Symbolic Gestures in the Performance of Clementi’s *Didone abbandonata*

Abstract

Throughout the eighteenth and early nineteenth century, over sixty operas were composed on the theme of Dido, Queen of Carthage, and Aeneas; Metastasio’s libretto (1724) served as a sort of template for most of them. The subtitle *Scena tragica*, and the dedication to Luigi Boccherini of Clementi’s Sonata *Didone abbandonata* (1821) underline the operatic origin of its style.

This presentation identifies through visual and musical examples some of the compositional and interpretive gestures that originated in Italian operatic conventions; it follows their transformation into the idiom of the *fortepiano* and the proportions of the classical sonata; it links to the ancient imagery and metric structure of Virgil’s Aeneid Book IV (The Passion of the Queen) the topoi that reverberate in the Sonata, and for which the composer gave expressive indications on the score (e.g. *con furia, languente*); it examines the translation of the symbolic imagery into the parameters of music - stress, distress, discord, tension, re/petition, reiteration, resolution, climax, etc.

Gestural implications are explored through comparison of vocal, *fortepiano*, and piano performances that reflect different decodings of the same selected fragments; they also reveal that it is the adherence to the encoded musical gestures, and not necessarily the authenticity of the instrumental timbre that brings the symbolic content to life.

Equipment needed: Power Point presentation