

SAGE
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SOCIETY

A Beethoven Cycle: The Complete Piano Sonatas

Recital I: Sonatas Nos. 1-4

Jiayan Sun, piano

September 20, 2018

8:00 PM

Sweeney Concert Hall, Sage Hall



SMITH COLLEGE

PROGRAM

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Sonata No. 1 in F Minor, Op. 2 No. 1 (1793-1795)

Allegro

Adagio

Menuetto. Allegretto

Prestissimo

Sonata No. 2 in A Major, Op. 2 No. 2 (1795)

Allegro vivace

Largo appassionato

Scherzo. Allegretto

Rondo. Grazioso

Sonata No. 3 in C Major, Op. 2 No. 3 (1795)

Allegro con brio

Adagio

Scherzo. Allegro

Allegro assai

intermission

Grand Sonata, No. 4 in E-flat Major, Op. 7 (1796-1797)

Allegro molto e con brio

Largo con gran espressione

Allegro

Rondo. Poco Allegretto e Grazioso

Josten Performing Arts Library has created a LibGuide to facilitate access to literature and resources on Beethoven's life and works.

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

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

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

Looking back, from a moment in time some two hundred years removed from their creation, we see the nine symphonies, the sixteen string quartets, and the thirty-two piano sonatas of Ludwig van Beethoven as magic mountains sculpted by a Michelangelic master into an expansive range of peaks and valleys of arresting passion and breathtaking beauty. But the apparently premeditative order of the totality—the pairings, the parallels, the progressions—is an illusion. Had the composer lived ten years fewer or ten years more, the larger shape would be different, the overall trajectory, other than what we perceive today.

In describing this music, the historian who wishes to enter the mindset of the creator must therefore distinguish what he knows, now, from what the artist knew, then. In 1795, when Beethoven set down his first mature piano sonatas (he was not quite twenty-five, although at the time and for years thereafter he believed that he was two years younger), he had no notion that he would eventually complete thirty-two of them, the last, when he was fifty-one, in 1822. He had no notion, we may safely presume, that he would revolutionize the very idea of the piano sonata, since, in his early years, his goal was to honor his masters—respectfully, not slavishly—by *imitating* their work. Today, and in a sense ever since Romanticism crowned “originality” as the highest of the aesthetic values, the word “imitation” gives pause. But by dedicating his first three sonatas to Joseph Haydn, at the time of their publication, in March 1796, Beethoven was surely expressing the hope that his world-famous teacher (at the time no composer, certainly not Mozart, was better known than Haydn) would approve of his disciple’s efforts to broaden the repertory to which the older man had by that time contributed at least sixty compositions.

These first three sonatas in F Minor, A Major, and C Major, assigned by the publishers the collective “work” or “opus” number 2, and the sonata in E-flat Major, Op. 7, also from 1796, constitute the first of eight programs in which our distinguished colleague Jiayan Sun, enjoying two-year residency at Smith, will bring to Sage Hall, *in chronological order*, all thirty-two sonatas. As an inhabitant of this building for nearly half a century, I can say with some authority that never before has it witnessed a gigantic achievement of this kind. I say “gigantic” advisedly: for English speakers, Jiayan’s name is best pronounced as “giant”—without the T.

To climb this mountain in chronological order is a feat of a particular kind, first accomplished in 1861 by the German pianist Karl Halle (later known as Sir Charles Hallé) and most recently by Jiayan’s mentor, András Schiff. Most of the explorers of the repertory have done so in such a way as to offer a

balance among works early, middle, and late. Indeed, Beethoven's creative lifespan provides the quintessential model for the now conventional sectioning of all artists' works into three periods. For our composer, these were early on labeled (by a Frenchman, of all things) "*imitation*," "*extériorisation*," and "*réflexion*." The designations must not be taken as definitive, for some of the late works breathe the naïveté of youth, while some of the early works demonstrate the virtues of old age. We shall arrive at the "period of externalization" in the fifth recital, with the performance of the "Waldstein" Sonata, Op. 53; and we shall arrive at the "period of reflection" in the seventh recital, with the performance of the A-Major Sonata, Op. 101.

At this evening's concert, we are in the "period of imitation"—but *what is it*, precisely, that is being imitated? The answer is: not the *tunes* of Beethoven's predecessors, although echoes of these can certainly be found (they are composed of scales and arpeggios and traditional ornaments), but rather the *textures* and the *forms* that the old masters used in the various movements that constitute the genre of the sonata, and, more specifically, the *tonal language* that they spoke.

The first sonata, **Op. 2 No. 1**, is in F Minor. Haydn *never* used that key for a piano sonata, and it is not inconceivable that by making this choice, Beethoven was saying to his teacher: take that! Because in the classic era (as Vince Lombardi said of winning), key is not everything, it's the *only* thing. Well, no, I take that back. But many aspects of classical compositions are *key dependent*: the choice of the key, for the composer, is tantamount to the choice of the rock—alabaster, granite, marble—for the sculptor; and to the choice of the paint—acrylic, oil, watercolor—for the painter. It determines the lines, the shapes, and the hues. If you have absolute pitch, you know exactly what I mean; if you know the difference between one sharp and six, you're on the right track; if sharps and flats are Greek to you, you have every right to love every note you hear, but you should probably be advised that there are some who hear more than you.

Beethoven composed the first movement of the F-Minor Sonata in "sonata form"—a technical term he would not have known. What he wrote is a movement that displayed the home key, or "tonic," in this case F Minor, that moved to a related key, in this case A-flat Major, that traveled with some ambiguity through several keys, and that returned to and confirmed the tonic. The theorists soon named these sections "exposition," "development," and "recapitulation"; Beethoven's term would have been first-movement *music*. The structure of the second movement, *Adagio*, in F Major, is ternary: an opening section, a contrasting middle section, and a final section that is a variation of the first. (Variation is a technique that is as old as the hills; Beethoven practiced it, in

every possible way, from the beginning to the end.) The third movement is also ternary: minuet, “trio” (not a piece in three parts but rather a contrasting section), and, again, minuet (unvaried). Minuets were danced as early as the seventeenth century, but such dances, in the minor mode, are not common. (Even as an imitator, Beethoven was a daredevil.) The final movement, *prestissimo*, is unusual in moving in the first section from F Minor to C Minor, and in having a second section, *sempre piano et dolce*, that seems to have little to do with the first. You can apply the words “exposition,” “development,” and “recapitulation” to this music, too, but you must remember that they are imprecisely descriptive, not imperiously prescriptive.

Haydn wrote at least six sonatas in A Major, and I would suppose that Beethoven knew some of them. The third and fourth movements of his own sonata in A Major, **Op. 2 No. 2**, a scherzo-trio-scherzo and a rondo, emit a charm that one might want to call Haydnesque. (A “scherzo,” for our purposes, is a speeded-up minuet; a “rondo” is a musical structure with a regularly recurring refrain.) But the slow movement here, *Largo appassionato*, is, on the contrary, about something very serious: the noble harmonies, and the walking bass, *staccato sempre*, suggest everything that is the opposite of frivolity. (You will hear this princely walking bass, again, in the slow movement of the E-flat Major Sonata, Op. 7.) The first movement of the A-Major sonata, on the other hand, with its short and contrasting opening motives, its sudden rests, its prolonged preparations, is a game of peekaboo. Listen to the upward arrows that punctuate this music: they answer the question of why, if you wish to be a pianist, you must practice your scales.

The C-Major Sonata, **Op. 2 No. 3**, requires conspicuously brilliant scales, and a hell of a lot more. It reminds us that Beethoven—the leading pianist of his generation—was a virtuoso. No less a prestidigitator than Carl Czerny (of the *études*) called Beethoven’s playing “brilliant,” “astonishing,” and “magical.” Some of the magic was caused by *improvisation!* We don’t hear enough about this, we probably don’t know enough about it, but it is not inconceivable that, in his prime, Beethoven was in a class with Oscar Peterson, or even Art Tatum.

With the “Hammerklavier” Sonata, Op. 106, which we shall hear in Jiayan Sun’s next-to-last recital, the E-flat Sonata, **Op. 7**, is one of the longest of the lot. It was begun in 1796, completed in the first months of 1797, and published in October of that year. The key of E-flat Major will forever be associated with the “Eroica” Symphony, which was still seven years in the future, but its “heroic” aspects were known earlier to Mozart (whose Piano Concerto in E-flat, K. 271, is sometimes called *his* “Eroica”) and to Haydn (whose E-flat Piano Sonata from 1794 is among that composer’s most grandiose works for the keyboard).

The Beethoven sonata opens with spacious first movement whose individual parts you will perhaps be able to perceive. The “exposition”—which is an exposition of the terms of “drama” that is *always* the subject of the sonata form, namely the “conflict” between the home key and its predominant tonal rival—is repeated: it is repeated precisely in order to drive home the terms of the conflict of which I speak, in this case, between E-flat Major and B-flat Major. In the following “development,” you will hear motives you have heard before, foreshortened and newly combined, as we wander through the keys of C Minor, A-flat Major, F Minor, B-flat Minor, G Minor, A Minor, and D Minor (you will hear the wandering, not the individual keys), before returning “home” to E-flat and to the opening material of the movement—which, because you have already heard it twice, you are expected to recognize. (This music is “classic” partly because it turns on a modicum of intelligent audience participation. “Romantic” music, on the contrary, pours over you like maple syrup. Or so it has been said.) In this “recapitulation,” Beethoven does what he almost always does: he varies the opening material, shortly after it has begun anew, and he adds a concluding section, or “coda,” to make it perfectly clear that the end is nigh.

Hector Berlioz—if I may interject a not-quite-total non-sequitur—wrote a book about the players in the opera pit (and a rowdy bunch they are) called *Evenings with the Orchestra*. In it, he describes what those players gossip about during the performance of silly operas. When a *great* opera is on, however, they remain absolutely silent. Well, the second movement of Beethoven’s Op. 7, *Largo, con gran espressione*, is as great as any opera. You must sit absolutely still and hold your breath. And when it comes to the end, you will feel glad for having been alive during its playing. “The rest is silence.”

“The rest is silence”: Hamlet’s last words. The music critic for *The New Yorker*, Alex Ross, turned them around for the title of his first book, *The Rest is Noise*. HaHa. In fact, Hamlet offers us a tautology: the rest (in music) *represents* silence; it *commands* silence. Pianists, because they do not have to breathe (unlike oboists, for example, to which fraternity the present bloviator once belonged), must work to *sustain* the rest. In the *Largo* of Op. 7, as elsewhere, but more so, the silence is essential to the discourse. It is golden.

Then the third movement, a minuet-and-trio; then the fourth movement, a rondo: these tell you that Beethoven was not yet prepared to send you home in a trance, that the earth is still an OK place, that music—while taking us, in the *Largo*, to another planet—is still a worldly entertainment.

It is ironic that in a few days, in this very music department, as Jiayan Sun begins his exploration of the Beethoven sonatas—than which no repertory could

conceivably be more *canonical*—a conference is to be held on the *idea of the canon* in the twenty-first century. “Canons are ideological”; they are not “value-neutral”; they “exclude important bodies of work”; they “reproduce existing social orders and replicate their inequalities and biases.” As you listen to this glorious music, you might wish to weigh the implications of these truths, which the conference organizers, declaring their independence, hold as self-evident.

—Peter Bloom
Grace Jarcho Ross 1933 Professor of Humanities, Emeritus

ABOUT THE ARTIST

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 frequently 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, 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, PianoTexas. Under the mentorship of Sir Andrés 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.

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

Hailed from Yantai, China, he received the 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>.

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Jiayan Sun, pianist
Eight Recitals at 8 PM on Thursdays
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I. Thursday, September 20, 2018
Sonatas Nos. 1-4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



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