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A Beethoven Cycle, Jiayan Sun, piano

Music: Faculty Performances

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3-21-2019

## Recital 7: Sonatas Nos. 27–29: Program

Peter Bloom

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### Recommended Citation

Bloom, Peter, "Recital 7: Sonatas Nos. 27–29: Program" (2019). Article, Smith College, Northampton, MA. [https://scholarworks.smith.edu/mus\\_beethovencycle/45](https://scholarworks.smith.edu/mus_beethovencycle/45)

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# A Beethoven Cycle: The Complete Piano Sonatas

Recital VII: Sonatas Nos. 27–29

Jiayan Sun, piano

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Thursday, March 21, 2019

8:00 PM

Sweeney Concert Hall, Sage Hall



SMITH COLLEGE

# PROGRAM

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## Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Sonata No. 27 in E Minor, Op. 90 (1814)

*Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck  
Nicht zu geschwind, und sehr singbar vorgetragen*

Sonata No. 28 in A Major, Op. 101 (1815–1816)

*Etwas lebhaft und mit der innigsten Empfindung. Allegretto ma non troppo  
Ziemlich Lebhaft, Marschmässig. Vivace alla Marcia  
Langsam und sehnsuchtvoll. Adagio ma non troppo, con affetto –  
Zeitmass des ersten Stücks. Tempo del primo pezzo –  
Geschwinde, doch nicht zu sehr und mit Entschlossenheit. Allegro*

### *Intermission*

Grande Sonate, No. 29 in B-flat Major, Op. 106 (“Hammerklavier”) (1817–1818)

Allegro

Scherzo. Assai vivace

Adagio sostenuto

Largo – Allegro risoluto. Fuga a tre voci, con alcune licenze

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The Josten Performing Arts Library has created a LibGuide to facilitate access to literature and resources on Beethoven’s life and work.

<http://libguides.smith.edu/beethovencycle>

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*Please silence all cell phones and other electronic devices before the performance.*

## NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

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On Jiayan Sun's previous recital, we heard three sonatas from the year 1809. By 1812 Beethoven had completed the Seventh and Eighth Symphonies. By 1814 he had revised his singular opera, *Fidelio*, whose theme of bravery in the face of tyranny was newly appropriate to the world in which Napoleon had been disastrously defeated in Russia and would soon be decisively defeated at Waterloo. Beethoven was duly celebrated at the Congress of Vienna, in the presence of the most powerful figures on the continent, who, when not feasting on the enjoyments of the capital, were busy organizing the geography of post-Napoleonic Europe. Since 1812, Beethoven's hearing had notably worsened, and his psychological equilibrium had been visibly upset: 1812 is the year of his famous letter to "the immortal beloved," a woman (she has not been conclusively identified) to whom he confessed his love, his loneliness, and his intention to withdraw from the world. It has thus become customary to view the period from 1813 to 1817 as "fallow," and as the line of demarcation between the "period of externalization" and the "period of reflection." It is certainly true that, during those years, Beethoven ceased performing in public, and slowed the rhythm of his composing. But he did not stop.

The Sonata in E Minor, **Op. 90**, was completed in August 1814. The first movement carries an unusually long heading: "Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck"—"*Con brio*, with feeling, and expression throughout." I would have thought that the composer wanted *all of his music* to be played "with feeling and expression throughout." Did he mean something special here? Was he urging players to indulge in greater *rubato*? The second movement likewise carries a detailed marking: "Nicht zu geschwind und sehr singbar vorgetragen"—"Not too quickly, and in a very *cantabile* manner." (The urge to imitate the voice is a characteristic of the late style; this, indirectly, is what led to the Ninth Symphony.)

The first movement is notable for an exposition in E Minor and B Minor, with a full stop at the end of both the first and second theme groups. In the recapitulation, what was heard in B Minor will be heard, as expected, in E Minor. The minor mode seems to generate in Beethoven an almost "romantic" display of dissonance, but structurally speaking, he adheres to the classical style. This is true of the second movement as well, which is a gentle rondo with two episodes surrounded by three refrains, the last with a brief coda. There is a word for the restrained lyricism of this extraordinary movement, a word that is anachronistic but apt: Schubertian. (Beethoven was not quite forty-four when he completed the work; Franz Schubert was only seventeen.) Beethoven here sets out a long melody that is so lyrical, so fluent, so flowing, so *cantabile*, that

even he, the greatest motivic chopper-upper in the history of western music, can do only what Schubert would do soon thereafter: repeat the melody, and luxuriate in its loveliness. The ending of the sonata is conspicuously understated; it will come to you as something of a surprise.

With the A-Major Sonata, **Op. 101**, we arrive at the classification of “Late Beethoven” and enter the strange and wonderful world that, with the exception of such exceptional musicians as Berlioz and Wagner and a few other wayward souls, remained mysterious and mystifying to countless listeners throughout much of the nineteenth century. Indeed, taking the relationship between biography and criticism to the limit, the mystified attributed the mystery to Beethoven’s encroaching deafness. But what did we just hear if not some of the most alluring sounds ever assigned to the piano? Beethoven’s hearing was imperfect; his sonic imagination was forever intact.

We hear at the opening of the first movement something of the lyricism of the second movement of Op. 90, but *there*, for the first one hundred bars, the phrase structure is almost entirely regular (4 + 4 + 4 + 4, etc.); *here*, after the first six bars (2+2+2), the phraseology—as we glide surreptitiously into the dominant, as we slide seamlessly from one area to another—is ambiguous: in this regard, Beethoven, a guide and teacher to *all composers* who followed in his wake, gave a lesson not so much to Schubert as to Brahms. The sonata form movement (no ruckus, no repeats) is marked “mit der innigsten Empfindung”—“with innermost feeling,” apparently implying, again, something more than what normal interpreters would take it to be their duty to convey.

The second movement, serving the function of a scherzo, is a march (with a trio) in the distant key of F Major. These could be toy soldiers marching, but as the harmony and counterpoint become knotty and hard-hitting, the toys seem to become (if the word is permissible) men. The feeling is one captured by the marking in the slow movement of the A-Minor String Quartet, Op. 132: “Neue Kraft fühlend”—“Feeling new strength.”

What follows sounds at first like a slow movement, “sehnsuchtsvoll”—“yearningly,” but it is rather a slow introduction: it begins with a little cadence to move us from F Major to A Minor, and to the dominant of A, at which point we have—a different sort of surprise—a diminutive recurrence of the opening of... *the first movement*. Then: a full-fledged sonata form finale, with the exposition repeated, the development full of contrapuntal cogitation, the recapitulation grounding us in the home key of A, the coda giving us A-plus.

These, then, are some of the formal maneuvers of the late style: not the teleological process of combative development and triumphant conclusion of Beethoven's "heroic phase," but beginnings *in medias res*, subdivisions that turn out to be fragmentary, fugue (as you heard in the finale), reminiscences and returns that relate the parts and round out the form.

In the "mountain chain" that I mentioned in the notes for Jiayan Sun's first concert, in September, and that is a common metaphor for the Beethoven sonatas in their entirety, it is generally agreed that the "Hammerklavier" Sonata, the Sonata in B-flat Major, **Op. 106**, begun in 1817 and completed in 1818, is the highest peak—if not in value (a Pandora's box not everyone wishes to open), then probably in length, and certainly in difficulty. The opening gesture alone, if played by only the left hand, as Beethoven's notation implies, is a reckless daredevil's challenge. The finale is a reckless daredevil's dream.

The sonata's nickname, "Hammerklavier," is derived from the title page of the first edition, *Große Sonate für das Hammerklavier*. The word simply means *piano*, but in Beethoven's day it was used in contradistinction to the harpsichord and referred, in an intentionally patriotic German, to what we now call the *fortepiano*, that is, an early version of the modern piano. The word also appears on the title page of Op. 101 and on the autographs of Opp. 109 and 110, but—because the word "Hammer" seems to carry intimations of power—it has stuck only to Op. 106. This is the first four-movement sonata that Beethoven had written since Op. 31 No. 3, from 1802. Indeed, its proportions, like its import, are symphonic.

Beethoven is said to have characterized the sonatas of Op. 14 as "a dialogue between a man and a woman." Now of course we know that gender is a social construct. (He says, glibly, as though he were not an unreconstructed rascalion.) But at the outset of the "Hammerklavier," some antediluvian music critic might have constructed the opening eight-note rhythmic figure, *fortissimo*, as [male], and the following lyrical theme, which spreads over bars 5-17, as [female]. Obviously, it is the contrast that is important, and that serves to animate the grand, sonata-form first movement, which takes us from B-flat (apparently the favorite key of the dedicatee, the Archduke Rudolph) not to the usual destination—in the later years in particular Beethoven found colorful substitutes for the dominant—but to the submediant, G Major. He takes us there not by a smooth progression, but by a "wrench": he hammers on D, the third note of the scale of B-flat, and turns it into the dominant of G. And, at the repeat of the exposition, he takes us back to the home key by the same process: he hammers on B-flat, which sounds like the minor third degree of the scale of G, and turns it into the new, that is, the old tonic. (I

apologize to those who did not follow what I just set down, but, *Hammerklavier oblige*, hammering on a particular note can indeed change its function.)

The development section of the first movement demonstrates Beethoven's increasing preoccupation with counterpoint and fugue as well as his daring harmonic imagination, as he lingers in the distant key of B Major (five sharps), seven accidentals away from the home key of B-flat (two flats). And after the recapitulation has begun (it is more a revision than a recapitulation), those "wrenches" are replaced by newly inventive harmonic shenanigans that allow Beethoven to present what was earlier in G in the home key of B-flat. A coda features some of the double trills that challenge performers of the late sonatas, and rounds off the movement with reminiscences of the rhythmic figure that opened the movement. The final sonority is composed not of a B-flat chord but of four octaves' worth of the single note B-flat: this—less conclusive than the full chord—signals that we should move with alacrity to what follows.

What follows is one of the shortest and most charming movements of all, a *scherzo* that lives up to its name: levity, humor, charm, impishness, everything that is the opposite of anxiety and angst. The dotted figure that is the upbeat here soon sounds like the downbeat (speaking of changing functions): the metrical ambiguity is part of the fun.

The slow movement, by contrast, reminds us of the gloom that characterized the composer's later years. It is a sonata movement with a twist: the "development" is only a "retransition"; the coda is notably long. The exposition explores the keys of F-sharp Minor and D Major (the latter a demonstration that the major mode can be as heart-breaking as the minor); the recapitulation gives us the earlier F-sharp Minor material, now disguised by melodic variation, and the D-Major material transposed to the parallel home key of F-sharp Major. The final chord of the movement is arpeggiated, as is the opening of the finale—another sign of the composer's desire to meld the four movements into one. (For financial reasons, Beethoven was perfectly willing to have the movements published separately in England. Organicism schmorganicism.) And yet he added the first two notes of the slow movement—upbeats that link it with the rest—when it was in proof. Ducats be damned?)

The finale, preceded by an introduction that seems to ask *should I* or *should I not*, is a fugue—and a very strange fugue it is. Suffice it to say that a few minutes into the movement, just when it seems clear to you that Beethoven has gone off the deep end, a second subject is introduced that is as melodious as the spring. This, too, soon gets wrapped up in the fugal texture, in the inversions, in the augmentations, in the transformations, in the wild trills at the top, at the bottom,

and in the middle. If anyone can convince you that there is method to Beethoven's madness (and light at the end of the tunnel), it is... Jiayan Sun.

—Peter Bloom

Grace Jarcho Ross 1933 Professor of Humanities, Emeritus

## ABOUT THE ARTIST

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Praised by the New York Times for his “revelatory” performances, and by the Toronto Star for his “technically flawless, poetically inspired and immensely assured playing,” pianist **Jiayan Sun** has performed with the Cleveland Orchestra, the Hallé Orchestra, the Chinese and RTÉ (Ireland) National Symphony Orchestras, the Fort Worth and Toledo Symphony Orchestras, the Toronto and Aspen Concert Orchestras, and the Suwon Philharmonic Orchestra, and he has conducted from the keyboard the Meiningen Court Orchestra. His performances have been broadcast by the BBC, the RTÉ, China Central Television, and classical music radio stations in North America. He has performed at and participated in the Verbier Festival, the Gstaad Menuhin Festival, the Klavier-Festival Ruhr, the Aspen Music Festival, the Sarasota Music Festival, and PianoTexas. Under the mentorship of Sir András Schiff, he was invited to give a number of solo recitals in Europe as part of Schiff's “Building Bridges” project for the 2017-2018 season.

Jiayan Sun has been awarded prizes at many of the major international piano competitions, including third prize at the Leeds International Piano Competition, second prize at the Dublin International Piano Competition, fourth prize and the audience prize at the Cleveland International Piano Competition, the first prize at the inaugural CCC Toronto International Piano Competition, among others. Playing early keyboard instruments and studying historical performance practice have played a significant role in his musical activities, with critically acclaimed appearances with the American Classical Orchestra in Alice Tully Hall.

Hailing from Yantai, China, Jiayan Sun received Bachelor's and Master's degrees from The Juilliard School. He continues his studies at Juilliard as a doctoral candidate under the tutelage of Yoheved Kaplinsky and Stephen Hough. His other mentors include pianists Malcolm Bilson, Richard Goode, Robert Levin, and harpsichordist Lionel Party. His devotion to the art of composition led him to study with the composer Philip Lasser. He is the Iva Dee Hiatt Visiting Artist in Piano and Lecturer in Music at Smith College. For more information, please visit <http://www.jiayansunpianist.com>.

# A Beethoven Cycle: The Complete Piano Sonatas

Jiayan Sun, piano

Final Concert of the Cycle:  
Thursday, April 18, 2019, 8 PM, Sweeney Concert Hall  
Last Three Sonatas, Opp. 109, 110, 111

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## A Beethoven Cycle: The Complete Piano Sonatas

Jiayan Sun, piano

Eight Recitals at 8 PM on Thursdays  
Sweeney Concert Hall, Sage Hall

I. Thursday, September 20, 2018  
Sonatas Nos. 1-4

II. Thursday, October 18, 2018  
Sonatas Nos. 5-8 & 19-20

III. Thursday, November 8, 2018  
Sonatas Nos. 9-11 & 3  
"Kurfürstensonaten" performed by  
Smith student pianists

IV. Thursday, November 29, 2018  
Sonatas Nos. 12-15

V. Thursday, January 31, 2019  
Sonatas Nos. 16-18 & 21

VI. Thursday, February 21, 2019  
Sonatas Nos. 22-26

VII. Thursday, March 21, 2019  
Sonatas Nos. 27-29

VIII. Thursday, April 18, 2019  
Sonatas Nos. 30-32

