

Hearing the unheard in Beethoven

May 10 2013, by Linda B. Glaser

Quirky, lyric, comic – critics have called Beethoven's Piano Sonata in E flat, Opus 31, No. 3, many things, but assistant professor of music Roger Moseley has an entirely new perspective: He says the piece is an auditory depiction of Beethoven's deafness.

The sonata opens with an unsettled chord that somehow manages to be both minor and major at once. It seems to begin in the middle, with no preparation or framing. "We're thrust into the position of not knowing quite where we are in relation to the sounds and their functions," explains Moseley. "This music forces us to imagine sounds that might have existed beforehand in order to make sense of what's actually reaching our ears."

Sound, of course, is fundamentally vibration. It can be experienced and registered in different ways. Moseley cites recent scholarship informed by disability studies and media theory that understands deafness not as a deficiency or a failure to hear, but rather as a kind of relocation of the reception of sonic impulses in space and time.

Moseley contends that [Beethoven](#)'s sonata does have a beginning – but it occurs halfway through the first movement, just before the opening chord is repeated. By relocating the beginning to the end of a formal section, Beethoven "allows new relationships to unfold between that harmonic progression and ones that happen over the course of the exposition," Moseley says.

One of Moseley's primary interests is the study of music as play, and he

sees a playful element in how Beethoven chose to open his sonata. "He's teasing his audience, by putting us in this position at the beginning of not knowing how to orient ourselves," he says.

Nevertheless, Moseley hears darker undertones beneath that playful element. Beethoven wrote the sonata the same year that he penned the emotive Heiligenstadt Testament, in which he described his despair over the deterioration of his hearing. Moseley suggests that the unsettling beginning of the sonata was a way for Beethoven to give his audience a taste of what it felt like to him to be deaf: out of step and confused.

"Beethoven overcame what he viewed as the worst disability a musician could suffer through the imaginative force of his music. In many ways, it exceeds the limits of what can be heard," says Moseley.

That imaginative power is another interest of Moseley's; he delivered his paper on the sonata, "Imagining the Unheard in Beethoven," at a recent conference at Cornell titled "Imagining Sound" that focused on the 19th century's fascination with sonic phenomena and their powers of suggestion. According to conference organizers Mike Lee, Amanda Lalonde and Ji Young Kim, artists in the 19th century were spurred by their inner hearing to explode the limits of orchestration and virtuosity; at times, this inner sound-world swelled past the boundaries of physical and instrumental reality so that it could only be realized in the imagination.

"Thinking in terms of the imagination is a productive way for people to conceive of music as migrating between auditory and visual realms via painting, sculpture, literature and technology," says Moseley.

In his current book project, "Digital Analogies: Music, Play and Games From Mozart to Nintendo," Moseley looks at different musical instruments and idioms from the past and present to illuminate the

playful aspects of performance. His research is helping to establish an agenda for ludomusicology – the study of music as play – that complements and challenges the work-based approach characteristic of much scholarly treatment of Western art [music](#).

Provided by Cornell University

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