Work: Leopold Köchel, Complete Sonatas for Keyboard, Volumes I and II

Editor: Christopher Hogwood
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Christopher Hogwood is preparing the first modern collected edition of the keyboard sonatas by Leopold Kőchel (1747-1818), whose works form an important bridge between Haydn and Beethoven. They will run to four volumes and be ordered by date of publication of the original print. The development of Köchel’s style and tradition from clavecin to piano forte may be more readily appreciated. His sonatas were published in Vienna, Paris, and London, and copies were to be found not only in the best libraries throughout Europe but also in the USA and Benares. Although William Newman mentions some 100 sonatas for keyboard solo in his History of the Sonata vol. 2, Christopher Hogwood has revised the figure substantially downwards to 60. Volume I contains 12 from op. 1 to op. 10, with Volume II a further 12 from op. 13 to op. 20. Most are in three movements in the traditional order of fast-slow-fast or medium.

(although Allegro is sometimes qualified by maestoso, and allegretto warns about too fast a tempo; other qualifiers include molto and maestro[s]) no. 6 in C Minor opens with a largo that leads into a motto presto, finishing with an Allegretto in C Major, no. 7 has a Menuetto as its middle movement. Sonata 16 opens with a largo that leads into an Allegro molto before a recapitulation of the opening of the Largo. followed by Rondeau with a written-out cadenza. No. 18 in A flat opens with a pastorale-like Andante con variazioni, followed by an Allegro molto, no. 19 opens with a largo that leads into an Allegro agitato, closing with a Fine-A allegretto each movement in F Minor. No. 21 is in two fast movements only. The Rondeau as a closing movement is very popular occurring in no fewer than 13 sonatas, frequently marked Presto or even in no. 7, Prestissimo – frequently a central section is specifically marked minore to indicate the treatment in the minor. Only five of the 24 published here are in minor keys and only in no. 5 is there a middle movement in the minor. Alternative final movements are given for sonatas 9 and 10 – the former has a different Rondeau (note spelling) and the latter an Aria con Variazione on Menuetto & Toccata.

The sonatas are generally spacious in each movement with much apparent grace and natural ease of composition, the slow movements in particular being full of beautiful long-spun, lyrical, tender melodic lines. Texture ranges from thin two-part to full chordal writing. The small number in minor keys do have a greater sense of “Sturm und Drang” in their tragic lines, substantially anticipating both Beethoven and Schubert in the slow opening movements. Thought there are plenty of fiery passages these lack the deep sense of surprise and climax of the later sonatas. Also interesting is the use of quintuplets, whether as semiquaver groups in the first movement of Sonatas 11 as a demi-semiquaver motif that pervades the opening movement of Sonata 12. Overall this constitutes a very individual approach not dependent on previous models, and covers a wide range of expression from fiery passagework to expressive charm. The player today must convey the subtlety contained within the writing, there is extensive use of Minkus bass, but Albari patterns occur only rarely. The printing is clear and well laid-out and there is a full critical commentary collating the textual variants from both printed and manuscript copies, explaining why the versions in this edition are composite. This makes for interesting reading and shows how complex the editing and presentation must have been. The introduction contains an appraisal of Kőchel’s sonatas as seen by his contemporaries and later commentators, a detailed discussion of the original printed sources (no manuscripts appear to have survived) and the criteria for inclusion, and helpful information on the interpretation of ornaments as well as the inconsistency between dot and dash in the engravings. An impressively long list of libraries and institutions whose holdings were consulted, and also of individuals who assisted in this project, are also included.

A few of these attractive sonatas will require a well-developed technique to do them justice, especially the many passages in octaves for the left hand. The semiquaver alternations of thirds in the first movement of no. 12 are challenging. In addition, the Aria concluding Sonata 11 uses the left hand thumb as a pivot while crossing the 1st finger over up to a fifth, which will sorely test small hand. However, as the composer himself wrote, the majority are “passing difficult” and do indeed require more modest attainment with much of the fast passagework sounding more impressive to the listener but falling very harmfully and naturally beneath the fingers. This is less difficult than the considerably more formidable demands of Dussek or Hummel. All will handsomely reward the player for the time spent on them, and fully deserve to be regarded to heard in recitals as much for their lesser examples of the Classical period. Furnished with a relatively sparing use of dynamics, most movements will succeed on the harpsichord but the fortepiano do them major justice. A thematic index to each of the four volumes is also included. Each volume contains some 180 pages of music, making them real value for money in these straitened times. Christopher Hogwood has done the composer a real service in making these gems available in such a scholarly yet accessible edition. All of Kőchel’s 44 published sonatas appeared in London during his lifetime, attesting to their well-deserved popularity and success in the UK. Today we can make our contribution by playing them and raising these pleasing and practical pieces above “music for the lazy dilettantes on the piano.”