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A Beethoven Cycle: The Complete Piano Sonatas

Recital IV: Sonatas Nos. 12–15

Jiayan Sun, pianist

Thursday, November 29, 2018
8:00 PM
Sweeney Concert Hall, Sage Hall

 SMITH COLLEGE

PROGRAM

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Grande Sonate, No. 12 in A-flat Major, Op. 26 (1801)

Andante con Variazioni

Scherzo. Allegro molto

Marcia funebre sulla morte d'un Eroe

Allegro

Sonata quasi una Fantasia, No. 13 E-flat Major, Op. 27 No. 1 (1801)

Andante – Allegro – Tempo I

Allegro molto e vivace

Adagio con espressione – Allegro vivace

Sonata quasi una Fantasia, No. 14 in C-sharp Minor, Op. 27 No. 2 (“*Moonlight*”) (1801)

Adagio sostenuto

Allegretto

Presto agitato

intermission

Grande Sonate, No. 15 in D Major, Op. 28 (“*Pastoral*”) (1801)

Allegro

Andante

Scherzo. Allegro vivace

Rondo. Allegro ma non troppo

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

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

NOTES ON THE PROGRAM

In music, as in sport, where professional practice requires extraordinary exactitude and painstaking preparation, it is often the case that the most urgent challenges are those the executants put before themselves. At the outset of the Sonata in A-flat Major, **Op. 26**, Beethoven seems to put forth a puzzle and then to solve it—or so one might wish to say of this movement, which is comprised, with elegant simplicity, of a theme and five variations. Be it known that a “variation” pledges allegiance not to the “theme” itself but rather to its constituent bar-lengths—its “periodic structure.” This one, which, without warning, you would probably hear as symmetrical, is in fact structured in bar-lengths of 8+8+8+2+8. The little two-bar interpolation is the challenge that transforms something regular into something rare. You could leave it out—that is what Beethoven’s contemporaries would have done (and that is why you have never heard of them)—but you would be remiss, because this micro-gesture—this mini-extension of the final two bars of the third eight-bar unit—is one small sign of one man’s giant imagination.

To begin a four-movement sonata with a theme-and-variation movement is unusual; to place a minuet-and-trio in second position is likewise untraditional. This one, in the home key of A-flat Major, with a trio in the “noble” key of D-flat Major (Wagner reserved it for the king of the gods), portends something serious to come.

The something serious is the *Marcia funèbre sulla morte d'un eroe*—a movement that foreshadows the solemnity of the funeral march of the “Eroica” Symphony, and, in a sense, the solemnity of all funeral marches for the rest of time. The march is in the key of A-flat Minor: the *look* of the page—seven flats—is in and of itself funereal. What is astonishing is that we do not know, after two-hundred years, *whose funeral* Beethoven had in mind. Perhaps the “hero” was an idealized figure whom Beethoven wished to honor in his imagination as having died in the service of the progress of humanity at the hopeful dawn of a new century: the sonata was conceived and completed in 1800-1801.

Now, from Maynard Solomon, the Beethoven biographer with a psychoanalytical bent, we know that the composer had a predisposition for the subjects of both heroism and death. If so, he repressed it in the finale, *Allegro, a rondo* in the home key of A-flat Major, which, for Jiayan Sun, is a kind of “rebirth,” and which, for the Swiss pianist Edwin Fischer, was a kind of rainfall that veiled the burial ground “in a consoling gray mist.”

You are very familiar with the first movement of one of the two sonatas that comprise Beethoven's Op. 27; its nickname, "Mondschein-Sonate," derives from an analytical article by the poet and conservative music critic Ludwig Rellstab, a fellow who excoriated not only Berlioz, but also Chopin and Schumann, for their avant-gardist shenanigans. Had Anglophones called the piece "Moonshine" rather than "Moonlight," they might have found it even more intoxicating than they have.

Op. 27 No. 1, in E-flat major, and Op. 27 No. 2, in C-sharp Minor (this is the famous one), completed in 1801, are both headed *Sonata quasi una Fantasia*. You may fantasize about the meaning of "fantasy"—in fact Beethoven may have harbored fantasies about the charming twenty-year old Austrian countess Guilietta Guicciardi, briefly his student, to whom he dedicated the later work—but in the musical world, "fantasy" means, innocently, a piece of an improvisatory character. Beethoven used it here to signal his decision to depart from the classical norms. He also writes *attacca* at the ends of all movements but the last—urging players, that is, to play them successively *without pause*.

The first movement of the E-flat Sonata, **Op. 27 No. 1**, opens, *Andante*, rather like Op. 26, with a theme and two variations. An *Allegro* intervenes, suddenly in C Major but veering back towards E-flat, and the movement concludes in the home key with what is a combination of a variation and a repeat of the theme. The larger structure here, *fantasia oblige*, is *sui generis*.

There follows a movement in ternary meter in C-Minor/C-Major: if you are Claudio Arrau or Richard Goode, this is a *scherzo furioso* (the marking is *Allegro molto vivace*); if you are Daniel Barenboim, it is a considerably slower romp, for reasons known to him but not to me. The "trio" is reminiscent of the "tick-tock" passages I mentioned when discussing Op. 10 No. 2, although, in three-four time, the "tick-tock" of the clock is probably a misnomer.

The following *Adagio con espressione* is an introspective but non-tragic meditation in A-flat Major. This short, song-form (ABA) interlude leads, with an underscored preparatory link, to the final *Allegro vivace*, a *rondo* (ABACA) with a difference—because, as a coda, we have, first, a totally unexpected return to the *Adagio*, then, a *Presto*, which in its intervallic structures parodies the very opening of the work.

With its movements run together and its returns to earlier material, Op. 27 No. 1 is exemplary of what we love to call *organic* in Beethoven, as though the scores had the genetic makeup of a person. For unifying elements: *seek and ye shall find*.

The less said about the first movement of the “Moonlight” Sonata, **Op. 27 No. 2**, the better. But these being program notes..., three things. 1) The tempo marking is *Adagio sostenuto*, which means slowly and sustained, but the metrical signature is not “four-four” but “cut time” or “two-two”: we are to feel the music, that is, in two half-note beats, not four quarter-note beats. For some pianists—András Schiff, for example, and, I think, Jiayan Sun—this means that the music should not drag; for others—Evgeny Kissin, for example, and Vladimir Horowitz—slowly means: *really slow*. 2) Another marking is *senza sordini*, which means not that the pasta is to be eaten without the sauce, but that the piano is to be played without the dampers, that is, without releasing the sustain pedal, so that the sounds are to run together from beginning to end. Using modern instruments, few pianists follow this direction literally. 3) The famous melody that arrives in the fifth bar begins with a dotted figure (a dotted eighth-note followed by a sixteenth-note) that acts as an upbeat to the following long note. Played against the triplets of the accompaniment, this creates a tiny, and agreeable, rhythmic dissonance, which underlines the funereal character of the tune. However, some respected scholars (I am not one of them) believe that the sixteenth-note of the dotted notation should be *assimilated* into the triplet pattern; that there should be no rhythmic dissonance whatsoever. The triplet versus dotted-rhythm debate, in western music, like the latke-hamantash debate, in Jewish cooking, is a serious matter.

As in Op. 27 No. 1, the second movement of Op. 27 No. 2 follows *attacca*: this is a moderate-tempo scherzo and trio, both parts in D-flat Major, the “parallel” major to the key of the first movement (C-sharp Minor). Why did Beethoven simply not change C-sharp Minor to C-sharp Major? Because, for the player, it is simpler to read five flats (D-flat Major) than it is to read seven sharps (C-sharp Major), even though, on the piano, the C-sharp key and the D-flat key are one and the same.

Neither you nor your grandmother played the last movement of the “Moonlight” Sonata. Unlike the others, this one requires technique. It is a *Presto agitato* in “sonata form,” with the curiosity that the second principal key of the exposition is the unexpected one of the dominant minor. In the recapitulation, this music returns in the home key of C-sharp Minor, and a long coda (with some passages in triplets that one might wish to hear as alluding to the first movement) confirms the dark preeminence of that key.

If the unusual were not the usual in Beethoven, we might say that the beginning of **Op. 28**, also from the year 1801, is unusual: the tonality at the outset, D Major, is announced gently and unobtrusively in a ten-bar phrase, immediately repeated, whose length—two bars more than the expected eight—is part of its charm. A transition and modulation to A Major, the “dominant,” ensues, but the question—which is at the expressive heart of the matter—is: when have we truly arrived in the new key? Here and elsewhere, Beethoven delays tonal confirmation, knowing as he does that delay is delight, and that, in the recapitulation of this sonata-form movement, the transposition of this material to the home key will sound especially fresh.

In 1805, a London publisher affixed *Sonate pastorale* to the title page of his edition of Op. 28, and the sobriquet of “Pastoral” has remained attached to the piece (though not as tightly as “Moonlight” clings to you know what). The Londoners were not thinking of Beethoven’s “Pastoral” Symphony, still seven years in the future, but they were presumably thinking of other pastoral music characterized by a ternary division of the beat, plenty of parallel thirds, and a tendency (as we have here in the opening bars) to move to the subdominant, the “relaxing” chord built on the fourth degree of the scale.

At the opening of the *Andante* in the “parallel” minor of D, we hear one of those idiomatic effects that make the piano such an expressive instrument: a *staccato* walking-bass in the left hand, more sustained chords in the right. The shape of the movement (ABA plus coda) articulates a sharp contrast between something apparently stern and something apparently silly.

The word “scherzo” means “joke,” of course, but these rapid movements in ternary meter, in Beethoven’s hands, are never entirely frivolous (this one comes close), and they are sometimes very serious indeed. If I were to say that this one is “about” a game of cat and mouse, you would not take me seriously (and you would be right). However—and this is not a frivolous point—the Romantics *always* supposed that music was *about* something, even those who advocated art “for art’s sake.” That a painting, or a musical composition, could be solely “about” line and color is a notion that belongs more to our age than to theirs.

A drone-like figure opens the finale: perhaps this is another one of the elements those London publishers took to be “pastoral.” The movement is in rondo form, not sonata form, something that is not apparent at the beginning—in case you are not “classically insecure” (as a headline in the *Times* put it last year) but rather trying to listen structurally—because, as he does in all outer movements, Beethoven moves in the first section from the tonic to the dominant. This is always what he did when composing *music*, just as taking them in from left to right is always what he did when reading *words*. He then returns, briefly, to the opening

theme and the home key. That much is like a sonata, with a repeat of the exposition. But the transition to the dominant is not there; this is not a repeat of the exposition; it is a new episode, in a new key, in which Beethoven will demonstrate his contrapuntal “chops,” so (sophomorically) to speak. It will be followed by another refrain, all in the tonic, another episode, and a final refrain with a coda that is a race-to-the-end.

“You want to know something about my present situation,” Beethoven wrote to a friend in 1801; “Well, on the whole it is not at all bad.” To the extent that we wish to see the life reflected in the work (some wish to see nothing of the kind), Op. 28 would reflect those sentiments. “But,” he continued, “that jealous demon, my wretched health, has put a nasty spoke in the wheel.” This was onset of the calamity that left the history of music with its most gigantic irony: the most revered composer the world has ever heard was himself beginning to be unable to hear.

—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 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.

Mr. 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 Mr. Sun's musical activities, with critically

acclaimed appearances with the American Classical Orchestra in Alice Tully Hall.

Hailing from Yantai, China, he 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
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Eight Recitals at 8 PM on Thursdays
Sweeney Concert Hall, Sage Hall

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
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