

PROGRAM NOTES
Penn State School of Music
Recital Hall. February 18, 2024

Almost ten years after I retired, I am happy to return to this beautiful Recital Hall. All the repertoire I have programmed for tonight is among my favorites I have played before in the old Esber Recital Hall.

As bookends for tonight's recital, I have chosen two of the most famous and beloved piano sonatas of the classical-early Romantic repertoire: Beethoven's Sonata in F Minor, Op. 57, the "*Appassionata*," a work of 1804-05; and Schubert's final piano work, the Sonata in B-Flat Major, D. 960, composed in 1828 but not published till ten years posthumously. Both the Schubert and the Beethoven reflect tragic circumstances. In Schubert's case, he had a chronic illness and probably knew that he would die fairly soon, though in November of 1828 his death actually seems to have resulted from infectious typhus or typhoid. His last three sonatas were composed at incredible speed between the spring and September of that year. He revered Beethoven, whose death in 1827 spurred him, it seems, to great heights of emotion and inspiration. His only public concert or *Akademie* commemorated the anniversary of Beethoven's death in March 1828, and several of his most significant works were prepared in that context and immediately after.

Beethoven's tragedy of his mid-thirties was his advancing deafness, of course; catastrophic for a musician who performed as well as composed. Beethoven was born in Bonn, Germany, but moved to Vienna in 1792, in the violent historical period of the French Revolution; by 1805, Napoléon's wars also convulsed Europe, including the defeat of Austria's armies and the occupation of Vienna. In Beethoven's works of the middle period, we often sense the pounding force of events, even where no extramusical reference is intended.

If these two sonatas could be summed up in a word or two, it might be "sublime:" sublime beauty as a reaction to tragedy in Schubert's case, sublime defiance in Beethoven's. Further in contrast, Schubert was comfortable with inherited forms, while Beethoven innovated ceaselessly throughout his life. The Schubert sonata is cast in four movements like the typical symphony or string quartet; Beethoven had used that form in his earliest sonatas, but not in the *Appassionata*, which has three. His second and third are linked by a modulation and a dramatic hinge chord. Schubert's sonata has a grand and leisurely pace incorporating lavish melody and harmonic creativity throughout the first, second, and fourth movements, but the third is a lyrical dance type. Beethoven's first movement has the unusual feature of the main theme in almost-exact inversion, appearing as the beautiful second tune in relative major. He also incorporates the famous "fate motive" (dot-dot-dot-dash) as heard in the Fifth Symphony. Beethoven's second movement is not marked as such, but consists of variations, and his finale is in relentless perpetual motion, almost monothematic.

Between these sonatas is John Beall's *Vandalia Suite*. John Beall is my old friend—speaking literally, as he and I were both born in 1942. He is emeritus professor of composition and former Composer in Residence at West Virginia University. We, along with his wife Carol, we are

friends of more than sixty-year standing, since as native Texans we were in college together at Baylor University and later at the Eastman School of Music. His *Vandalia Suite* is a mostly-joyful work composed for me in 2004-08, and his comments on the five brief movements are summarized below.

Vandalia is a name seen in several places in the region of West Virginia and points to the northwest; it refers to a proposed fourteenth English Colony in pre-Revolutionary America, so-to-be-named in honor of George III's Queen Charlotte. Each of the five movements of *Vandalia Suite* refers to a place or event in West Virginia. "The Gorge" was inspired by a day in late 2001 in the New River Gorge at Thurmond, a ghost town whose silence is interrupted by a passing train. "Nocturne" is a left-hand study; he calls it "a moody piece of night music" and "somewhere outdoors in the summer." "Glade Creek" is the rushing whitewater in a famous photograph of a mill in Babcock State Park near Clifftop. "The Old Stone House" refers to the oldest house (1785) in Morgantown; the right hand plays the folk tune "Arise, Arise" ("Arise, arise, you slumbering sleeper...hear what your true love doth say") in a richly textured setting. "Saturday Night" is a pianistic fantasy on the fiddle tune "Cacklin' Hen."

~ *Steven Herbert Smith*