

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Sonata n°30 in E major, Op.109 19'27

- | | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|-------|
| 1 | Vivace ma non troppo | 3'57 |
| 2 | Prestissimo | 2'24 |
| 3 | Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo | 13'06 |

Sonata n°31 in A flat major, Op.110 20'04

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------------|-------|
| 4 | Moderato cantabile molto espressivo | 6'47 |
| 5 | Allegro molto | 2'22 |
| 6 | Adagio, ma non troppo | 10'55 |

Sonata n°32 in C minor, Op.111 28'21

- | | | |
|---|--|-------|
| 7 | Maestoso. Allegro con brio ed appassionato | 9'19 |
| 8 | Arietta. Adagio molto semplice e cantabile | 19'02 |

Total time: 67'52

Irakly AVALIANI, piano

Studio «Guimick», Yerres, France, June 2011

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BEETHOVEN'S LAST PIANO SONATAS

"Immense Beethoven", Berlioz would say. And all Beethoven is here, in these last three sonatas. One is immediately impressed by the richness and diversity of these works, conceived and written between 1820 and 1822, concurrently to the *Missa Solemnis*. The same is true for the late string quartets (1823-1826), likewise extraordinary and distinctive.

These sonatas all share a common trait, however: the climax of each is to be found in the last movement. The same cannot be said of those composed between 1795 and 1810 (the 'early' and 'middle' periods), where the point of greatest intensity is rather the slow movement - usually the second, sometimes the third.

Unlike the last string quartets, no-one had commissioned the last sonatas. These gigantic signature pieces are of his choosing, and seem to say: "*This is what I write for the piano now. This is who I am.*"

Beethoven's piano was a Broadwood, a gift of the London Philharmonic Society. He had urged his editor that all his late sonatas be presented as "Sonaten für Hammerklavier", literally "Sonatas for Keyboard with Hammers". His instrument did not have the latest improvements introduced in France and the United States ("système à répétition" - improperly known as "double escapement action" - Erard 1821; felt hammer coverings - Pape 1826; cast iron frame - Babcock 1825) and was not yet equipped with the "choirs", composed of three crossed strings. Beethoven doubtless would have been delighted to have had such instruments at his disposal. So it is rather superfluous to (choose to) interpret his work on a piano of his time.

Beethoven underwent a long crisis between 1813 and 1818. During these five years he only composed three major works - the *Piano Sonata No. 28*, the final two *sonatas for cello and piano*, and the lieder cycle "*An die ferne Geliebte*". One of his main patrons (Kinsky) had just died - and Beethoven was suing his family. He was also in a legal dispute with a second patron (Lobkowitz). A third (Razumovsky) was facing ruin after his palace had burnt to the ground. Above all, he seems to have renounced all female conquests. He wrote in his Journal: "*The perfect harmony of several voices precludes, after all, their coming close.*"

Moreover, after the death of his elder brother, Beethoven had to fight (yet another trial) for custody of his nephew Karl, then aged nine. When the court found in his favour, he had to turn his life upside down, as he had always lived alone. He was then forty-six, his health poor and his thoughts dark. He wrote to his friend Zmeskall: "*Each day without music brings me closer to the grave.*"

He overcame this despondency in composing the monumental *Sonata Opus 106*, the longest he ever wrote and which he dedicated to his principal patron, the Archduke Rudolph (as he did the *Trio, Opus 97*). And for his benefactor's enthronement as Archbishop of Olmütz, he embarked on the *Missa Solemnis*

The three sonatas which follow are masterpieces and worthy sequels to Opus 106. At the time, all are met with incomprehension. Of Opus 106 Beethoven wrote to his editor, Artaria: "*When, in fifty years time, this sonata is played, it will be a challenge for pianists.*"

The Sonata No. 30 in E Major Opus 109, in the tranquil key of E major, is reminiscent of the very first sonatas. As is often the case with Beethoven, the indications of style and tempo (in Italian and/or German) are very detailed. Thus, the

first movement is *vivace, ma non troppo, dolce sempre legato*; the second is *prestissimo*, with the left-hand chords *ben marcato*.

These movements, both of them brief but intense, prepare the listener for the grandiose finale, *andante molto cantabile ed espressivo*. The indications in German are even more explicit: *gesangvoll mit innigster Empfindung* – (songful, with deepest feeling).

The finale is a Theme and six Variations, a form that Beethoven was to use in all his densest works: the *Sonata Opus 111*, the *Diabelli Variations* and the *Opus 127 & 131 string quartets*. Its main theme is reminiscent of the *Violin Sonata Opus 96* and the lieder cycle "*An die ferne Geliebte*". J. and B. Massin (Fayard) discerningly remark that this movement is based on the duality of absence and presence, as in the *Piano Sonata Opus 81a*. The movement culminates in the fifth *fugato* variation and the sixth, which subdivides the duration of the notes: from crotchets to quavers, semiquavers and demisemiquavers and finally to ethereal trills – which we will meet again in the *Arietta Opus 111*.

The Sonata No. 31 in A Flat Major Opus 110 tells a highly dramatic story. Here too, the climax is to be found in the finale, where the traditional *rondo* (refrain and episodes) is replaced with an elaborate sequence: *arioso dolente/fuga/arioso dolente (perdendo le forze)/inversione della fuga (poi a poi di nuovo vivente)*. The infinitely sad theme of the *arioso dolente* comes straight from the aria "*Es ist vollbracht*" (*All is consumed*), from J.S. Bach's *St John Passion (BWV 245)*. It had already appeared in the *Third cello sonata*. The return of the fugue (inverted) is preceded by a chord repeated ten times, louder and louder. Such audacity will only be found again a century later, with Alban Berg's *Wozzeck (Invention on a Single Note)*.

The "late period" Beethoven was fascinated by fugal composition, though his treatment of the fugue is rather unorthodox. *The Cello Sonata Opus 102 No. 2*, as well as the imposing *Piano Sonata Opus 106*, also end with a fugue. He would return to this form one last time in the exceptional "*Große Fuge*", *Opus 133*, for string quartet. The idea of vital renewal inherent in this second fugue has obvious autobiographical connotations. Still more than an illness, a deep personal crisis has been overcome. This crisis is also the source of the sublime slow movement of the *String Quartet No. 15, Opus 132*, 'A Convalescent's Holy Song of Thanksgiving to the Divinity, in the Lydian Mode'.

The final **Piano Sonata No. 32 in C Minor, Opus 111**, is strikingly modern, notably in its use of silence as an active rhythmic element, fully integrated into the whole.

From the onset, the initial *maestoso* bears the 'late' Beethoven hallmark of iambic rhythms (short – long) followed by an imposing trill, the latter not ornamental, but structural. Boucourechliev's luminous comment is: "The introduction precedes an immense formal sequence, which takes a diminished seventh, the quintessence of uncertainty, as a starting block". The coda ends with a dotted rhythm and in the key of C major, elements both present in the second movement.

When his close friend Schindler queried about the absence of a third movement, Beethoven quipped, "*I haven't had time to write it!*"

The Arietta, adagio molto semplice e cantabile, must be approached with utmost simplicity, humility even. Should the pianist be too personal in his interpretation (for example by choosing an excessively slow tempo) the performance will be spoilt – and the audience frustrated.

The variations, along with the *andante* from the *String Quartet Opus 31*, are the most impressive examples of what are known as Beethoven's "amplifying variations". As in *Opus 109*, there are consecutive rhythmic subdivisions, ranging from crotchets to demi-semi quavers. An epic saga unfolds, which comes to rest in the sublime calm of the concluding bars. From a waking dream of multiple trills, the return of the main theme emerges in the key of C - a moment of intense felicity - and the trills lead into the nirvana of the coda.

The association of mysticism and composers brings Bruckner to mind. Beethoven was throughout his life far from a religious man. However, between 1813 and 1818, he explored Greek and Hindu philosophical and mystical texts (the *Upanishads* and the *Bhagavad Gîtâ* in particular). Traces of his reading can be found in his *Journals* as well as in certain compositions, particularly here in the *Arietta*. Like many German Romantic artists, he was inspired by pantheism, as some passages of his journal show.

The author of these lines shamelessly admits to being hopelessly addicted to Opus 111: deprivation will lead to severe withdrawal symptoms!

The excellent works of R.Rolland (Albin Michel) and A.Boucourechliev (Seuil Actes Sud) provide a detailed analysis of the three sonatas.

A year later, in 1823, Beethoven composed his final work for solo piano: the *Thirty-Three Variations on a Theme by Diabelli*, a masterpiece whose length must have disconcerted the editor. Diabelli had asked Beethoven amongst others, of whom Schubert, a young Liszt, Czerny and Hummel to provide one or two pages of music - and received ten times that! The *Ninth Symphony*, the five last string *quartets*, as well as the *Große Fuge* - all masterpieces - were still to come.

Until the commemoration of the centenary of his death in 1927, these sonatas were seldom performed in public. Concert promoters probably considered them too demanding for their public. But following a series of recitals of complete sonata cycles (such as by M.Jaëll, E. Del Pueyo, A.Schnabel, W.Backhaus, C.Arrau, W.Kempff) - they have been performed more regularly - by E.Fischer, R.Serkin, S.Richter, amongst others. Today they are still far less played than the 'titled' sonatas ("*Pathétique*", "*Tempest*", "*Waldstein*", "*Appassionata*" etc.).

Thanks to Irakly Avaliani for having chosen them, performed them in public, and then magnificently interpreted them on this CD! It is to be hoped that the new generation of pianists will continue to perform these pinnacles of the piano repertoire.

*Philippe Leduc, president of the Wilhelm Furtwängler Society
Translated by Anthony Gledhill*

Irakly Avaliani was born in Tbilissi, Georgia. He began his musical studies at the Tbilissi High School of Music, then went on to Moscow Tchaikowsky conservatory. After winning the highest awards there, he continued his studies with Ethery Djakeli who introduced him to the method of Marie Jaëll and, over a period of five years, completely reconstructed his piano technique. Today he is one of the few pianists to have explored this path, as did also Albert Schweitzer, Dinu Lipatti and Eduardo Del Pueyo. Irakly Avaliani has lived in Paris since 1989. Irakly Avaliani's recording career, consistently lauded by the music press, has been patroned by Mecenat Group BALAS since 2000.