

The Piano Sonata

I have devoted so much space to a description of *Séquence* simply because it is by far Barraqué's most accessible work. But, though I, for one, feel that its role is closer to that of *The Afternoon of a Faun* than to that of *La Demoiselle Elue*, posterity may well regard it as an "early work." The same is not likely to be true of the Piano Sonata, begun only a few weeks after the completion of the first draft of *Séquence*. One is amazed to think that this towering score, which might easily be the musical testament of some venerable master, written at the end of a long career and at an age of solitary retirement and renunciation, should in fact be the work of a very young man. Certain works of Mozart and Schubert are astonishingly precocious; this one is terrifyingly so.

Like Beethoven's greatest sonatas, Barraqué's is conceived on a very large scale and lasts over half an hour. Its massiveness is that of a block of marble, and in some ways it has marble's glacial stillness, as well. It may be said to be divided into two parts, the first dominated by a rapid tempo and the second by a very slow one. But while the Sonata, like *Séquence*, is meant to be played without pauses, the demarcations are far less distinct here than in the earlier work. A comparison between these two works, which stem from a similar attitude toward composition, seems all the more relevant as they have certain elements—and particularly certain rhythmic elements—in common. (They may one day, in fact, share the same opus number in the catalogue of Barraqué's complete works.) The interrelationships between these two scores are, to my knowledge, without parallel in the history of music, but conversely no two works written by one and the same man have ever been so radically different. Superficially, one might say that their dissimilarity is one of rigor versus looseness. Yet though it is true

that rigor is the keynote of the Sonata's style, certain sections of it—especially the very beginning—are handled in what is commonly known as a free style, while this same “free” style is occasionally abandoned in *Séquence*. The basic difference between the two scores is one of *mood*. *Séquence*, despite its “nocturnal” passages—perhaps the loveliest in the work—is life-giving, diurnal music. The Sonata, on the other hand, gradually descends into death; it is the Orphean work par excellence, inviting the listener on a journey to the Underworld from which there is no return.

For centuries the Western composer has delivered his message with the accents of faith. In a Bach chorale, which constitutes the highest expression of this attitude in art, the music *sings*; it is the music of confidence and love. Beethoven was the first to challenge his forefathers' serenity with such profoundly disturbing works as the Great Fugue. But Barraqué's Sonata actually succeeds in expressing disbelief; it is the first full-fledged expression in art of that grandiose sense of despair which has only been hinted at by literature. I wish to emphasize the Nietzschean aspects of this despair, preserved against any pernicious interpretation by its essential purity; a despair in which the Dionysian spirit reveals its most secret visage.

Here, for the first time in history, perhaps, Music comes face to face with her arch-enemy, Silence. In the early passages, Music's essentially dynamic character leaves no room for her enemy; but soon Silence begins to filter in. He first appears in insidious shapes, hollowing out tiny pockets in the mass of sound. Wherever a given structure lacks a note, who knows but what Silence has not spirited it away? But Music fights back: now she gathers herself in a solid mass, now she spreads herself out in registers and now, coiling up like a huge snake, she lies motionless for minutes on end, with only an occasional shiver to show that the work is still alive. Inexorably, however, Silence reappears in the shape of irrational pauses that grow steadily longer and more threatening in the course of an interminable

development. If Music retaliates by donning the mask of her adversary and becoming Silence, then he in turn assumes the shape of Music. Caught up in a frenzy of expansion, the work breaks out of its fixity and hurries toward its close, in a series of “forgotten” developments and “implied” periods, monstrous musical ellipses, so to speak. Now Music musters all her strength once more to streak about in flights of unbearable lyricism; the notes bunch together and heave upward to form towering barriers, but these only succeed in deepening the furrows of silence at their feet. Then, for a moment, Music pauses to look back, in a fleeting effort to return to her origins; is there still time for a fresh start? But the adversary is close at hand. The finale attains a summit of agonizing grandeur; the relentless process is coming to an end now, and Music cracks under the inhuman strain, disintegrates and is sucked into the void. Whole slabs of sound crumble and vanish beneath the all-engulfing ocean of silence, until only the twelve notes of the row remain, and even these are plucked off, one by one.

Although this final passage of the Sonata attains the most ineffable beauty, it would be completely meaningless taken out of context. It recalls one of the greatest moments in Beethoven, a passage in the Eighth Quartet in which an equally simple structure—a major scale—was used to add an entirely new and precious dimension to the range of musical expression, a dimension which may well have been rapture itself.

For the moment this Sonata still defies any real analysis. It is unclassifiable, incomparable and, to some degree, still incommunicable music. We may rest assured that it will continue to mystify a good many would-be commentators until the day when a very great musician will employ his own creative genius to elucidate it, just as Barraqué is now elucidating Debussy. In the meanwhile, generations of pianists will have devoted their efforts to mastering first the technical, then the interpretive problems that it raises. For this music lies outside the scope of our era, in any case; it can belong only to the future.

In this sense, Thomas Mann lacked audacity; in his concern for plausibility he dared not imagine that a twenty-four-year-old composer could outstrip all of contemporary music in a single stride, nor above all, that a man so young could produce music as brilliant and as rigorous—I say this advisedly—as the last works of Beethoven. No music of this density has been composed since *The Great Fugue*, the only ancestor worthy of this unique score; that fact alone should suggest the kind of shock it can produce at first hearing.

Most amazing of all, though, is the fact that this Piano Sonata, which in a sense might seem to have put an end to musical history once and for all, was not its creator's last word; it is incredible that anything could still emerge from the huge sea of silence which engulfed the last, solitary, *absolutely hopeless* notes of that flawless block of music, incredible that anything should emerge to revive the creative impulse and prevent that silence from becoming definitive. True, Barraqué did stop composing for several years (this retirement was interrupted only by his experience with "music for tape"). I myself can testify to the fact that at that time he was entirely unaware of the greatness of his past work and had absolutely no idea of the gigantic enterprise he was about to undertake.