Notebook for Anna Magdalena Bach* of 1752. The book contains a mélange of pieces, most copied out by different family members. Some are easy keyboard pieces, some are difficult, others are vocal. Some are attributed, some not. It was long recklessly assumed that all, unless otherwise designated, were composed by J S Bach, whereas it is now widely known that the famous Minuet in G is in fact by Christian Petzold (1677–1733). How much of the minuet's popularity has depended on the prestige of its presumed composer? It will be interesting to see if, through the years, the piece gradually fades, now that it is no longer 'by Bach.'

Paderewski's minuet, by contrast, was a wilful misattribution. As a young man, Paderewski used to play for the enjoyment of two elderly friends. Irritated by their gushing praise of Mozart, he composed a little minuet, asserting it was by their idol. When they began to go into predictable raptures of enthusiasm, he revealed himself as the composer, to their great chagrin. He succeeded in proving that it was not necessarily the individual genius of Mozart that they loved, but the style of the 18th century. Paderewski then elaborated the composition and published it in its present form. His elderly friends inadvertently did him a great favour: the minuet was an immediate hit, establishing Paderewski's name even before he became a famous pianist. But now (to paraphrase baseball player Yogi Berra) it's so popular no one plays it anymore.

Beethoven's Minuet in G is by Beethoven, but was not composed for piano. It is the second of six minuets (WoO 10) that are almost certainly Beethoven's transcriptions of orchestral originals, now lost. This orchestral origin explains the chromatic sixths in the second half, which are conspicuously atypical of Beethoven's piano style. Since these sixths continue the motif of the minuet's graceful opening, they should presumably be legato as well, although here Beethoven has marked *forte*. Sliding the thumb from black to white notes might seem to be the most efficient way of achieving legato here – and this method undoubtedly offers tactile appeal! But the effect of legato results from smoothness of dynamics as well as the connection between notes, and in practice, sliding reduces control of the thumb, tending to produce unwanted accents. A legato sound may be better achieved by connecting only the upper voice (necessary, in any case, for the upbeat, which lies exclusively on white notes). The D will not 'know' that it is connected to the wrong voice (the A sharp rather than the C#); it will only know the touch with which it has been depressed.

Ex 1

Musical score for Ex 1, showing a minuet in G major. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of two staves. The first staff is marked 'legato' and the second staff is marked 'non leg'. The piece begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff has a tempo marking of 'legato' and a dynamic marking of 'f'. The second staff has a tempo marking of 'non leg' and a dynamic marking of 'f'. The piece ends with a double bar line.

It goes without saying that the pedal is required for legato—even if we can slide the thumb down, we cannot slide it up again!

The two-voice texture of the trio resembles that of the minuet from the Sonata Op 2 no 1, which Beethoven composed at around the same time. In the sonata, the bass begins legato, whereas in the G major minuet, no left-hand slurring is marked. Should we be guided by the sonata movement and play the left hand legato here as well? Despite the stated similarities between the minuets, in the sonata Beethoven presents a smooth, melodically coherent bass line, in the G major minuet only an arpeggio formula.

Ex 2

Musical score for Ex 2, showing a Trio in G major. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of three systems. Each system has two staves. The first system is marked 'TRIO' and 'p'. The second system is marked 'TRIO' and 'p'. The third system is marked 'TRIO' and 'p'. The piece begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff has a tempo marking of 'TRIO' and a dynamic marking of 'p'. The second staff has a tempo marking of 'TRIO' and a dynamic marking of 'p'. The third staff has a tempo marking of 'TRIO' and a dynamic marking of 'p'. The piece ends with a double bar line.

Whereas the sonata movement is in the *form* of a minuet, the G major piece is a real dance – its rhythm is more marked, so I find non-legato preferable here. The beginning of the second half of this trio is not really a canon, but it does suggest canonic imitation. The uniformity of the rhythm tends to obscure the counterpoint, though; the passage can sound like a single voice doubled in sixths and tenths. The voices can be clarified by dynamic contrast, however.

Ex 3

Musical score for Ex 3, showing a Trio in G major. The score is in 3/4 time and consists of two systems. Each system has two staves. The first system is marked 'mp' and 'p'. The second system is marked 'p' and 'mf'. The piece begins with a treble clef and a key signature of one sharp (F#). The first staff has a tempo marking of 'mp' and a dynamic marking of 'p'. The second staff has a tempo marking of 'p' and a dynamic marking of 'mf'. The piece ends with a double bar line.

This plan may seem unnecessarily schematic. But, while it may be obvious on the page that the left hand imitates the right, it will not necessarily be obvious to the listener without the performer's help.

Beethoven's transcriptions of his works often stemmed from commercial motives. (We may question the merit of the second symphony arranged for piano trio, for instance.) But in this case, we may be grateful that this charming piece was preserved by means of its transcription.

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