

JONATHAN BISS

BEETHOVEN

THE COMPLETE

PIANO SONATAS

SEPTEMBER 21–22, 2019

OCTOBER 12–13, 2019

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HERTZ HALL



Jonathan Biss (*piano*) is a world-renowned pianist who channels his deep musical curiosity into performances and projects in the concert hall and beyond. In addition to performing with today's leading orchestras, he continues to expand his reputation as a teacher, musical thinker, and one of the great Beethoven interpreters of our time. Biss was recently named co-artistic director alongside Mitsuko Uchida at the Marlboro Music Festival, where he has spent 13 summers. He also leads a massive open online course (MOOC) via Coursera, which has reached more than 150,000 people from nearly every country in the world. Biss has written extensively about the music he plays, and has authored three e-books, including *Beethoven's Shadow*, the first Kindle Single written by a classical musician, published by Rosetta Books in 2011.

For more than a decade, he has fully immersed himself in the music of Beethoven, exploring the composer's works and musical thought through a wide variety of projects, several of which culminate in 2019–20. Biss' recital repertoire this season is almost exclusively focused on the Beethoven piano sonatas, with complete cycles here at UC Berkeley, as well as at London's Wigmore Hall and the McKnight Center for the Performing Arts at Oklahoma State University. He also performs select sonatas in recital and mini-cycles around the United States, including in Philadelphia, New York, Washington (DC), and Seattle, as well as abroad in Rome, Budapest, Sydney, and Melbourne.

In 2011, Biss began a journey to record the composer's 32 piano sonatas; the project concludes this fall with the ninth and final volume, to be released on Orchid Classics. The final two sets of lessons in his Coursera lecture series, *Exploring Beethoven's Piano Sonatas*, will be released in September and January, at which time all the sonatas will have been examined.

Biss also surveys Beethoven's five piano concertos in his *Beethoven/5* commissioning project, which pairs each concerto with a new concerto composed in response. Launched in 2015 in partnership with lead commissioner the St. Paul Chamber Orchestra, the project has led to world premieres by Timo Andres, Sally Beamish, Salvatore Sciarrino, and Caroline

Shaw. This season, Biss premieres Brett Dean's *Gneixendorfer Musik* with the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra, performed alongside Beethoven's *Emperor* Concerto. He then brings the new commission to the Dresden Philharmonic, Melbourne Symphony Orchestra, and Poland's Wrocław Philharmonic. Additionally, he performs the *Emperor* with orchestras worldwide, including with the Curtis Symphony Orchestra led by Osmo Vänskä at Carnegie Hall and Philadelphia's Kimmel Center as part of a seven-city East Coast tour.

Biss' projects represent his complete approach to music-making and connecting his audience to his own passion for the music. Previous projects have included an exploration of composers' "Late Style" in various concert programs at Carnegie Hall, the Barbican Centre, Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, and San Francisco Performances. He also published the Kindle Single *Coda* on the topic. *Schumann: Under the Influence* was a 30-concert exploration of the composer's role in music history, for which Biss also recorded Schumann and Dvořák piano quintets with the Elias String Quartet and wrote *A Pianist Under the Influence*.

Biss represents the third generation in a family of professional musicians that includes his grandmother Raya Garbousova, one of the first well-known female cellists (for whom Samuel Barber composed his Cello Concerto), and his parents, violinist Miriam Fried and violist/violinist Paul Biss. Growing up surrounded by music, Biss began his piano studies at age six, and his first musical collaborations were with his mother and father. He studied with Evelyne Brancart at Indiana University and with Leon Fleisher at the Curtis Institute of Music, where he is now on the faculty and holds the Neubauer Family Chair in Piano Studies. Biss has been recognized with numerous honors, including Lincoln Center's Martin E. Segal Award, an Avery Fisher Career Grant, the 2003 Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award, and the 2002 Gilmore Young Artist Award.

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In Search of Something Unreachable

by Jonathan Biss

The word “wonderment” goes a long way towards conveying my own feelings about Beethoven’s music. It was the dominant sensation when I first heard Serkin’s *Appassionata* on a cassette tape in the car, at age 9. It was again at the forefront when I discovered the *Grosse Fuge*, a year or two later, in a recording by the Budapest Quartet. (I can remember, vividly, that my immediate reaction was that the piece was totally incomprehensible, and that I had to hear it again, right away; years later, after countless hearings, and even a number of performances of Beethoven’s own arrangement of the piece for piano four-hands, it seems only slightly more comprehensible, and remains as irresistible as ever.) And it was an actual sensation, felt in my whole body, when I had that first encounter with the complete cycle of piano sonatas at age 13.

Those were all listening experiences. When I am the one playing—that is to say, when my relationship to the music becomes tactile and is complicated by questions of self-expression—the sensation becomes exponentially more powerful. This sort of awe, while a very intense thing to live with, is not in any way negative; in fact, it is probably essential, given my conviction that the search for something unreachable is part of this music’s expressive DNA. But at the same time, it creates a very practical diffi-

culty: once you come to the conclusion that something is unreachable, how—and when—do you decide to reach for it? If one is, by definition, never really ready to play all the Beethoven sonatas, when is the moment to say, “ready or not, here I come?”

In trying to answer this troublesome question, I again resort to a negative definition: It may be impossible to know that you are ready to take on such a project, but it is emphatically possible to know that you aren’t ready. For most of my life—probably since [a] Peabody cycle—I’ve known that I’ve wanted to play the 32 Beethoven sonatas. What I’ve known, to be more precise, is that this body of music is more important to me than just about any other, and that I want—feel compelled—to spend my life interrogating it. And while the open-ended study of music can be a wonderful, wonderful thing, one’s relationship with a piece invariably takes on new dimensions after public performance. There are probably many reasons for this—again, there is the tactile aspect of music-making, so vital to an instrumentalist, which will always receive more emphasis when a performance looms—but above all it is because these works exist to be communicated, and thus there are things to be known about them that one simply cannot know without experiencing that communication. And so, when a concert

presenter in a major American city asked me, aged 23, to play the 32 sonatas, I should have been thrilled. And in fairness, I *was* sort of thrilled. At the same time, though, I was absolutely plagued with doubt. So plagued that nothing—not putting off the start of the project for three years, or spreading the concerts over a longer period—could make me feel that the enormous fear I felt was unjustified.

Some of the sources of the fear were probably intangible, but others were plenty tangible. First of all, at that point I'd played no more than 10 of the sonatas, including just one of the last five. (While it would be wrong to say that the earlier works are easier—on a purely physical level, for one, some of them are enormously uncomfortable to play—the late sonatas are composed in a language, or languages, so unprecedented, unique, and seemingly inscrutable, that coming to terms with them seems to me a greater bridge to be crossed.) While I'd always assumed—to whatever extent I'd thought it through—that when I got around to performing the whole cycle there would be certain sonatas I'd still need to learn, making the leap when I still had 22 sonatas to go seemed to involve a degree of hubris.

A second reason, closely related to but ultimately independent from the first, is that experience has taught me that the physical and mental preparation of a piece of music can take you only so far: Putting the piece away for a time, letting it rest while the mind and fingers are occupied with other things, often leads to more development than the actual, quantifiable work does. Time and time again, I've struggled with something—the shape of a phrase, the handling of a transition—in a work that is new to me, searched and searched for a solution that seemed organic, and found that nothing I tried sounded natural—nothing passed the “rightness” test. But then, after leaving the piece for a period of several months, sometimes really not even thinking about it at all, the same passage has somehow, through some kind of osmosis, resolved itself, and no longer poses a question. (Or rather, [as I learned listening to Artur Schnabel,] having answered one question, it now poses a new one.) It can be frustrating knowing that this process has no shortcuts, but ultimately it has led me to the

conclusion that I simply should not perform a work immediately after learning it; much better to let it percolate first, away from the pressurized atmosphere of the concert hall, which tends to force the performer to fall back on what works—even if it doesn't work too well. And if I had accepted that offer when I was 23, there would have been no way around the reality that I would need to play many of the sonatas immediately after learning them.

Then there was a third reason, which goes beyond the Beethoven sonatas themselves: Performing the cycle when I still had so many sonatas to learn would have meant a degree of immersion in that music so extreme, it would have all but excluded the possibility of my learning anything else at a time in my life when I should have been musically omnivorous. This is partially, of course, a question of my musical development at large: It would have been a very bad decision to have taken on the complete Beethoven sonatas and in the process moved away from other music—the Mozart concerti, or Schumann's solo works, for example—which was arguably as important to me, and which would become vastly more difficult to learn if I postponed it too long. But it also played directly into the question of my readiness to take on the project itself. Beethoven's music is so exceedingly easy to program in part because it represents such a watershed in the history of music: To a remarkable extent, all the music that precedes it (certainly in the classical era) seems to be leading up to it, and all the music that has come since exists in response. Haydn's will to surprise, to invent, and Mozart's way of finding expressive possibilities everywhere (how different they are from one another!) are among the roots of Beethoven's music, which grows from them in ways neither prior master could have envisioned. And one would have to go outside the central European tradition to find music written after 1827 that does not grapple with the essential aspects of Beethoven's music—the fierce independence; the architectural asymmetry, with enormous works resisting any resolution until their final movements; the harmonic boldness, which precipitated the slow collapse of the tonal system; the grit. And even farther afield, he looms large: With music as various as Kirchner and Kurtág, Janáček and

Takemitsu, he might not be central, but one quality or another of the music points backward toward him; he is always in the room. And so, deciding to spend the bulk of several years of my life with Beethoven, without having addressed such a huge volume of great music with so much to say about him, seemed not only inadvisable, but irresponsible.

Seven years later, what has changed? I will make this series of recordings over a nine-year period, which naturally makes the prospect somewhat less daunting. And a significant side effect of this pacing is that my relationship with Beethoven while I am preparing the recordings will be immersive but not exclusive; his music

amount of Beethoven I've played beyond just the sonatas (many other isolated solo works; all of the concerti; most of the chamber music), and the time I've spent listening to and studying the symphonies and, especially, the string quartets. The latter, even more than the sonatas, often seem to me to be Beethoven's most personal statements, and perhaps because they are written for instruments Beethoven did not have a physical relationship with, it is in these pieces that earthly concerns—practicality for the player, comprehensibility for the listener—seem furthest from his mind, freeing him to write both some of his most consoling and his most harrowing music. The late quartets in particular

Once you come to the conclusion that something is unreachable, how—and when—do you decide to reach for it?

—*Jonathan Biss*

will exist not in a vacuum, but in conversation with his predecessors and followers (or rather, precedents and consequents). Still, my decision to dive into this undertaking when I could not bring myself to commit to it when it was offered to me, relatively recently, on a plate represents a significant shift. Particularly as what I am committing to now is not just performances of the sonatas, but recordings—recording...being the most fraught, disorienting process in a musician's life.

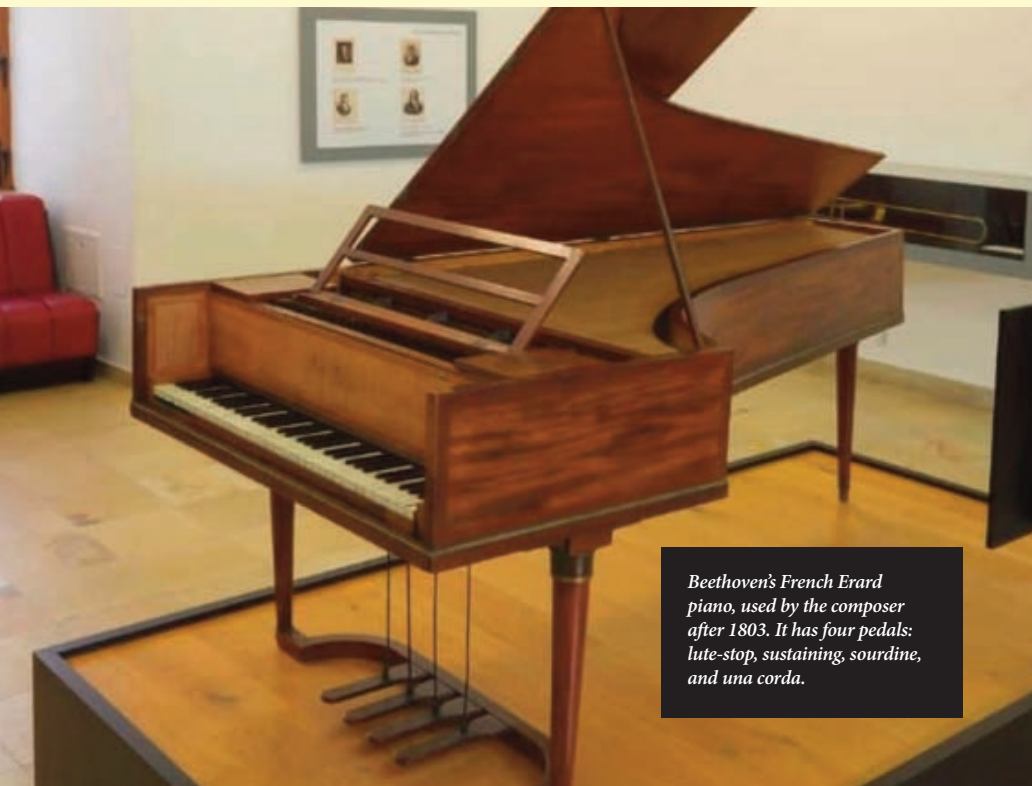
First, the straightforward answers: The 10 sonatas I'd played as of 2004 have now become 18, drawn from all periods of Beethoven's compositional career. While it is true that each sonata poses decidedly unique questions and problems—to refer to the Beethoven sonatas as a “body of music” is misleading, given the extent to which each sonata is a self-contained emotional universe—the percentage of this music I've now played makes me feel that I am at least reasonably well acquainted with both his musical personality and his ever-evolving musical language. This feeling is bolstered by the

often seem to be beyond human understanding, and yet to engage with them is to feel that you know Beethoven, somehow.

And in these past seven years, I also learned plenty of other music, from Bach and Handel to new works—in several cases, ones composed specifically for me, which gave me invaluable insight into the creative process from which I, as an interpreter, am one enormous degree removed—and of course, a vast quantity in between the two. I learned a huge amount of Mozart, which taught me about Beethoven not through their similarities but through their staggering differences. In short: Mozart, a theatrical composer if there ever was one, writes about the real world; Beethoven writes about an idealized world. Beethoven's admiration for Mozart was enormous, which makes it all the more interesting that the drama of his music is drawn from such utterly different sources than Mozart's. While Mozart's music so often suggests conversation, Beethoven's is most often written in one immensely strong voice. Where Mozart's temperament is quicksilver, Beethoven's is stead-



Beethoven's last grand piano, built by the Viennese piano manufacturer Conrad Graf, who placed the instrument at Beethoven's disposal in January 1826. Beethovenhaus Baden has embarked on an ambitious project to restore the instrument to its original glory.



Beethoven's French Erard piano, used by the composer after 1803. It has four pedals: lute-stop, sustaining, sourdine, and una corda.

fast. And where Mozart is so often willing to interrupt the narrative of a work if inspiration takes him in a different direction, Beethoven's music is nearly always relentlessly argued, never straying significantly from the business of resolving the central questions it poses.

I learned a great deal of Schubert, and was repeatedly struck by the way this musical genius with a personality so fundamentally different from Beethoven's was still profoundly influenced by him. There are some very specific instances of this debt—the last movement of Schubert's Sonata in A major, D. 959 hews far too closely to the finale of Beethoven's Op. 31, No. 1, in form and even in specific gestures, for it to be an accident—but it is the monumentality and the individualism Schubert pursued in his late works that really show what the example of Beethoven provided him with. The material is utterly different in character, and the use of the material is no more similar—where Beethoven develops and insists, Schubert wanders and dreams—but the breadth of Schubert's vision and the nerve he needed to realize it show beyond doubt how closely he had studied Beethoven.

I learned much of Schumann's piano music, and found that even German music's most original and unanticipated voice is in conversation with Beethoven. The poetry, the ear for detail both bizarre and exquisite, and the talent for glorious non sequitur are all Schumann's own, but the sense of striving and the use of music as diary—as a means of working through life's terrors and dissatisfactions—are straight out of Beethoven. I played many of Brahms' great works, and was moved by the obviously crushing weight that this master, born six years after Beethoven's death, felt in the form of the need to be Beethoven, and the subsequent difficulty he had merely being his own, great, self. (Brahms may have carried this burden more heavily than others, but Beethoven cast the same shadow over the entire 19th century.) Furthermore, it was through Brahms that I discovered something equally true of Beethoven: that the presence of rigor is in no way an impediment to the expression of passion, and that the craft of composition, while no substitute for inspiration, is absolutely essential if the inspiration is to have any impact at all.

I learned the works of Schoenberg and his contemporaries, and felt more strongly all the time that while Beethoven never could have imagined this music, it was a natural consequence of the trail he blazed. Schoenberg spoke about his need to “emancipate” dissonance with the 12-tone system he built, and Beethoven's music, in its daring, so destabilized the diatonic system that the road toward atonality was in a sense already paved by the time he wrote his last works. And of course, Schoenberg's attempt to create an entirely new language, which he did with tremendous fanfare and, one can now say, six decades after his death, limited success, makes Beethoven's late period seem more awe-inspiring than ever. For where Schoenberg's serial works juxtapose passages of great nostalgic beauty with music that is both leaden and obviously “constructed,” Beethoven's late style, while no less linguistically removed from all that came before it, is seamless enough to accommodate some of the most profound statements of western civilization. To play one of Schoenberg's piano works directly before Beethoven's Op. 109—as I've done on a number of occasions—is to make the rather astonishing discovery that the Beethoven is not only more satisfying, but more daring and modern than the Schoenberg. The latter's music is often complex, but it is a complexity that one can work through; the mystery of Beethoven remains inexplicable.

It's not just that my study of all of this music felt somehow related to Beethoven—in many cases, it seemed to be leading me to him. As I could feel the weight of the preoccupation these giants had with Beethoven, my own preoccupation became increasingly intense. The Beethoven sonatas, always the holy grail as far as I was concerned, gradually became something else as well: the orbit around which my other fascinations moved. The more I widened my musical sphere, the more central he seemed. I repeat: He was always in the room.

—*excerpted from the Kindle eBook
Beethoven's Shadow by Jonathan Biss*



Portrait of Beethoven by Joseph Karl Stieler, 1820

Travels with Beethoven

by Larry Rothe

Eight years ago, in an article called “Beethoven’s Guide to Being Human,” I made the case for Beethoven’s power to fill his audience with optimism, his capacity to convince a listener that good will prevail. This, I admit, reduces my argument to its most simplistic components. Even back then, few would have believed the victories celebrated at the end of Beethoven’s Fifth and Ninth symphonies, or his opera *Fidelio*, could last beyond the final curtain. But how much has happened in these eight years. Today, when national and world events demand we re-examine and get more serious about what “being human” means, Beethoven can help.

These days we can be forgiven for imagining we live in a uniquely unstable world, where unwelcome news is dismissed as fabrication, facts possess alternatives, and even nature’s laws are questioned. But stability is always an illusion, as Beethoven knew, personally and politically. Imagine: a 31-year-old composer loses his hearing—“the one sense,” he confessed, “which ought to be more perfect in me than others.” Imagine Beethoven’s Vienna, where the freedoms left intact by Napoleon’s army were undercut by the Austrians themselves. Emperor Franz II, his ear fine-tuned by the French Revolution, heard seditious whispers everywhere, sent his spies to root out enemies of the people,

and abolished the free press he abhorred. Beethoven tamed such personal and social catastrophes. Facing deafness, he rejected suicide as an option: “It was only my art that held me back. It seemed to me impossible to leave the world until I had brought forth all that I felt was within me.” He reassembled his inner resources, intent on changing things. Beethoven (writes his biographer Maynard Solomon) “was prepared to furnish [Vienna] with a model of heroism as well as beauty during an age of revolution and destruction and to hold out the image of an era of reconciliations and freedom to come.” He has done the same for the generations since. He translated his inner powers into music of virtually uncontained aspiration, music that urges us to do as he did: continue, and reject despair. Beethoven’s message is optimism, optimism hard-won but ever-present and waiting to be captured: a constant, a kind of stability.

A World in 32 Pieces

Fortunately for the Cal Performances audience, Beethoven is a focal point of this season as we celebrate the 250th anniversary of his birth. You will hear orchestral works and chamber music (see a listing of concerts featuring music by Beethoven on page 12). But for the full Beethoven immersion, pianist Jonathan Biss appears in seven recitals. Between September 2019 and March 2020, Biss performs the complete cycle of Beethoven’s 32 piano sonatas.

Beethoven began composing piano sonatas early in his career and continued writing them to the end. As you might expect, given the span of years between the first and last of these creations, they encompass an artistic and emotional terrain of varied contours, ranging from lighthearted melody to cosmic statements at music’s outer limits. If you think of the sonatas as a 32-piece jigsaw puzzle that, completed, forms an image of the world, you get some idea of what’s in store.

Jonathan Biss, who has spoken of Beethoven’s sonatas as “a private diary of a genius,” is nearing the end of a nine-year project of recording the Beethoven sonatas, with the final volume scheduled for release in November. Biss is an eloquent writer, and with disarming candor

he talks about his relationship with this music in *Beethoven’s Shadow*, an extended essay available as a Kindle e-book (but not in a print edition) through Amazon.com. (An excerpt from Biss’ writing begins on page 3.) In this personal account Biss covers a broad territory—his earliest experiences with Beethoven, his changing reactions over the years to the *Appassionata* Sonata, the opportunities and problems of recording, the challenges and assurances Beethoven offers a listener.

A Better World?

Count me among the multitude for whom Beethoven opened a world. His work is a point of entry and defines why we listen to “classical” music. Compared to him, every other composer comes up short if what we’re looking for is urgency and a persistent sense of necessity. In the words of British music critic Neville Cardus: “Beethoven most times was a rebel, beating his fist against the mortal limitations of music. He often wanted to say things which music couldn’t contain, let alone express.... That is why there are so many repeated notes and chords in Beethoven, violent *sforzandi* which are symbols of protest. Repeated notes in music, when they are strenuous and weightily harmonized, usually mean that a composer has something on his mind. He, at any rate, is not just trying to write a melody.”

Beethoven molds our sense of what we expect music to offer. No one before him had given instrumental music such narrative power, and everyone after him attempted to emulate his storytelling command. His genius was to infuse his music with psychological scenarios, to join an almost operatic concept of drama with music not limited by the words that any characters sing. The Fifth Symphony is the most obvious example of this. Tchaikovsky, who claimed his own Fourth Symphony was “a reflection” of Beethoven’s Fifth, wrote that the Fifth was based on a program “so clear that there cannot be the smallest difference of opinion as to its meaning.”

That plot, depicting a movement from struggle to victory, darkness to light, suggests that abstract music possesses an ethical component. Which is not to say that music makes

us better people. That claim disintegrates in light of history's many bad-guy music lovers. But abstract music, because it *is* abstract, is open to interpretation. Lacking the limits and specifics that words would impose on them, Beethoven's unconstrained dramas engage the imagination, enlisting our gut responses to his scenarios, enabling us to grasp his messages by understanding our own reactions to him. In this, Beethoven tells us to value our own emotions. That may not make us better, but it certainly can make us happy.

The Effort and the Payoff

If Beethoven can open a wider world for listeners, the door to that world is perhaps accessed most easily through his symphonies. Besides the large and insistent gestures delivered by an orchestra—try ignoring those—we encounter theater in every Beethoven symphony: rising and falling action and climaxes, all delivered in unforgettable lines.

The symphonies tell only a fraction of the story. Big public statements can convey their messages with blunt power, but Beethoven explored most deeply in more intimate forms, especially his piano sonatas and string quartets. In those genres, particularly in the late works, he experimented with structure and devised new ways to communicate—Biss has written of “the perpetual innovation which is one of the most significant aspects of Beethoven's output.” Beethoven ignores limits. Into his music he loads a multitude of beauties and complexities, and he trusts our anticipations and memories of both—he trusts our close listening—to ensure that his compositions will transcend their formal borders. He expands music's capabilities.

Beethoven, says Jonathan Biss, “writes about an idealized world.” The pianist speaks of the “wonderment” he finds in Beethoven's sonatas, as though “the search for something unreachable is part of the music's expressive DNA.” Beethoven invested huge effort in that search, and to be true to the music, the artist must convey that effort. As Biss writes, “Without the sense that blood, sweat and tears were involved, a performance simply will not sound like Beethoven.”

Discovering the Sonatas

Even in the early sonatas you hear a new voice. Listen to No. 2. Neither Haydn nor Mozart wrote anything so highly spiced, or so delightfully narcissistic. Its self-love dictates its structure: because Beethoven can't let go the principal theme of his third movement, it becomes part of the finale. Beethoven aims at more than what music before him could embrace, and he carried that aim to extremes in the late sonatas. For example: In the second movement of the two-movement Op. 111 Sonata, the last of the 32, we never know where he is leading. He asks that this movement be played in a “simple and song-like” way, yet no line of melody goes in a direction we expect. At the same time, he convinces us of the momentum's inevitability. He convinces us he has captured and transcribed some essential generative rhythms. Think back to what Neville Cardus said. Rather than melody, this music is *about* rhythm and energy and invention.

Energy also marks the many great, tender adagios Beethoven created. In them, too, the music is not so much based on recognizable and memorable melodies as on reflection, on gesture, on beautifully uttered phrases—quietly urgent, at once rapt and taut with compressed force, sublime.

Beethoven understood the sublime, and also the absurd. As a deaf composer—what could be more unlikely?—he would have had to cultivate a sense of irony and the ridiculous. His humor could be crude. If his instrumental music included words, you can bet many of them would be spelled in four letters.

Sometimes crude and more often direct, Beethoven is also subtle. Listening to different artists approach him reveals different shadings and nuances. I recently compared recordings of the *Appassionata* Sonata's first movement by three pianists. A minute into Rudolf Serkin's recording, he attacks the keyboard, seemingly bent on destroying it. Trills that emerge as ornaments in recordings by Artur Schnabel and Alfred Brendel pinch like pinpricks in Serkin's recording, which is only slightly slower than Schnabel's but almost half a minute faster than Brendel's. (Schnabel, still identified with the sonatas today, was the first to record them all,

Beethoven 250

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September 21 at 8pm

Sonatas Nos. 1, 9, 13 (*Quasi una fantasia*), 12 (*Funeral March*), 21 (*Waldstein*)

September 22 at 3pm

Sonatas Nos. 4, 17 (*Tempest*), 5, 23 (*Appassionata*)

October 12 at 8pm

Sonatas Nos. 15 (*Pastoral*), 20, 3, 27, 28

October 13 at 3pm

Sonatas Nos. 6, 10, 18 (*The Hunt*), 29 (*Hammerklavier*)

December 15 at 3pm

Sonatas Nos. 25 (*Cuckoo*), 11, 14 (*Moonlight*), 24 (*À Thérèse*), 30

March 7 at 8pm

Sonatas Nos. 19, 16, 7, 2, 31

March 8 at 3pm

Sonatas Nos. 8 (*Pathétique*), 22, 26 (*Les adieux*), 32

ADDITIONAL RECITALS AND ORCHESTRAL CONCERTS

Danish String Quartet

November 10 at 3pm, Hertz Hall

String Quartet No. 13 in B-flat major, Op. 130, with *Grosse Fuge*, Op. 133

David Finckel, cello and Wu Han, piano

November 24 at 3pm, Hertz Hall

Sonata No. 3 in A major, Op. 69

Sheku Kanneh-Mason, cello

and Isata Kanneh-Mason, piano

December 4 at 8pm, Zellerbach Hall

12 Variations on Mozart's "*Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen*," Op. 66

Royal Philharmonic Orchestra

Pinchas Zukerman, conductor

January 26 at 3pm, Zellerbach Hall

Overture to *Egmont*

Rotterdam Philharmonic

Lahav Shani, conductor

and Nelson Freire, piano

March 22 at 3pm, Zellerbach Hall

Piano Concerto No. 5, *Emperor*

FURTHER READING

Beethoven's Shadow

by Jonathan Biss

Go to Amazon.com

Political Beethoven

by Prof. Nicholas Mathew, UC Berkeley Dept. of Music (speaker at pre-performance talks before Sunday matinee recitals: Sept 22, Oct 13, Dec 15, Mar 8)

Go to Amazon.com

Beethoven's Guide to Being Human

by Larry Rothe

Go to sfsymphony.org, click on "Watch, Listen & Learn," then on "Program Notes & Articles," then on "Articles & Interviews," and scroll to "March 15, 2011."

in the 1930s.) Toward the end of the movement, a racing passage is suddenly interrupted, punctuated by a downward jab. Serkin hesitates for a micro-second before the jab, and in that suspension you feel him gathering strength for the blow. Neither Schnabel nor Brendel bring a similar sense of drama to this moment. While Serkin focuses on each step in the narrative and its various characters, Schnabel is less episodic, integrating its elements more completely, emphasizing the music's beauty. Brendel stresses architecture and balance, drawing special attention to a four-note figure that is cousin to the fate motif of the Fifth Symphony. Do these differences reflect the artists, or Beethoven?

"Who knows what ingredients go into the greatest of performances?" the film director Errol Morris asks in his *New York Times* essay "The Pianist and the Lobster," proceeding to point out that "no matter how good we can ever be, we may still be chained to the wall in Plato's cave, fantasizing about an unreachable ideal."

Given such shifting ground, you might think Beethoven offers no more stability than the public figures who alter their positions with

the polls. But all three pianists whose *Appassionata* I compared suggest what the *Appassionata* is, different and yet the same, there for us.

In a world as unstable as the ground in earthquake country, we need Beethoven. As we perform and listen to what Beethoven gave us, we do well to remember the deafness and illnesses he coped with, how his very act of writing represented courage in the face of considerable misery, and how that misery vanishes and that courage is mirrored in the dramas he wrote—dramas that culminate insistently or gently or even enigmatically in some ideal destination. In our lives, that ideal will remain unreached simply *because* it is an ideal, but traveling toward it can be good in so many ways. Beethoven invites us to join him.

Larry Rothe, who writes about music for Cal Performances and the San Francisco Opera, has written for the Chicago Symphony Orchestra, New York Philharmonic, and San Francisco Symphony. His books include For the Love of Music and Music for a City, Music for the World.



Portrait of Beethoven by Joseph Willibrord Mähler (1778–1860), 1804–05

Beethoven's Piano Sonatas

An Introduction

by Thomas May

When we consider Ludwig van Beethoven's artistic persona overall, the role played by the piano can hardly be exaggerated. Often regarded as a vehicle or even a ready-made laboratory for the composer, the instrument also served as a kind of alter ego. It provided not only a tool but a place apart that encouraged Beethoven to confide his boldest, wildest intuitions and creative aspirations.

Recalling the spell Beethoven cast when performing at the keyboard, his prodigy student Carl Czerny wrote: "His improvisation was most brilliant and striking. In whatever company he might chance to be, he knew how to produce such an effect upon every hearer that frequently not an eye remained dry, while many would break into loud sobs; for there was something wonderful in his expression in addition to the beauty and originality of his ideas and his spirited style of rendering them." Czerny adds that, "after an improvisation of this kind, [Beethoven] would burst into loud laughter and banter his hearers on the emotion he had caused in them. 'You are fools!' he would say"—cultivating a contrarian image was part of the persona Beethoven presented to his aristocratic admirers.

The 32 published piano sonatas tally roughly a half-million individual notes. Those notes chart one of the most extraordinary trajectories in Western music, encoding the epic of an artistic adventurer who persistently challenged the boundaries of what music itself can express. Culminating in the visionary extremes of Beethoven's late style, these works span nearly his entire career (and even reach back to his adolescence in Bonn, if we include the three unpublished sonatas he wrote at age 12—just around the time Jonathan Biss had his first major epiphany encountering the Beethoven sonatas).

Beethoven produced a greater number of piano sonatas than he did of works in any other genre: 32 remains the canonical number (though in his edition, by admitting into the canon the aforementioned three from his teenage years, the musicologist Barry Cooper has attempted to extend the total to 35). At the same time, as Biss has pointed out, the piano sonatas resisted being categorized and dated according to the conventional three-period model of Beethoven's development—early, middle, and late (or, in Franz Liszt's unforgettable phrase: "l'adolescent, l'homme, le dieu").

The afterlives of these works have assumed countless forms and continue to set expectations: for composers, performers, music lovers. And just as they chart the development of Beethoven's genius, each encounter reflects a new stage in our understanding of what music, at its most challenging and under the pressure of that genius, can convey. As Biss writes in *Beethoven's Shadow*, his behind-the-scenes account of the odyssey of performing and recording the sonatas, "composing gave his life an order and meaning that were otherwise unavailable to him." The challenges that the piano sonatas embody from Beethoven's own life and experience are transferred on to the performer (and listener), but the result "addresses and consoles the spirit in a way that no other creative artist has managed. [Beethoven] is simultaneously superhuman and intensely, painfully human."

Thomas May is a writer, critic, educator, and translator. Along with essays regularly commissioned by the San Francisco Symphony, the Juilliard School, and other leading institutions, he contributes to the New York Times and Musical America and blogs about the arts at www.memeteria.com.



Saturday, September 21, 2019, 8pm
Hertz Hall

Jonathan Biss, *piano*

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) The Complete Piano Sonatas (Concert 1)

Sonata No. 1 in F minor, Op. 2, No. 1
Allegro
Adagio
Menuetto: Allegretto
Prestissimo

Sonata No. 9 in E major, Op. 14, No. 1
Allegro
Allegretto
Rondo: Allegro commodo

Sonata No. 13 in E-flat major, Op. 27, No. 1, *Quasi una fantasia*
Andante: Allegro – Allegro molto e vivace –
Adagio con espressione – Allegro vivace

INTERMISSION

Sonata No. 12 in A-flat major, Op. 26, *Funeral March*
Andante con variazioni
Scherzo: Allegro molto
Marcia funebre sulla morte d'un eroe
Allegro

Sonata No. 21 in C major, Op. 53, *Waldstein*
Allegro con brio
Introduzione: Adagio molto
Rondo: Allegretto moderato – Prestissimo

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Piano Sonata No. 1 in F minor, Op. 2, No. 1

Ludwig van Beethoven published his first set of sonatas as Op. 2 (a set of three) in 1796—he was 25 at the time—with a dedication to Joseph Haydn, whose student he had been. We know that he played these three sonatas for Haydn at a private concert held by one of his patrons in the fall of 1795. By this point, he deemed what he had created of sufficient quality to be officially acknowledged as his first published statements in the genre.

Each of the three Op. 2 sonatas is ambitiously cast in four movements, and the fact that Beethoven decided to launch the set with a work in the minor is noteworthy. (Compare this with other significant Beethovenian genres: his First Symphony, First String Quartet, and First Piano Concerto are all in major keys.) The opening Allegro theme of this F minor sonata clearly echoes the finale of the K. 550 Symphony in G minor of Mozart (1788)—whose Piano Concerto in C minor also left an indelible mark on young Beethoven.

Shaped as a dynamic, rising arpeggio, the gesture later is turned in the opposite, descending direction to provide the second theme. Also of interest is the use of a fermata pause (i.e., an improvisatory break that brings the tense action of the opening to an abrupt, suspenseful halt). This gesture of silence is what gives the opening motto of the Fifth Symphony, for example, much of its power.

Beethoven grants a respite between the agitated emotions of the first and third movements with a comparatively conventional, song-form Adagio in F major as the slow movement. The ensuing Minuet, by contrast, boldly plays with dynamic contrasts in a way that will become a stylistic signature. Lauded for his thrilling manner with impetuous tempi, Beethoven draws on this facet of his keyboard personality for the restless and stormy Prestissimo finale. Within the framework of its breakneck speed, a middle section of exquisite lyrical poise offers a welcome brief oasis. A fortissimo descent concludes the sonata.

Piano Sonata No. 9 in E major, Op. 14, No. 1

The two sonatas of Op. 14 date from 1798–99

and were dedicated to one of Beethoven's benefactors, Baroness Josefa von Braun. While Beethoven had already attempted to use the piano to create a sound world of orchestral scope in the Op. 7 sonata of the year before (and, to some extent, in the contemporaneous Op. 13, *Pathétique*), both Op. 14 sonatas are decidedly intimate, intended for the private sphere.

Indeed, Beethoven underscored the chamber music sensibility here by deciding to transcribe the first, the Sonata in E major, for string quartet in 1801 (the only sonata he so transcribed). Although he disapproved in principle of transcribing from solo piano to string instruments, some scholars have argued that this sonata was initially conceived as a string quartet.

The piece unfolds in three movements. Though the motivic material of the Allegro first movement comprises elemental gestures—fourths, arpeggios, scales—Beethoven's treatment is unflinchingly engaging. The middle movement, an Allegretto in E minor, is more akin to a minuet, with a brief trio that shifts boldly to C major. Concluding this sonata is a rondo marked “comfortably Allegro” (Allegro comodo) in which Beethoven indulges the playful humor that is a recurrent element in the sonatas.

Piano Sonata No. 13 in E-flat major, Op. 27, No. 1, *Quasi una fantasia*

Beethoven was already concerned with questioning conventional Classical sonata form and expectations in his early sonatas. The Op. 27 pair, which he completed in 1801, take a particularly innovative approach to issues of architecture. Like its much-better-known companion (the Sonata in C-sharp minor, immortalized as the *Moonlight*), the Sonata in E-flat major (jestingly called by some the *Sunlight*) bears the unusual designation *Sonata quasi una fantasia* (i.e., “in the manner of a fantasy”). In both works, Beethoven transforms the Classical architecture of sonatas built from separate movements into a single overarching fantasy by segueing directly (*attacca*) from one movement to the next—most explicitly in this work, whose four movements all proceed without pause and find their center of gravity in the final movement.

The first movement presents a kind of rondo characterized by simple, relaxed harmonic seeing-sawing, though Beethoven undercuts its stability with sudden shift to music in C major (the first time stealing in with quiet surprise). Sleight-of-hand syncopations energize the Allegro molto e vivace, a scherzo-with-trio movement in C minor that stops short in the major.

As a slow movement within the fantasy (*Adagio con espressione*), Beethoven turns to songlike, improvisational musing. The sound world here is deeply felt but so brief as to form a kind of lyrical upbeat or prelude to the joyful Allegro vivace finale. Strains of the *Adagio* return unexpectedly (transposed to the home key) in one of this sonata's most affecting movements. This gesture of recollection out of the blue makes the ensuing, unbridled, rapid-fire coda sound all the more brilliant and conclusive.

Piano Sonata No. 12 in A-flat major, Op. 26, *Funeral March*

Composed at the dawn of the new century and dedicated to the composer's patron Prince Karl von Lichnowsky, this sonata marks a new stage in Beethoven's approach to the genre—and in his understanding of his identity as a composer. Here, according to the biographer Jan Swafford, Beethoven “fully possessed the voice history would know him by, and at age 30 he was writing music that would place him once and for all in the history of his art. Everything about this sonata seems to be more than anything in the works before: more personal; more innovative in the approach to form...; more varied in the expressive scope, with fresh kinds of unity.”

As to its formal innovation, Op. 26 is the first sonata by Beethoven that begins without an actual sonata-form movement. Indeed, none of its four movements is in sonata form, and Beethoven reverses the usual slow movement-scherzo order, placing the latter before the former (as in Op. 27, No. 1). The first movement, moreover, is an Andante, its five variations presenting a concept of musical development that swerves from the dialectic of the sonata paradigm. The Scherzo contrasts staccato and legato articulation, while the third movement

returns to an Andante tempo (now marked *maestoso*—“majestic”) and the variation idea. Titled “Funeral March on the Death of a Hero,” it naturally brings the parallel movement of the *Eroica* Symphony to mind, as do the Andante's solemn gestures of dotted rhythms in the minor key (albeit in a more flowing tempo). The same holds for the brightly contrasting middle section, with bass tremolos suggesting ceremonial drumrolls. Beethoven actually orchestrated this movement for use as incidental music (using winds and brass): it was played at his funeral in 1827. His pupil Carl Czerny reported that the composer was thinking of a mythic hero, not a contemporary Napoleonic figure. His direct inspiration seems to have been Ferdinand Paër's 1801 opera *Achille*. The variation idea returns yet again in the relatively modest but dazzling finale. “The effect is of pulling back from the somber funeral march into something animated but impersonal, like a cleansing rain,” remarks Swafford.

Piano Sonata No. 21 in C major, Op. 53, *Waldstein*

Beethoven's sketches for this landmark sonata can be found in the same notebook he used to work out ideas for the contemporaneous *Eroica* Symphony; he completed both works in 1804. The composer dedicated Op. 53 to Count Ferdinand Ernst Gabriel von Waldstein—the nobleman who was among his earliest supporters when he first set off for Vienna (hence the well-known nickname). This music is animated by the surge of renewed creativity following Beethoven's Heiligenstadt Testament—in which he confided overcoming his thoughts of suicide and resolving to accept the fate of his worsening deafness.

Here, Beethoven transcends the High Classical style with a quasi-symphonic approach to the keyboard. The *Waldstein* Sonata was in fact partially inspired by the gift of a new, state-of-the-art instrument Beethoven received from the Parisian piano makers at Erard. The paradox is that the music manages at once to sound symphonic *and* quintessentially pianistic.

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Bust statue of Beethoven by Hugo Hagen (1818–1871),
based on life mask by Franz Klein done in 1812



Sunday, September 22, 2019, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Jonathan Biss, *piano*

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) The Complete Piano Sonatas (Concert 2)

Sonata No. 4 in E-flat major, Op. 7
Allegro molto e con brio
Largo con gran espressione
Allegro
Rondo: Poco allegretto e grazioso

Sonata No. 17 in D minor, Op. 31, No. 2, *The Tempest*
Largo: Allegro
Adagio
Allegretto

INTERMISSION

Sonata No. 5 in C minor, Op. 10, No. 1
Allegro molto e con brio
Adagio molto
Finale: Prestissimo

Sonata No. 23 in F minor, Op. 57, *Appassionata*
Allegro assai
Andante con moto
Allegro ma non troppo

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Piano Sonata No. 4 in E-flat major, Op. 7

Beethoven is believed to have composed this ambitious sonata in 1796, while visiting the family estate in Bratislava of a female student: Babette Countess Keglević, to whom he decided to dedicate the score. Like his first three sonatas—published the previous year as Op. 2—Op. 7 contains four movements, but its much grander scale is apparent from the fact that this is the first piano sonata Beethoven published under its own opus number, sans companions.

And Op. 7 reined as the longest of the piano sonatas for years, up until Beethoven wrote the Op. 106 *Hammerklavier* in 1817–18. It represents the first piano sonata he designated on its title page as “grand” (“Grande Sonate” is sometimes used as a nickname). His student Carl Czerny once remarked that the epithet *Appassionata* would have been more properly suited to Op. 7 than to the Op. 53 sonata that Jonathan Biss has chosen to close this program. The relative neglect of the epic Op. 7 is puzzling indeed. To what extent might the lack of a catchy nickname be to blame?

The scale of this work indicates how rapidly Beethoven was pushing beyond his models from Mozart, Haydn, and other authorities—and beyond the technical limits of the keyboard’s power as he knew it. While the later *Waldstein* (with which Biss concluded last evening’s program in the cycle) is contemporaneous with the breakthrough *Eroica*, the momentum of Op. 7’s first movement—in the *Eroica* key of E-flat major—seems to prefigure something of the impetuous drive of that symphony. It similarly features an energetically pulsating accompaniment on the same note. A highly contrasting, chorale-like second theme allows for a brief dissipation of this tension, but it comes back with a vengeance at the end of the exposition. Beethoven inserts powerful—at times even violent—accents and abrupt dynamic shifts amid the virtuoso passages of this fiery movement, whose soundscape at moments strains for an almost orchestral expansiveness.

The harmonic change to C major for the Largo, to be played “con gran espressione” (“with great expressiveness”), arrests the attention at

once. Beethoven subtly underscores a sense of unity by again starting, as he had in the Allegro molto e con brio, with two pairs of chords separated by a pause. Here, in one of his most profound slow movements, spacious silences are integrated to wonderful effect.

The Allegro third movement begins sweetly and politely, yet unexpected syncopations of silence and hammering accents impart the attitude of a scherzo. The trio, in agitated E-flat minor, recalls the restless momentum of the opening with incessant triplets. In the finale (Poco allegretto e grazioso), an especially ingratiating melody takes a backward glance to Beethoven’s origins, though he again surprises with a tense shift to C minor in the contrasting middle section. After so much ground has been traversed, this “Grand Sonata” comes to a self-effacing close.

Piano Sonata No. 17 in D minor, Op. 31, No. 2, *The Tempest*

Roughly contemporaneous with the *Moonlight* Sonata, this work, dating from 1801–02, has similarly become known to posterity via an indelible nickname, *The Tempest* (*Der Sturm* in German). Yet, as in the case of the *Moonlight*, the highly suggestive moniker did not originate with Beethoven. The party responsible for it was Anton Schindler, the composer’s personal secretary—and the source of a good deal of dubious “information” that has become inextricably linked to Beethoven.

Schindler claimed that his question as to what Beethoven had envisioned with this music prompted the reply: “Read Shakespeare’s *Tempest*.” While Beethoven did own a complete edition of Shakespeare’s works, the notion that he was attempting something like program music to illustrate the Bard’s late romance must be considered with caution. After all, a good many other sonatas by the composer include what might be labeled “stormy” music.

In any case, this sonata in D minor stands out on its own, in purely musical terms. The opening Largo might suggest a slow introduction, but it is an integral counterpart to the agitated Allegro. These alternating musical states form a polarity of contemplation and terror and gen-

erate an emotional complexity greater than the sum of their parts. Pay close attention to the bare recitative-like lament when the Largo returns at the recapitulation. It is one of the most haunting moments in all Beethoven (anticipating the oboe solo at the parallel moment in the first movement of the Fifth Symphony): to be whispered, as the eminent scholar Charles Rosen has remarked, “like a voice from the tomb.”

Duration and scale here manifest Beethoven’s preoccupation with exploring new, ambitious potential for the genre. The first movement’s architecture veers from conventional sonata design to build a powerful drama of dramatic contrasts and musical suspense. The arpeggiated chord that begins this sonata is echoed at the start of the Adagio, now shifted to a newfound equipoise in B-flat major. It opens the vista onto a serenely songful dream, momentarily sealing us off from the turmoil preceding it. Yet the mood of restless anxiety returns in the perpetual motion of the Allegretto finale. The music thrillingly synthesizes an air of improvisational mastery with Beethoven’s virtuoso pianism, all in the service of this sonata’s extraordinary psychological intensity.

Piano Sonata No. 5 in C minor, Op. 10, No. 1
Beethoven worked simultaneously, starting in 1796, on the three sonatas he published as Op. 10 in 1798. He dedicated them to Countess Anna Margaretha Browne, who was the spouse of his patron Johann Georg Browne, a Russian diplomat of Irish background in service in Vienna. Among the gifts Beethoven received from this aristocratic pair was a horse.

Certain “common features” link these sonatas together, according to the biographer William Kinderman, “such as the presence of comic music abounding in sudden contrasts and unexpected turns”—traits Beethoven had likely internalized from Haydn, and then made his own. Yet each sonata in this set possesses a distinctive personality. One contemporary critic (writing in 1799) praised the set as a whole but could not help wishing that “it might occur to this fanciful composer to practice a certain economy in his labors.” Beethoven was seen as too prodigal with his “fancy” and “abundance of ideas.”

The opening sonata of the Op. 10 set is also Beethoven’s first piano sonata in C minor, the key associated with “Beethoven as Hero,” as Charles Rosen puts it. The stern, call-to-attention chord opening the Allegro molto e con brio splinters into a tensely dotted, rising idea, followed by a contrasting soft lament. This sets into relief the lyrical second theme. In developing these ideas, Beethoven seems eager to stretch beyond the keyboard’s confines of register.

With the Adagio molto in A-flat major, we encounter “the last such lyrical sonata slow movement Beethoven was to write” and a cousin to the parallel movement of the Sonata in F minor, Op. 2, No. 1, according to the pianist Robert Taub. The composer, he explains, “never returned to the style of a florid slow movement in a piano sonata.” The Prestissimo finale resorts to a compressed dramatic process similar to that of the first movement—its unison octave opening giving an anticipation of how the later, groundbreaking *Appassionata* will begin. Uncanny hints of the Fifth Symphony similarly emerge in the brief development. An intriguing reversal of one of Beethoven’s favorite strategies occurs in the coda: rather than speed up the (already rushing) tempo, he slows it down to an improvisatory Adagio, then repeats the shock of the opening with a terse final statement that gutters out like a candle, ending suddenly in C major.

Piano Sonata No. 23 in F minor, Op. 57, *Appassionata*

A few years separate *The Tempest* from this sonata, which also has become known by a posthumously conferred nickname (this time, from a publisher with good marketing savvy). The *Appassionata* dates from 1804–05, yet it shares several noteworthy aspects with Op. 31, No. 2: most obviously, the raging turbulence of the outer movements. In the case of this F minor sonata, a prominent rhythmic motto (three shorts and a long) relates it to the complex of musical ideas Beethoven was preoccupied with at the time, when he was also making sketches for the Fifth Symphony. A sonata-symphony connection seems to obtain here not unlike that found in the earlier *Eroica/Waldstein* relation.

The *Appassionata* finds Beethoven in fully amped “heroic” mode, but here channeled into a more concentrated and fiercely dramatic style. We might recall that F minor is the same tonality Beethoven daringly chose to inaugurate his sonata cycle. From it he generates a disturbingly dark, violent, menacing soundscape of tragic conflict.

Played at the outset in unadorned unison and with an eerily conspiratorial quiet, the main theme of the opening *Allegro assai* sprawls over two octaves. Note Beethoven’s masterful use of disturbing pauses—also a feature of the Fifth Symphony, along with the motto rhythm that here emerges low in the bass. The second theme reworks the first, viewing it from a different angle—a concentration of ideas that intensifies the drama’s vividness. Remarkably, the composer dispenses with the conventional repeat of the exposition for the first time in his piano sonatas. Hammering outbursts are set against passages of unnerving *sotto voce*—nowhere more so than in the reduction to *ppp* to end

the movement, the passion momentarily spent but by no means resolved.

The first movement of *The Tempest* had ended with a similar strategy, and, in the *Appassionata*, the shift to D-flat major for the *Andante con moto* parallels the shift in the former work’s slow movement (down a major third from its minor home key). This *Andante*—the eye of the hurricane—is hymnal in character. Beethoven proceeds to dash its reassurance with the tempestuous, perpetual-motion fury of the finale. The theme whirls and churns with merciless determination—the Fates spinning their thread. There is no journey in this sonata from darkness to light. It yields only unrelenting tragedy, closing with a coda that speeds up like a mad dance of death. After these exhaustive explorations of the sonata, Beethoven would take a lengthy break—five years—from the genre. But he had already changed our expectations of what could be accomplished within it forever.

—Thomas May

PROGRAM NOTES (cont. from p. 18)

Steadily pulsing chords at the outset of the *Allegro con brio* (the same marking as the first movement of the Fifth Symphony) signal the dynamism of Beethoven’s thinking. They establish an electrifying current of seemingly endlessly renewable energy (compare this with the similar pulsation at the start of the *Eroica*). A dramatic pause brings the forward motion to an abrupt stop at the end of the first full statement. Beethoven’s harmonic planning and dramatic use of extreme contrasts of range and volume shape the first movement’s magnificent architecture.

Initially, Beethoven planned a substantial *Andante* to correspond to the proportions of the outer movements, but later he replaced this with the “*Introduzione*”—a quasi-operatic *intermezzo* that bridges the outer movements and raises the curtain on the massive finale. Like the *Allegro con brio*, the final movement opens almost surreptitiously before swelling with immense energy. Beethoven brings it all to a close with a coda of dizzying speed—in the process redefining the piano’s powers.

—Thomas May



Saturday, October 12, 2019, 8pm
Hertz Hall

Jonathan Biss, *piano*

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) The Complete Piano Sonatas (Concert 3)

Sonata No. 15 in D major, Op. 28, *Pastorale*

Allegro

Andante

Scherzo: Allegro vivace

Rondo: Allegro ma non troppo

Sonata No. 20 in G major, Op. 49, No. 2

Allegro ma non troppo

Tempo di Menuetto

Sonata No. 3 in C major, Op. 2, No. 3

Allegro con brio

Adagio

Scherzo: Allegretto

Allegro assai

INTERMISSION

Sonata No. 27 in E minor, Op. 90

Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck

Nicht zu geschwind und sehr singbar vorgetragen

Sonata No. 28 in A major, Op. 101

Etwas lebhaft und mit der innigsten Empfindung

Lebhaft, marschmäßig

Langsam und sehnsuchtsvoll

Geschwinde, doch nicht zu sehr, und mit Entschlossenheit

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Portrait of Beethoven by Christian Horneman (1765–1844), 1803

**Piano Sonata No. 15 in D major, Op. 28,
*Pastorale***

Tradition has surrounded a number of Beethoven's piano sonatas with vague programmatic (or "characteristic") associations. These are usually crystallized by the nicknames attached to them. This sonata, which was published in 1801, with a dedication to Joseph von Sonnenfels (a former Mozart patron and anti-torture activist), has become known as the *Pastorale*—another publisher's invention—though it is not as famous as Beethoven's other moniker-bearing sonatas.

The suggestion of a peaceful, bucolic mood arises from specific devices Beethoven uses here: above all, the repeated bass drone of the tonic D in the finale triggered rhetorical connotations of the countryside. One might also identify the charming rondo theme in that movement as belonging to the same family as the lightly tripping theme in the final movement of the later *Pastoral* Symphony (which does bear Beethoven's authentic nickname).

Beethoven sets aside the experimental mode of the three sonatas preceding Op. 28, opting instead to take a look again at more Classically oriented conventions. The rhythmic pulse in the bass at the beginning of the first movement (often likened to a steady beat provided by the timpani) anchors the harmonic voyage to come.

Beethoven's use of contrasts is especially pleasing in the D minor Andante, as well as in the relationship between the Allegro vivace Scherzo in D major and its minor-key trio. Despite the music's leisurely aura, the finale encompasses a wide range of textures, from intricate polyphony to Beethoven's most virtuosic vein in a thrilling coda. As a whole, writes the biographer Maynard Solomon, this sonata "celebrates the peace that comes from the fulfillment of a difficult creative effort and withdraws to a relative traditionalism, from which Beethoven will gain strength for a new creative surge."

Piano Sonata No. 20 in G major, Op. 49, No. 2
Jonathan Biss' juxtaposition of the five sonatas in this program underscores the inadequacy of pigeonholing Beethoven into conveniently

schematic periods that set "early" off against "middle" and "late." Even within a narrow chronological span, the composer exploited remarkably disparate strategies, such that each fresh approach to the genre possesses a unique character.

The Op. 49 pair of sonatas comes from the heyday of Beethoven's years as a performing virtuoso in the 1790s. (The comparatively late opus number merely indicates that these pieces were held back from publication for several years, though their composition is actually dated sometime between 1795 and 1798.) Yet in this modest set of twins (see p. 46 for a description of its companion), each comprising only two movements, Beethoven purposely reins in virtuoso display. Anyone who has studied piano has likely encountered these so-called "easy sonatas," for they belong to the tradition of keyboard music intended for students and amateurs, to which such composers as J.S. Bach and Mozart also contributed such notable repertoire.

Not that there is anything rote or formulaic about Beethoven's pared-down writing here. The second of this pair, in G major, is even more straightforward than its G minor twin but poses interpretive challenges in the lack of dynamic markings, which normally play such a crucial role in Beethoven's shaping of the musical argument. (The autograph score is not extant.)

Both movements are in G major, the first a simple and charming Allegro ma non troppo whose two main themes feature a contrast of extroverted and more subdued lyrical material. Beethoven, the master atomizer, pulverizer, and transmogrifier of motivic ideas, here contents himself with a mere wisp of a development section. The first movement is complemented by a rondo in *tempo di menuetto* (an indication Beethoven uses elsewhere in the sonatas only for Op. 54—as well as in his uber-popular Op. 20 Septet, for which he recycled this tune). Each reprise of the rondo theme offers an opportunity for the pianist to shade a bit differently with improvisatory inflections.

Piano Sonata No. 3 in C major, Op. 2, No. 3
Of the very first set of piano sonatas that Beethoven published in 1796 as his Op. 2 (see p. 17



Vienna ca. 1800. The Kohlmarkt. Artaria, Beethoven's publisher, is on the right.

for more background), the concluding work in C major is the boldest, in regards both to its structural scope and to the challenges it poses for the performer. This music has been hailed as a prefiguration of the brilliance of the later C major *Waldstein* Sonata. Like its companions in Op. 2, the third sonata is laid out in an expansive four movements (in contrast to the three movements more typical of Haydn's and Mozart's solo piano sonatas).

The *Allegro con brio* first movement presents an abundance of material, including a surprising transitional thematic group in the minor—a hint of the harmonic surprises scattered throughout this sonata. A lengthy development is balanced by the unusual bravura required for the coda, for which Beethoven writes out a cadenza—as if he wanted to make this solo sonata interchangeable with a public concerto. In tandem with the expanded architectural proportions, he makes pithy use of the opening theme, enhancing a sense of organic unity. It even appears subliminally in the *Adagio*, in startling E major, where it is transformed into a new melody. An extended minor-key section evokes pathos with the most economical of means, based on a sighing semitone figure.

Beethoven shows off his contrapuntal prowess in the neatly dovetailing canon imitations of the *Scherzo*. Instead of offering repose, the Trio ripples past in restless triplets, while the coda retreats into stagey whispers. Some of the most dazzling flourishes (and technical demands) are reserved for the *Allegro assai finale*. The main theme of ascending chords (to be played with a light touch) almost suggests an amiable parody of the early Classical era commonplace known as the “Mannheim rocket.” Into this movement Beethoven crowds powerful crescendos, daring harmonic shifts and hints of still another cadenza (which never actually arrives), with a fanfare of trills near the end.

Piano Sonata No. 27 in E major, Op. 90

A period of absence from the piano sonata genre separates this work, composed in the summer of 1814, from its predecessor, Op. 81a, which had been completed almost five years earlier. Even Beethoven's tempo indications hint

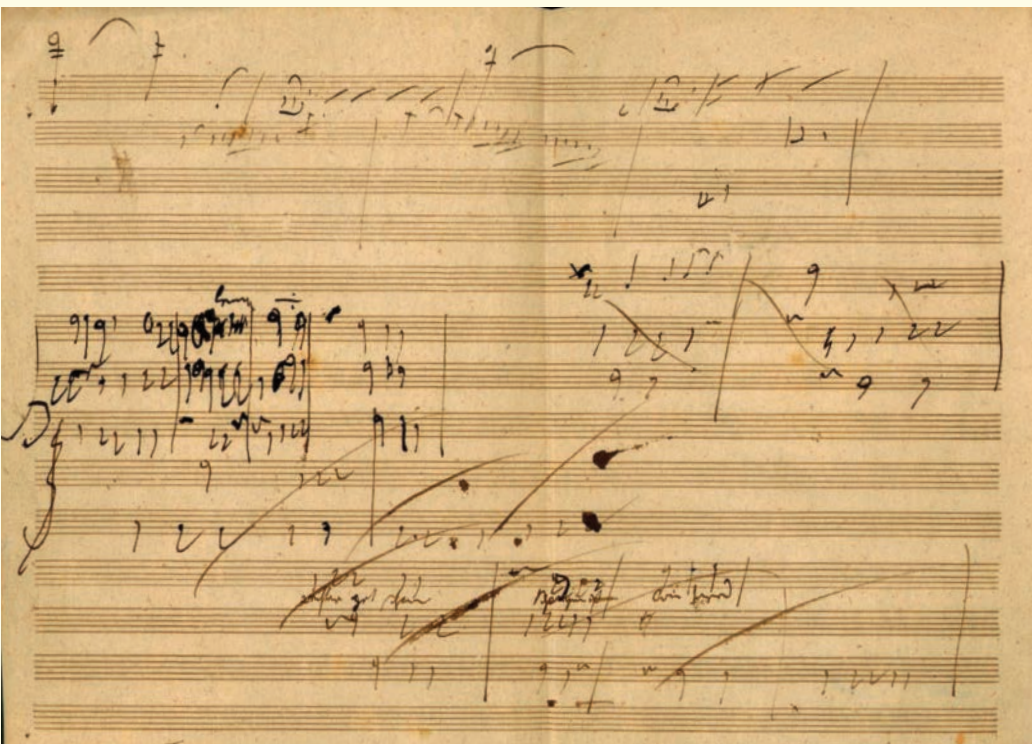
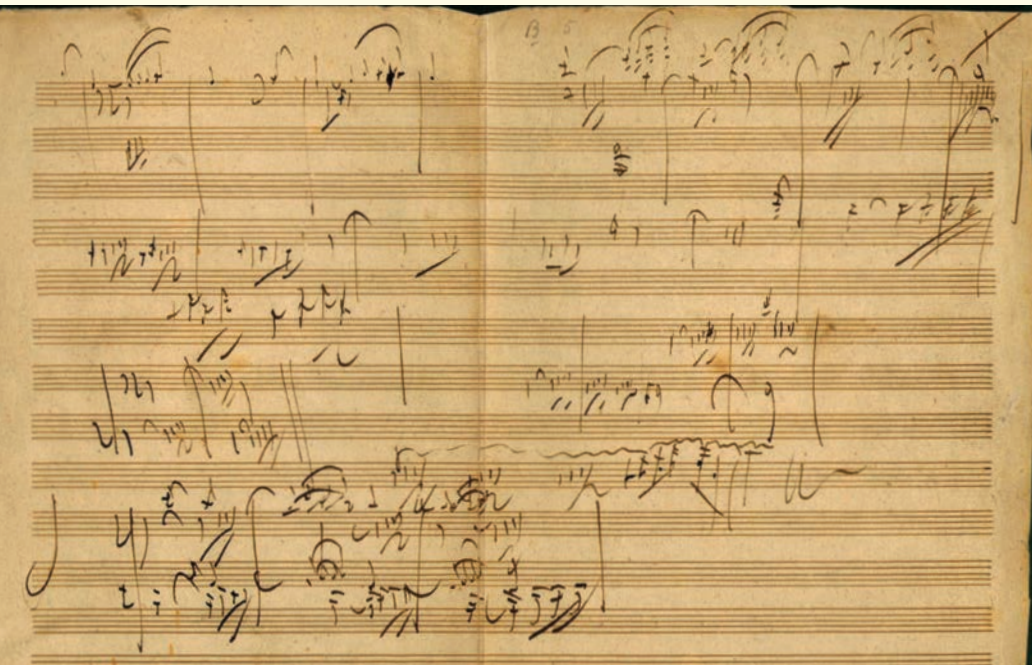
at a significant change in perspective. While he had started introducing German directives to clarify his Italian ones in that preceding sonata (see p. 51), the composer dispenses with the Italian convention altogether in Op. 90. The sonata is dedicated to the composer's patron Prince Moritz von Lichnowsky.

The German indication for the first movement (“Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck”) might be translated “lively, with feeling and expression throughout” and that for the second (“Nicht zu geschwind und sehr singbar vorgetragen”) “to be played not too fast and in a very singing manner.” (The traditional lore from Anton Schindler suggested Beethoven wanted to name the movements “Contest between Head and Heart” and “Conversation with the Beloved,” respectively.)

The two-movement scheme—so different from that of the early Op. 49—additionally singles out this E minor sonata as a work on the threshold of Beethoven's musical thinking in his late style. Opus 78 from 1809 had likewise been cast in only two movements, yet here the juxtaposition is extreme, as if to suggest the yin and yang of experience itself. Instead of the raw conflict of dialectical opposites, organized to resolve in a goal-oriented “victory,” both movements simply co-exist: night and day. As such, they foreshadow the design of Beethoven's final essay in the genre, Op. 111.

The first movement sets up internal contrasts that remain unresolved. Its opening statement, structured as a call and response, is declamatory, but emphatic and unyielding rhythms give way to a flowing lyrical impulse. The exposition is tight, compressed, yet intensely eventful, marked by dynamic contrasts and crashing dissonances, while the coda opens up vast new mysteries.

With a simple upbeat, the second movement shifts to E major. Notwithstanding the innocent suavity of its rondo theme, Beethoven makes it feel like the inevitable counterpart to the declamatory outbursts of the first movement. Even through the digressions of the intervening episodes, Beethoven's writing here spells out the implications of the opening lyricism with



Piano Sonata in A major, Op. 101, Fourth Movement, manuscript sketch in Beethoven's handwriting

music that seems to pass beyond conflict and comes to a close with a heartbreakingly honest whisper.

Piano Sonata No. 28 in A major, Op. 101

With Op. 101, Jonathan Biss enters into the realm of what is widely designated Beethoven's late style. Completed in 1816, this sonata reminds us not only of the extent to which the composer refined and expanded the formal and stylistic ideas he had inherited from Haydn, Mozart, and others. In his so-called late style, Beethoven radically reconsidered the essence of the piano sonata as a creative act.

By this time, worsening deafness had forced him to abandon his own career as a virtuoso pianist. The 45-year-old Beethoven dedicated Op. 101 to Baroness Dorothea von Ertmann, a student who became a highly respected contemporary Viennese pianist—and at one time was regarded as a strong candidate in the quest to identify the mysterious “Immortal Beloved” with whom Beethoven famously corresponded in the summer of 1812.

Another notable feature of the published score is the fact that here, for the first time, Beethoven used a German word for the rapidly evolving piano, settling on *Hammerklavier* (which would become the moniker of his subsequent sonata, Op. 106). His (notoriously unreliable) personal secretary Anton Schindler claimed that “this is the only one [of his piano

sonatas] that was publicly performed during the lifetime of the composer,” with Beethoven in attendance as part of the audience. He also reports that Beethoven named the first and third movements “impressions and reveries.”

Marked “*Etwas lebhaft, und mit der innigsten Empfindung*” (“Somewhat lively, and with the most intimate sensitivity”), the gentle first movement conveys complex emotional intimacies beneath its deceptively simple, flowing surface. Richard Wagner not only greatly admired this music but learned much from it for his concept of “infinite melody.”

The “lively, march-like” ensuing movement shifts unexpectedly to F major (like the Scherzo of the A major Seventh Symphony). Its contrasting middle section builds on the canonic overlapping of voices. The Adagio (“slow and full of longing”) is not a stand-alone slow movement but serves as a meditative, improvisatory interlude and introduction to the finale, incorporating a memory of the opening movement's first theme near the end. Beethoven then segues into the richly confident final movement (“swiftly, but not too much so, and with determination”), which features elaborately contrapuntal textures—another preoccupation of Beethoven's late style—above all in the development section, which unfolds as a grand fugue. In the final bars, Beethoven repeats his trick of slowing and hushing the music before bringing it back to tempo at full blast.

—Thomas May



Portrait of Beethoven by Joseph Willibrord Mähler (1778–1860), 1815



Sunday, October 13, 2019, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Jonathan Biss, *piano*

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) The Complete Piano Sonatas (Concert 4)

Sonata No. 6 in F major, Op. 10, No. 2
Allegro
Menuetto. Allegretto
Presto

Sonata No. 10 in G major, Op. 14, No. 2
Allegro
Andante
Scherzo: Allegro assai

Sonata No. 18 in E-flat major, Op. 31, No. 3, *The Hunt*
Allegro
Scherzo: Allegretto vivace
Menuetto: Moderato e grazioso
Presto con fuoco

INTERMISSION

Sonata No. 29 in B-flat major, Op. 106, *Hammerklavier*
Allegro
Scherzo: Assai vivace
Adagio sostenuto
Largo: Allegro risoluto

Cal Performances' 2019–20 season is sponsored by Wells Fargo.

Piano Sonata No. 6 in F major, Op. 10, No. 2
 Beethoven as tragic, defiant, fate-protesting hero: this quintessentially Romantic image of the composer continues to cast its spell. It tends to overshadow many other aspects of the man—in particular, the importance of humor in his work. Jonathan Biss here presents sonatas replete with Beethovenian humor, presented side by side with the most ambitious of the sonatas in the entire cycle, the mighty *Hammerklavier*, which opens the way into new ways of thinking about the genre, the instrument, and the very nature of musical expression.

In his pathbreaking book *The Classical Style*, the scholar and pianist Charles Rosen encapsulates the significant role played by humor and the comic spirit in general with regard to the stylistic language that Beethoven inherited and transformed: “The buffoonery of Haydn, Beethoven, and Mozart is only an exaggeration of an essential quality of the Classical style. This style was, in its origins, basically a comic one. I do not mean that sentiments of the deepest and most tragic emotion could not be expressed by it, but the pacing of Classical rhythm is the pacing of comic opera, its phrasing is the phrasing of dance music, and its large structures are these phrases dramatized.”

As the biographer William Kinderman has noted (see p. 23 for more background on the set as a whole), the three Op. 10 sonatas published in 1798 share certain “comic” gestures of the sort perfected by Haydn, which take the form of “sudden contrasts and unexpected turns.” He also points to “a whimsical, unpredictable humor [that] surfaces in the finales” of all three Op. 10 sonatas, “most strikingly in the opening Allegro” of this sonata in F major.

Beethoven even seems to mock his own tendency to obsess over a phrase: listen to his treatment of the ornamental turn right after the first two chords, which ends up being no trivial decoration at all. For Kinderman, this opening movement suggests something of the “tail wagging the dog” and is, as a whole, “anti-teleological,” in that “the music appears to progress in fits and starts”—which is to say, as it were, anti-Beethoven (or a very clichéd notion of Beethoven epitomized by the darkness-to-

light trajectory of, say, the Fifth Symphony). For the performer, comic music requires nuanced comic timing.

The mood turns rather more serious in the F minor Allegretto, which is graced by a trio in D-flat major. In lieu of a temporary Eden between storms (as in Beethoven’s “tempestuous” sonatas), this middle movement is flanked by the giddy spirits of the opening and the contrapuntally playful Presto finale. We can practically hear Beethoven laughing here, as if “revoking” any attempt to take too seriously what had been presented in the Allegretto.

Piano Sonata No. 10 in G major, Op. 14, No. 2
 The two sonatas published in 1799 as Op. 14 (see p. 17 for more background) were intended for private, domestic music-making. In contrast to the ambitious, four-movement design of the first four sonatas, this pair reverts to the three movements characteristic of Mozart’s and Haydn’s solo sonatas.

Beethovenian humor is often described as “gruff,” but it has other facets as well that come to the fore in the Sonata in G major—as in the rhythmic displacements so central to the language of the opening Allegro. In his commentaries on the complete sonatas, the pianist Robert Taub observes that this is the first Beethoven sonata to begin with “no chords of any sort.” Indeed, the feeling of fantasy imparted by the opening measures is reminiscent of a Baroque prelude. The movement unfolds with considerable grace and wit.

There’s no shortage of chordal writing in the theme-and-variations Andante in C major. The variations actually transpire in the accompaniment. Unusually, Beethoven ends this sonata with a rondo-form Scherzo that seems to thumb its nose at the four-square march demeanor of the middle movement with comically eccentric accents and pauses as unpredictable as a game of musical chairs.

Piano Sonata No. 18 in E-flat major, Op. 31, No. 3, *The Hunt*

This sonata, completed in 1802, did not appear in print until 1804, and only in 1805 did it join its companions as the third of the Op. 31 set



The Beethoven Broadwood, manufactured in London in 1817

(see p. 46 for more on Op. 31's publication history). The lack of autograph scores has exacerbated the editing issues that beset Op. 31 from the start. What is certain is that Beethoven had become impatient to seek out a new "path" as a composer—the image is his own, according to his student Czerny, who recalled Beethoven expressing an intent to make a fresh start on his creative work. The *Tempest* Sonata, published as the second of the Op. 31 set, stakes out daring new territory in Beethoven's sonatas. His preoccupation with progressive musical ideas and forms is also apparent,

though in different ways, in this sonata, which carries the nickname *The Hunt*. (The moniker is not as widespread as the "standard" ones like *The Tempest*, *Appassionata*, and *Waldstein*, but became attached to the piece in some countries during the 19th century—in this case, mostly in France.)

According to Kinderman, the composer's "innovative tendencies surface more clearly" in these pieces, in which Beethoven "boldly [explores] artistic territory that he soon consolidated in the *Eroica* Symphony." Cast in the *Eroica* key of E-flat major—but in no way akin

Antonij Peter Am. Broadwood!

J'aurais je n'esprouvais pas un plus grand
Plaisir de ce que me causa votre bonté
de l'arrivée de cette Piano, avec que vous
m'honorez de m'en faire présent, je
regarderai comme un Autel, ou je
dépenserai les plus belles offrandes
de mon Esprit au Divin Apollon.
Aussitôt comme je recevrai votre Excellence

instrument, je vous enverrai deabord les
Fruits de l'inspiration des premiers
moments, que j'en passerai, pour
vous servir d'un Souvenir de moi à
vous mon très cher B., et
je ne souhaite ce que, qu'ils soient
dignes de votre instrument.

Mon cher Monsieur et votre
ami, ma plus grande
Confidant on

de votre amitié
et très humble serviteur

Vienna le 3^e Fev
1818

Louis Van Beethoven

After receiving word of Broadwood's gift, Beethoven wrote: "My dearest friend Broadwood, I have never felt a greater pleasure than that given me by the anticipation of the arrival of this piano, with which you are honouring me as a present. I shall regard it as an altar on which I shall place my spirit's most beautiful offerings to the divine Apollo. As soon as I receive your excellent instrument, I shall send you the fruits of the first moments of inspiration I spend at it, as a souvenir for you from me, my very dear B., and I hope that they will be worthy of your instrument. My dear sir and friend, accept my warmest consideration, from your friend and most humble servant, Louis Van Beethoven, Vienna, 3rd February 1818.

to the “heroism” of the latter work—this sonata is laid out in four movements. Interestingly, Beethoven would use a four-movement design again only in Op. 101 (where it’s actually ambiguous) and Op. 106 (the *Hammerklavier*), which concludes this program.

The Allegro opens with a coy phrase—light-years apart from the determination of the Third Symphony—and even suggests “a continuation of music that had already begun” (Kinderman). The harmonic ground shifts subtly, even anticipating the instability of Wagner’s *Tristan* chord. Yet the ambiguity coexists with an overall cheerful air.

The ensuing Allegretto vivace Scherzo (in duple rather than triple meter) makes comic use of dynamic contrasts. Curiously, Beethoven follows this with a serious minuet (Moderato e grazioso), concluding the sonata with a fiery finale (Presto con fuoco) built from obsessively chasing tarantella rhythms (the origin of the *Hunt* nickname). Virtuosity here shows its alliance with wit and humor.

**Piano Sonata No. 29 in B-flat major,
Op. 106, *Hammerklavier***

The piano also served as a laboratory for Beethoven’s innovative experiments with Classical forms and rhetorical expression: a testing ground where he could try out unconventional sonorities and bold new combinations of ideas. The results have left a continuing mark on piano composition. More than two centuries after it was completed, Beethoven’s *Große Sonate für das Hammerklavier* in B-flat major, Op. 106, remains a formidable challenge for performers and listeners alike. Charles Rosen went so far as to claim that the *Hammerklavier* does not even sound “typical” of Beethoven, not even of late Beethoven: “It is an extreme point of his style.... In part, it must have been an attempt to break out of the impasse in which he found himself.” Notable already merely for its unprecedented vast dimensions, “it was an attempt to produce a new and original work of uncompromising

greatness.” Rosen adds that “it is just this extreme character which makes it a statement of such clarity and allows us to see, as almost no other piece does, the principles by which he worked, particularly at the end of his life; through it we can understand how the total structure as well as the details of a work of Beethoven have such an audible power.”

By the time Beethoven composed the *Hammerklavier*, in 1817–18, the comic spirit of Rossini had conquered Vienna and the aging German (though only in his late 40s) feared being regarded by his peers as old-fashioned. There’s a sense of rousing all his energy here to prove that he was capable of the unprecedented—not unlike the creative rallying that followed the Heiligenstadt Testament of 1802.

Beethoven dedicated Op. 106 to his friend and patron, the Archduke Rudolph. The piece has become known as the *Hammerklavier* by way of reference to one of the German words of the era for the then-rapidly evolving piano (describing the keyboard’s hammer mechanism). Beethoven was on the point of completing the *Hammerklavier* when a gift of the latest Broadwood piano from London arrived. According to the musicologist Tom Beghin, only the final movement corresponds to the span of this more “modern” piano. He concludes that the *Hammerklavier* “is not some grand six-and-half-octave piece, but one that actually combines two ranges” (the six-octave Viennese keyboard of the time for the first three movements and the new Broadwood with extended bass but actually a more limited treble span).

The grandest of Beethoven’s piano sonatas in terms of architectural design—the duration of the piece extends beyond that of several of his symphonies—the *Hammerklavier* evokes a sense of uttering “the final word” through its sheer scope and exhaustive treatment of its materials. Beethoven encompasses his ideas within a four-movement ground plan that, like the Ninth Symphony—which he was simulta-

neously beginning to sketch out—reverses the traditional order of the inner movements, preceding the slow movement with a Scherzo. (In a letter the composer actually referred to the *Hammerklavier* as having five movements, considering the Largo *Introduzione* to the finale as a separate fourth movement.)

Yet the Classical architecture has been made gigantic. With its sudden attack and massive span of octaves, the Allegro's opening theme juxtaposes forceful statements and prolonged silences in a way that recalls the concentrated power of the opening motto of the Fifth Symphony. The hugeness of this music is propelled by an unconventional harmonic engine: the prominence given to progression by descending thirds, which drive the progress of the first movement's development section toward the far-distant key of B major. The shift by a half-step to the home key of B-flat major for the recapitulation is, as Rosen puts it, "brutally abrupt."

Rosen reads the surprisingly compact Scherzo (*Assai vivace*) as a "parody" of the processes explored in the first movement—notably, for example, in the insistent "wrong-note" B natu-

ral that clashes against the tonal context of B-flat major. There ensues one of the most transportive of Beethoven's slow movements, an extended sonata form *Adagio sostenuto* in F-sharp minor. The key choice continues the harmonic descent of a third (from the B-flat major of the first two movements) that is a signature of the *Hammerklavier's* tonal planning. Beethoven, unusually, marks it to be played *Appassionato e con molto sentimento*. The detailed pedal markings likewise point to the composer's sensitivity to the ideal timbre he was imagining for this music. William Kinderman reminds us that this *Adagio* was once likened to "a mausoleum of the collective suffering of the world."

Beethoven's late-period fascination with Baroque textures and forms is above all apparent in the final movement, starting with the mysterious Largo transition to a vast fugal edifice that, writes Kinderman, "seems not to affirm a higher, more perfect or serene world of eternal harmonies, as in Bach's works, but to confront an open universe."

—Thomas May



Sunday, December 15, 2019, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Jonathan Biss, *piano*

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) The Complete Piano Sonatas (Concert 5)

Sonata No. 25 in G major, Op. 79, *Cuckoo*
Presto alla tedesca
Andante
Vivace

Sonata No. 11 in B-flat major, Op. 22
Allegro con brio
Adagio con molta espressione
Menuetto
Rondo: Allegretto

Sonata No. 14 in C-sharp minor, Op. 27, No. 2, *Moonlight*
Adagio sostenuto
Allegretto
Presto agitato

INTERMISSION

Sonata No. 24 in F-sharp major, Op. 78, *À Thérèse*
Adagio cantabile: Allegro ma non troppo
Allegro vivace

Sonata No. 30 in E major, Op. 109
Vivace ma non troppo: Adagio espressivo
Prestissimo
Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung

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**Piano Sonata No. 25 in G major,
Op. 79, Cuckoo**

Dating from 1809—the year Napoleon returned to again occupy Vienna, when Beethoven was working on his Fifth Piano Concerto (*Emperor*) and the brilliant Sonata Op. 81a (*Les Adieux*)—this sonata seems like a comparatively modest effort. It ranks among the shortest of the sonatas, though it unfolds in three movements. On the surface, its manner even suggests something of a throwback to early Beethoven. Yet a great deal is condensed into its miniature framework—the entire exposition is well under a minute—and the extrovert attitude of the start leads to moody detours and turn-on-a-dime shifts from major to minor. It's also possible to hear an anticipation of the humor of the opening of the Eighth Symphony, another underestimated work whose “backward glances” conceal an innovative spirit.

Beethoven heads the first movement *Presto alla tedesca* (referring to a German folk dance in triple meter that moves rapidly), but it has also become known by the nickname *Cuckoo* because of the suggestive calls of the minor thirds that pervade the development section. (In the *Pastoral* Symphony, Beethoven had introduced another voice of the cuckoo, heralding the summer.)

All three movements are centered on the tonic G—the major outer movements framing G minor in the *Andante*, which looks ahead to the emerging Romantic aesthetic with its lilting gondolier rhythm and its hints of erotic escape. The rondo theme of the *Vivace* finale returns to mirthful G major with an idea that Beethoven would recycle for his Op. 109 sonata 11 years later. The musicologist Kenneth Drake even interprets Op. 79's last movement as a *bagatelle*—the miniature form to which Beethoven turned in his solo piano writing after he stopped composing sonatas and after his epic final set of variations (the *Diabelli Variations*). He notes that aspects of late Beethoven are already apparent here “in widely spaced writing and also in the sketchlike transparency of the writing, in which rhythmic combinations and quick register changes that are otherwise not difficult sound complex.”

Piano Sonata No. 11 in B-flat major, Op. 22
While Beethoven compresses the sonata into an intimate essence in works like Op. 79, this work proceeds in the opposite direction. His only other sonata in the key of B-flat major aside from the much-later *Hammerklavier* (Op. 106), Op. 22 marks the composer's return to the ambitious, four-movement sonata design he had most recently explored in the Sonata in D major, Op. 10, No. 3, of 1798.

Published by itself and a work of which he was particularly proud, Op. 22 is the only sonata Beethoven completed in 1800—the year in which he introduced his First Symphony. His conception combines big, quasi-orchestral gestures with an outright virtuoso attitude. The boldly articulated sonata form of the *Allegro con brio* first movement makes do without a coda but feels satisfyingly resolved.

We encounter Beethoven's proto-Romantic lyrical grace in the *Adagio con molta espressione*. The interplay of line and ornament evokes an unwritten opera scenario for some. Startling contrasts between the minuet and its trio (toggling between major and minor) set the stage for the surprising developments of the amiably flowing finale. Overall, the Op. 22 sonata, so unfairly neglected, is a wise and superbly crafted ode to the style Beethoven had inherited and, with full deliberation, was crystallizing into something unprecedented.

**Piano Sonata No. 14 in C-sharp minor,
Op. 27, No. 2, Moonlight**

Ever since Beethoven's own lifetime, commentators have been tempted to trace all manner of biography into the notes—above all, details of the composer's lack of a fulfilling personal relationship. The intimacy of this sonata, for example, has given rise to speculation that Beethoven was here encoding the history of his despair over his love for the dedicatee, also a piano pupil of his, the young Countess Giulietta Guicciardi (one of the former candidates for the “Immortal Beloved”).

But still another angle gave rise, posthumously, to the nickname that has stuck. In the 1830s, the poet-critic Ludwig Rellstab's remarked that the first movement's rippling tex-

tures reminded him of the moonlight over Lake Lucerne. In “Because” on The Beatles’ *Abbey Road* album, John Lennon paid a tribute of his own by adapting the famous arpeggiated chords of the Adagio sostenuto first movement.

The musicologist Timothy Jones has proposed a thought experiment: Why not imagine the subdued, muted-pedal sonority that predominates here as an image for “Beethoven’s impaired auditory world and—at the same time—a lament for his loss”? He goes on to caution: “It is all too easy to let such speculation run wild.” The truly astonishing achievement of this C-sharp minor sonata, which Beethoven completed in 1801, is the impression of fantasy that is sustained in the nocturne-like opening movement, though it does refer to sonata form. Like its companion, Op. 27, No. 1, he titled this score *Sonata quasi una fantasia* (“Sonata in the manner of a fantasy”).

Whatever associations of improvisation the music evokes, this sonata is constructed as a finale-centered structure whose culmination seems inevitable. The Presto agitato drowns out whatever residual serenity remains of the brief, almost insouciant intermezzo separating the outer movements. Its raging arpeggios and brutal attacks reconfigure the rippling motions of the prelude first movement.

Piano Sonata No. 24 in F-sharp major, Op. 78, *À Thérèse*

Composed in 1809, like the sonata with which Jonathan Biss began this program, Op. 78 is the only one of Beethoven’s piano sonatas in the key of F-sharp major. This is an inexplicably overlooked gem among the cycle—even though the composer himself counted it (along with the *Appassionata*, its predecessor) among his favorite achievements at the keyboard. We encounter here an alternative to the “heroic” mode as well as the epic scale that the composer had perfected in the *Appassionata* and *Waldstein* sonatas. In Op. 78, “the concentration on small thematic motives is characteristic of the organic, meticulously composed works of the last period... in which every nuance is an integral part of the whole,” observes the pianist Robert Taub.

It’s as if Beethoven found a way of proceeding beyond the *Appassionata*’s powerful combination of breathtaking bravura and expressive intensity by changing tack, opting for relative brevity and avoidance of grandiose sonorities. But we should not mistake the extraordinary intimacy of Op. 78 for mere modesty of design. Like the similarly neglected Op. 54 (overshadowed by its companion, the *Waldstein*), Op. 78 is cast in only two movements that are both in the same key (F major and F-sharp major in Op. 54 and Op. 78, respectively).

Beethoven dedicated Op. 78 to his pupil Countess Thérèse von Brunsvik (it is sometimes known as the *Sonata à Thérèse*). She was one of the two sisters, as it happens, of the *Appassionata*’s dedicatee (Count von Brunsvik) and yet another candidate for the elusive “Immortal Beloved” to whom the composer later sent his famous confession of love in 1812. The essentially lyrical nature of the longer first movement seems only to enhance that potential association. As for its compressed distillation of ideas, von Bülow rhapsodized over the brief Adagio cantabile introduction, which lasts all of four bars but contains an immensity of melody and self-revelation. Tantalizingly, the melody itself never returns, though it does provide the motivic cell for the main Allegro ma non troppo. Beethoven juxtaposes various rhythmic treatments of the material, first in quarter notes, then in sixteenths and triplets.

Meanwhile, as Robert Taub observes, “distinctions between melody and accompaniment begin to dissolve,” thus posing a particular challenge for the performer to delineate “each theme individually but nonetheless to weave them all into a carefully constructed, luminescent musical fabric.”

The shorter Allegro vivace, while in the same key, manifests a character notably different from that of the quasi-Schubertian first movement. Its saucy rhythmic slurs and dynamic contrasts update Haydn-esque wit, while the main theme incorporates a tongue-in-cheek reference to the tune “Hail, Britannia” (for which Beethoven had written variations in 1803).

Piano Sonata No. 30 in E major, Op. 109

In 1820—a year that marked the resolution of a long period of emotional turmoil and crisis, as the composer was nearing 50—Beethoven accepted a commission from his Berlin publisher to write three new piano sonatas. The biographer Maynard Solomon notes that the composer, who was “battered and torn from the stresses” of the previous years, could now “set about reconstructing his life and completing his life’s work.” Beethoven took until 1822 to finish the last of these sonatas; his only other major work for piano to appear after them would be the monumental *Diabelli Variations*. Significantly, Beethoven assigned each of these three sonatas a separate opus number, and each embodies a distinctive character and even philosophy. Jonathan Biss has made these works the respective culminating points of each of the last three programs in his complete Beethoven Cycle.

At the same time, there are connections among these three sonatas. All of them transform musical elements familiar from Classical vocabulary into novel new formations. Their scores are filled with curious reversals of signification as well: “major ideas” become compressed rather than elaborated, while trills and arpeggios, devices normally associated with mere ornamentation, are glorified into significant but elusive gestures.

Also shared by the final trilogy is a singular use of contrast, both on the large scale and in

local contexts. The opening movement of this sonata in E major, for example, juxtaposes vivace against *adagio espressivo* and uses a change of meter to distinguish the chorale-like first theme from the improvisatory texture of the second. The *Prestissimo* second movement, in E minor, deploys dynamic contrasts of soft and violently loud.

The first two movements are in tightly compressed sonata form, but together they are dwarfed by the final movement. Here, Beethoven juxtaposes languages to delineate his tempo and expressive markings, using Italian and German: *Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung* (“songful, with innermost feeling”) and *Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo*.

This finale unfolds as a set of six variations (only the first four of them numbered as such) on the two-part theme whose rhythmic profile has been compared to that of a sarabande, the ceremonial Baroque dance in triple meter. Beethoven’s procedure here is to expand the scope of the underlying theme that is being varied into unexpected realms, including a fugato for the fifth and a rhapsodic efflorescence in the sixth and final variation—all capped by a return to the stark simplicity of the theme itself. As in the parallel return to the Aria in Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*, Beethoven leaves us with a feeling that its essence has been informed by the intervening experience—and thus permanently changed.

—Thomas May



St. Michael's Square, Vienna, ca. 1800. Burg theater (the German theater) is far right



Portrait of Beethoven in 1823 by Ferdinand Georg Waldmüller



Saturday, March 7, 2020, 8pm
Hertz Hall

Jonathan Biss, *piano*

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) The Complete Piano Sonatas (Concert 6)

Sonata No. 19 in G minor, Op. 49, No. 1
Andante
Rondo: Allegro

Sonata No. 16 in G major, Op. 31, No. 1
Allegro vivace
Adagio grazioso
Rondo: Allegretto

Sonata No. 7 in D major, Op. 10, No. 3
Presto
Largo e mesto
Menuetto: Allegro
Rondo: Allegro

INTERMISSION

Sonata No. 2 in A major, Op. 2, No. 2
Allegro vivace
Largo appassionato
Scherzo: Allegretto
Rondo: Grazioso

Sonata No. 31 in A-flat major, Op. 110
Moderato cantabile molto espressivo
Allegro molto
Adagio ma non troppo

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Piano Sonata No. 19 in G minor, Op. 49, No. 1 Disregard the relatively high opus number of this work. The music is a product of Beethoven's years as a performing virtuoso in Vienna in the late 1790s. He merely waited to publish this set of modest sonatas until nearly a decade later. (See p. 27 for more background on Op. 49.)

The gently doleful theme of the Andante that opens this sonata—so far removed from the breathless pathos Mozart associated with this key—reminds us of the melodic gift with which Beethoven charmed his audiences. In the Rondo: Allegro, which turns to G major, good-humored rhythmic frolics alternate teasingly between light and shade.

Piano Sonata No. 16 in G major, Op. 31, No. 1

The publication history of Op. 31 is unusually complicated. Beethoven agreed to write three new sonatas for Zurich-based publisher Georg Nägeli during the half year he spent in the Viennese suburb of Heiligenstadt in 1802. When the first two sonatas of the set came back from the printer in 1803, the enraged composer worked out a re-publication deal with another publisher on account of the sloppy editing, which had resulted in a profusion of errors—and even the arbitrary insertion of a few measures composed by the publisher. The three sonatas that comprise Op. 31 appeared together only in 1805. Still another publisher, based in Vienna, brought out all three that same year, but under a different opus number. The autograph scores have disappeared, so editing questions continue to bedevil these works. Unusually, there are no verified dedications.

The first sonata of the Op. 31 set has been overshadowed by its dramatic neighbor, the D minor sonata known as *The Tempest* (No. 2 in the set, though it was finished before this piece). Likewise, the sense of subversive humor that this G major sonata manifests is a quality that has been relatively undervalued in Beethoven's music. This is especially so with regard to the idea governing the Allegro vivace first movement. Beethoven begins with tricky syncopations that create an auditory illusion of the pianist's hands being off kilter—precisely where

they need to be laser-precise in timing. He extends this ploy so that, when the hands do finally come together in very demonstrative fashion, the result is genuinely comic. Harmonic adventure also abounds as Beethoven veers toward keys not expected or prepared for in conventional Classical style.

The Adagio grazioso—one of the longest of Beethoven's slow movements—contains another brand of humor. In part, this may be construed as parody, starting with the exaggerated trill that launches the movement. Almost absurdly drawn-out ornamentation begins to sound suspect. Beethoven's target here is the frivolous salon music of his peers, as well as the preening of contemporary Italian opera. At the same time, moments of seemingly straightforward affect complicate the picture.

Playing with expectations is again a theme of the Rondo finale, where rhythmic displacement and pauses are used with cleverly subversive intent. In the coda, Beethoven speeds the music up to a breakneck presto in a gesture that Sir Donald Tovey likened to “fitful giggling.”

Piano Sonata No. 7 in D major, Op. 10, No. 3

Of the three works gathered as Op. 10 (see p. 23 for more background on the set, which was published in 1798), this D major sonata is the most ambitious. Some regard it as the first real “masterpiece” of the 32 sonatas, particularly with regard to its intricate craftsmanship. Its two companions are cast in three movements each, but here Beethoven calls for four movements that encompass an extraordinary emotional spectrum. The forward-looking, experimental humor of the Op. 10 set as a whole—and humor represents one of this composer's most radical tools—frames a tragic slow movement in the minor key that Tovey hailed as nothing less than a “landmark in musical history.” The large-scale architecture of this sonata is rooted in the use of the same tonic (D—major and minor) for all four movements.

Charles Rosen reminds us of the importance of Beethoven's mastery of the *Well-Tempered Clavier* as an adolescent. The Presto first movement derives from the most elemental mate-

rial—the descending D major tetrachord (four notes) played as octaves at the outset. “For the capacity to draw inspiration from the smallest motif, Beethoven has no rivals in music history with the possible exception of Bach,” Rosen observes. The dynamism generated by this movement is thrilling, dramatic, and bracingly optimistic.

The slow movement is designated *Largo e mesto*. Only in the *Adagio* of the String Quartet No. 7 (Op. 59, No. 1) does Beethoven again use the term *mesto* (“mournful”). It’s interesting to note that among Beethoven’s other works from the period of Op. 10, the *Adagio* of his First String Quartet (Op. 18, No. 1—also in D minor) has been suggested as similar in tragic profundity. At this point in his life (only in his late 20s), Beethoven’s ability to convey despair and emotional darkness is already remarkable. As in the later *Eroica*’s Funeral March, he stages a pattern of emerging solace, only to be crushed again by futility and hopelessness.

The *Menuetto* provides relief while also preparing, with its Trio section, for the rousingly comic spirit of the finale (which nonetheless makes reference to the tragic slow movement before brushing that aside). In this *Allegro*, Beethoven again gets enormous mileage from the simplest material, playing with contrasts and pauses to confound our expectations.

Piano Sonata No. 2 in A major, Op. 2, No. 2

Beethoven obviously intended to make a bold statement with his first official batch of piano sonatas. (See pp. 17 for more background on Op. 2.) Or, rather, a series of bold statements: a powerful, dramatic sonata in the minor to open the set (the Sonata in F minor), a brilliant, at times almost symphonic closer (the Sonata in C major), and this vividly inventive, animated work.

Like the D major sonata we heard at the end of the program’s first half, this Sonata in A major begins with a straightforward, call-to-attention octave statement in both hands. But the directions this *Allegro vivace* then takes are anything but straightforward. Notice especially the harmonic stealth with which the composer intro-

duces the second theme. Our images of the rebellious young Beethoven notwithstanding, the young artist worked hard to learn the art of counterpoint, which is proudly on display here. As we experience so often in the later sonatas, his acclaimed virtuosity at the keyboard is allied to spellbinding wit and imagination.

There follows a prayerful song-form *Largo appassionato* (what a curious descriptive for a slow movement!), accompanied by a kind of walking bass line beneath slow-moving hymn chords. A dramatically extended coda suggests an operatic farewell. The *Allegretto Scherzo* recalls something of the sparkling, elegant dynamism of the opening movement, with a swerve to A minor for the trio. Marked *Grazioso*, the finale integrates an ingratiating arpeggio sweep into its cheerful theme. Another return to A minor spices the central episode with chromatic drama—but how quickly Beethoven dispels the clouds, freeing the way for a deliciously subtle ending.

Piano Sonata No. 31 in A-flat major, Op. 110

Referring to Beethoven’s late quartets, Schumann once observed that they are works “for whose greatness no words can be found.” Countless listeners have experienced similar reactions to the final series of piano sonatas, in which Beethoven forged the language of his late style. And it is above all in the last three sonatas (Op. Nos. 109, 110, and 111 [see p. 42 for more biographical background on their composition]) that the piano—the instrument Beethoven could no longer play in public—becomes the medium for a music of ineffable, visionary intensity.

Like a shed skin, the materiality of sound itself—by now a ghostly presence for the deaf composer—seems to dissolve as Beethoven voices the sorts of deeper intuitions about existence that we associate with religious or even mystical thought. Around this time, Beethoven was also preoccupied with his ongoing *Missa solennis* project. Alfred Brendel famously likened the third movement of Op. 110, with its interplay of Baroque forms of *arioso* and fugue, to “Passion music.”

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Beethoven's funeral on March 29th, 1827, by F. Stober; his funeral procession was attended by an estimated 20,000 Viennese citizens.



Sunday, March 8, 2020, 3pm
Hertz Hall

Jonathan Biss, *piano*

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) The Complete Piano Sonatas (Concert 7)

Sonata No. 8 in C minor, Op. 13, *Pathétique*
Grave: Allegro di molto e con brio
Adagio cantabile
Rondo: Allegro

Sonata No. 22 in F major, Op. 54
In tempo d'un menuetto
Allegretto

Sonata No. 26 in E-flat major, Op. 81a, *Les Adieux*
Adagio: Allegro
Andante espressivo
Vivacissimamente

INTERMISSION

Sonata No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111
Maestoso: Allegro con brio ed appassionato
Arietta: Adagio molto semplice e cantabile

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**Piano Sonata No. 8 in C minor,
Op. 13, *Pathétique***

Jonathan Biss has framed this final installment of his epic sonata cycle with two C minor sonatas that encapsulate the astonishing odyssey of Beethoven's art between his early sonatas and the work with which he took leave of the genre.

When listening to a committed performance of the Op. 13 sonata, we can readily imagine the impression young Beethoven must have made on his contemporaries—both in his style of playing and in the expressive power of his imagination as a composer. Though this piece already marks more than a quarter of the way (numerically) through the 32 sonatas (the two Op. 49 sonatas were written earlier), the *Pathétique* is an early work, dating from 1798, when Beethoven was still in his late 20s. Already he has appropriated the tonality of C minor and given it a personal stamp. Here, as in the Third Piano Concerto and Fifth Symphony, he imbues the key with a defiantly tragic pathos.

This is the first of Beethoven's sonatas to bear a familiar nickname. The French adjective, meant to evoke the music's particular emotional quality, is in this context closer to the connotations of *appassionato*. The influence of French musical rhetoric on Beethoven's language is also manifest here. Its most obvious markers are the dotted rhythms and dignified tragic air of the opening slow introduction. A striking structural feature of the *Pathétique* is the recurrence of music from this slow introduction within the Allegro di molto e con brio. Beethoven splices it several times—in an almost cinematic manner—into the body of the first movement. He also uses accentuation and *sforzando* to startling effect.

Have you ever heard the nonsensical claim that Beethoven had a hard time writing a simple melody? You need simply point to the Adagio cantabile for a heavenly example of his lyrical gift. In the midst of this slow movement, Beethoven unleashes a brief tempest, but the *Sturm und Drang* is soothed by the potency of the main melody. The theme of the finale subliminally recalls the agitated second theme from the first movement.

Piano Sonata No. 22 in F major, Op. 54

While crafting the Op. 53 *Waldstein* Sonata in 1803–04, Beethoven wrote a full-scale slow movement that he ultimately decided to reject (it was thought to make the *Waldstein* overly long) and publish separately. This became known as the *Andante favori* (WoO 57) in F major—the key of this Op. 54 sonata, whose opening theme shares something of the *Andante favori*'s easy-going nature. At the same time, its dotted rhythm anticipates the start of the *Appassionata* Sonata, which Beethoven was already sketching out.

That Op. 54 is surrounded by these two famous and powerful giants (the *Waldstein* and *Appassionata*) might explain why this modestly proportioned piece ranks among the least-known works in Beethoven's sonata cycle. Perhaps, though, this neglect also results from Op. 54's arch ambiguity: in a sense, the F major Sonata is a piece of meta-music that playfully interrogates the genre's identity.

The prototype of a two-movement sonata was not Beethoven's invention. There are many precedents in Haydn, whose presence is keenly felt here. At the same time, Beethoven's formal economy—an intense concision that nevertheless allows for striking contrasts—anticipates the experiments of the later sonatas. The opening movement even swerves away from sonata form. It's as if he decided to leave out an opening movement and begin off the bat with a dance movement that alternates between two radically different themes. The relaxed grace of the first theme is rudely pushed aside by the thorny accents, in double octaves, of the second. Near the end comes a moment that foreshadows the *Andante con moto* of the Fifth Symphony, on which Beethoven had also begun working.

The second movement is also in F major. It spins out a single theme in perpetual motion—another feature that links it to the ideas Beethoven was shaping for the *Appassionata* Sonata, whose finale is in the same meter and similarly restlessly driven.

Astonishing harmonic detours give variety to the monothematic material. Like the two sonatas surrounding it, the F major Sonata ends with a coda in accelerated tempo.

**Piano Sonata No. 26 in E-flat major,
Op. 81a, *Les Adieux***

Opus 81a is Beethoven's only explicitly (though in the broadest sense) "programmatic" sonata. It was published with the composer's own descriptive title: *Das Lebewohl*. Ironically, in light of the French invasion of 1809 that inspired it, the work has become better known as *Les Adieux*. The publisher insisted on the French phrase as being more marketable, much to the chagrin of Beethoven, who protested that the German word more closely conveyed the spirit of the music. *Lebewohl*, he pointed out, "is said in a warm-hearted manner to one person" (in this case, the young Archduke Rudolf of Austria) rather than to a collective. The narrative, such as it is, however, is minimalist. Rather like the presentation of single "affects" in Baroque style, each of Op. 81a's three movements focuses on one stage in the sequence "Farewell," "Absence," and "Return."

A substantial slow introduction signals the intensity and emotional weight that distinguish this masterful sonata. The first three chords encode the cell for the entire first movement (the "Farewell"—three syllables in the German, *Lebewohl*), their descent veering from an implied E-flat major to C minor. This poignant ambiguity colors not only the introduction but also the character of the richly developed Allegro, whose widely ranging first theme and energetic contour metaphorically suggest the image of wandering (and the anxiety of those left behind). The descending "Farewell" motif is threaded into the second theme and then sent through various harmonic detours in the development. Beethoven reorganizes sonata form itself to explore the concept of departure (and hoped-for return); tellingly, the coda is even more extensive, ending with a touching series of elegiac envois.

The interlude-like structure of the *Waldstein* Sonata's middle movement is echoed here in the Andante espressivo movement ("Absence"), which similarly suggests a suspenseful recitative. Dissonance and harmonic irresolution intensify the pain of separation—and the overpowering joy that bursts out in the finale ("Return"), which follows without pause. Calling for the unusual

tempo designation *Vivacissimamente*, Beethoven leads into the main rondo theme through a prologue of passionate, almost erotic, frenzy.

The sturdiness of this theme arrives as a huge relief and counters the instability preceding it. But reminiscences of what has been experienced intrude in new harmonic digressions. Much of Beethoven's figuration here has a concertante quality that practically implies an orchestra. The coda, slowing for a spell to *poco andante*, offers a powerful retrospective glance before a final headlong rush to rejoice in the safe reunion.

Piano Sonata No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111

A leave-taking of the most profound sort is staged in Op. 111. Here, Beethoven bids adieu to his piano sonata oeuvre by composing a sonata that consists of only two movements. Retrospective, forward-looking, and timeless qualities all coexist in this music. Its expressive range has prompted many commentators to resort to the language of religious revelation and philosophical speculation. Hans von Bülow, himself a virtuoso pianist, found in the pairing a musical counterpart to the Buddhist ideas of "Samsara and Nirvana," while the English music writer Wilfrid Mellers suggested a metaphysical opposition of "becoming and being."

In his novel *A Room with a View*, E. M. Forster has his heroine Lucy Honeychurch play the first movement, which the musicologist Michelle Fillion interprets as "an emblem for Lucy's yearning to escape this stranglehold of the *Ewig-Weibliche* [eternal feminine] and join the ranks of the New Woman in a man's world." It's interesting to note that while Beethoven dedicated the first edition to Archduke Rudolph, the English edition bore a dedication to Antonie Brentano, another of the candidates for the composer's "Immortal Beloved."

The first movement immediately summons both the defiantly tragic and heroic aspects of the C minor persona we encountered in the *Pathétique*. This is distilled through a neo-Baroque sensibility, in terms of rhythmic aspects (perpetual motion and dotted rhythms) as well as density of texture (the intricately contrapuntal working out of ideas). The thunderous chords of

the *maestoso* introduction—which look ahead to the Ninth Symphony—establish a scenario that requires resolution.

Yet Beethoven revokes the dramatic dialectic of Classical sonata form in favor of a paradoxical simplicity. The effect is of profound peace attained after great struggle. C minor's major-key antipode, already introduced quietly at the end of the first movement, prepares the way for the slow variation movement (*Adagio molto semplice e cantabile*), whose theme is as free of guile as a child's song. Who could have expected

what characters this song encompasses, in its profound simplicity? Beethoven's variations gradually speed up, reaching an ecstatic state of jazz-like rhythmic grooves, before being pared down and leaving us with a vision of other-worldly serenity.

According to Charles Rosen, the Arietta final movement “succeeds as almost no other work in suspending the passage of time at its climax.” And in this final sonata, Beethoven proves to be “the greatest master of musical time.”

—Thomas May

PROGRAM NOTES (cont. from p. 47)

A drive toward concision marks the first movement of this sonata. Ecstatic arpeggiations anticipate the Prelude to Wagner's *Parsifal* by more than half a century. They contrast with the muscular, syncopated chords of the Scherzo, which lead directly into one of Beethoven's strangest formal conceptions: a fusion of operatic and instrumental idioms from the Baroque setting the stage for a powerful finale that serves to anchor the entirety of Op. 110.

Here, Beethoven seems to look ahead to the interplay of voice and instrument that would emerge in the finale of the Ninth Symphony of 1824: the implicit vocalism of the minor-key *arioso dolente* (“songlike lament”) is juxtaposed with an animated fugue whose theme derives from the opening movement's main theme. The second appearance of the lament breaks off in a startling passage of repeated G major chords, announcing the return of the fugue, in varied form—and with it, a reaffirmation of the will, an assent to life itself.

—Thomas May