
JONATHAN BISS
BEETHOVEN
Piano Sonatas Vol. 4
Nos 1, 6, 19 & 23
ORCHID CLASSICS

PIANO SONATAS, Vol 4
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

	Piano Sonata No.1 in F minor, Op.2 No.1	
1	Allegro	3.54
2	Adagio	4.36
3	Allegretto	3.18
4	Prestissimo	4.39
	Piano Sonata No.6 in F major, Op.10 No.2	
5	Allegro	8.20
6	Allegretto	3.45
7	Presto	3.51
	Piano Sonata No.19 in G minor, Op.49 No.1	
8	Andante	3.34
9	Rondo: Allegro	3.12
	Piano Sonata No.23 in F minor, Op.57 ('Appassionata')	
10	Allegro assai	9.36
11	Andante con moto	5.30
12	Allegro ma non troppo – Presto	8.08
	Total time	**62.28**

Jonathan Biss, *piano*

Sonatas 1, 6, 19 & 23 ('Appassionata')

Can this really be how it all begins?

Each time I start to play Beethoven's Sonata Op.2 No.1, the first of the 32, I ask myself that same question. It seems…unfitting…that a body of music so questing, so challenging, so heaven- (and, occasionally, hell-) storming, would begin so unassumingly. Written in 1795 and dedicated to Haydn, the sonata opens with a simple upward arpeggio, the so-called "Mannheim Rocket", a conventional device if there ever was one – a device that Haydn, the work's dedicatee and a composer who had recently *finished* a long career of writing piano sonatas, would have considered old-fashioned and paint-by-numbers. The initial impression is of music – and, presumably, a composer – with modest aims.

This impression holds for, at most, one phrase. Beethoven was, by nature, neither referential nor deferential, and his personality would not be constrained. On the surface, he may have been paying homage to Haydn, but his restlessness manifests almost immediately: the emotional neutrality of the opening is quickly transformed into urgency, as each subsequent gesture climbs higher and grows more breathless, leading – in mere seconds – to a *fortissimo* outburst, followed by a silence that is all anxiety and irresolution. Beethoven is at work.

It is fascinating, in this sonata, to hear Beethoven's unmistakable voice fight to assert itself in the face of self-imposed strictures: the work finds Beethoven appropriating the language and the style of the past in a way that he rarely did later on. And so, the slow movement has a floridly vocal quality of the sort one often finds in Haydn's piano writing; but it simultaneously has a gravity, a metaphysical aspect which is the very essence of Beethoven. The menuet has an old-world courtliness about it; but that courtliness is forever being disturbed by misplaced accents, and in fact, the mere *presence* of a menuet in a piano sonata flies in the face of tradition – the four movement model was, prior to Beethoven, reserved for symphonies, and its use here is a powerful statement of Beethoven's ambition for the sonata genre. The finale has an entirely symmetrical, even predictable structure; but its *material* bristles with a rage that

keeps threatening to spin out of control and into brutality, in a way that looks *forward* (to another work on this album, in fact), rather than back.

If Beethoven's need to innovate meant that he soon grew reluctant to use the past as template, he continued to use it, with affection, as a point of reference, for the rest of his life: in the *Diabelli Variations*, his last major work for the piano, there are suggestions of Bach and a direct quotation of Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, even as the music anticipates the rhythmic puzzles of Schumann and, on occasion, the bel canto line of Chopin. In the Sonata Op.49 No.1, an early work that Beethoven almost certainly conceived as a pedagogical tool and perhaps never even intended for publication, the reference point seems to be neither Bach, nor Mozart, not Haydn, but Muzio Clementi, whose sonatas and sonatinas for piano, while by no means lofty works, nonetheless have considerable charm. Beethoven surely did not invest much time or energy in this work, and yet it inevitably has a depth of feeling and a strength of personality that Clementi could only aspire to; such is the gulf between talent and genius.

The Sonata Op.10 No.2, while still modest in length, is an altogether more substantial affair, and accordingly, the past it alludes to is a far more formidable one: here, it is the world of Bach and, more to the point, of the fugue, that Beethoven is borrowing from. This being post-Op.2 Beethoven, though, the allusion is fleeting and, in this case, comic: the last movement begins as if it will be in strict three-part counterpoint, but by the time the third voice makes its first appearance, Beethoven is already veering into melody-and-accompaniment territory, and he has soon given up the game entirely. There are, it is true, several more contrapuntal passages sprinkled throughout the movement, but he never fusses too much about the independence of the voices; he allows himself to enjoy the fugal sonority without the pesky business of actually writing a fugue. Beethoven's refusal to commit to the form he seems to be promising at the outset is a joke in a piece that is full of them: the first movement's opening idea is a happy-go-lucky series of fits and starts, and the movement is peppered with modulations which either lead to unexpected places, or simply *happen*, without

warning. But this is not Beethoven in absurdist mode: in sharp contrast to the slapstick one finds in a number of the other sonatas, the humour here is gentle, even earnest. This earnestness comes to the fore in the middle movement, in which Beethoven trades humour for something mellower and darker. The furtive, mysterious, outer sections flank a trio of uncommon loveliness, with a series of appoggiaturas approximating the sighs of a singer in an *opera seria*.

While nothing in these three sonatas is anything less than extremely fine, there is also nothing in them to prepare the listener for the hurricane that is the Sonata Op.57, the so-called 'Appassionata'. The work shares a tonality with the first piano sonata, and with the later 'Serioso' Quartet, which is similarly terse and explosive. But ultimately, the 'Appassionata' defies any and all comparisons. It is a one-off, an unrepeatable force of nature, which probably shouldn't be repeated even if it could be, so overwhelming is its power. Beethoven and posterity often disagreed on the greatness question: many of his personal favourites among his own works, such as the sonatas Opp.22 and 78, or the Septet for strings and winds, are comparatively rarely heard today. But Beethoven's conviction that the 'Appassionata' was something special has been confirmed by two hundred years of dumbstruck listeners; its modernity is eternal.

Beethoven's hold on the public owes mostly to two factors: his brilliant command of musical structure and the psychological effect it has on the listener, and the force of his giant personality. Each of these elements is on full display in the 'Appassionata'. I struggle to think of another work in which so much is accomplished with so little in the way of raw materials. The first movement, average in length but massive in scope, is built from nothing more than its opening theme – laconic but fantastically malleable, transforming itself from repression, to warmth, to fury as necessary – and a four note motive that serves as an increasingly ominous leitmotif. The middle movement is a theme and variations whose theme barely merits the title: it is a chorale with almost no melodic interest to speak of. And yet, it is the basis for a world of feeling, each variation moving a step away from placidity and toward the ecstatic, until the

rug is pulled out from underneath at the last moment. And Beethoven links the last movement to the first with one simple harmonic progression, which slithers eerily up a half step. At every turn, the work reveals the freakish architectural acuity of its author.

And as for the personality? On no other occasion did Beethoven unleash it in quite so ruthless a fashion. The 'Appassionata' lives at a high emotional temperature from its first notes, and midway through the first movement comes the first in a series of explosions that are quite literally unprecedented – never before, and only rarely ever, has a work of classical music reached so directly for the jugular. When the finale hurtles to its terrible conclusion, that suggestion of brutality in the finale of Op.2 No.1 has found its full expression, and it is truly terrifying. Beethoven's piano sonatas are nothing if not thorough in their exploration of humanity; in the 'Appassionata' it is its darkest corners that are exposed.

Jonathan Biss

Pianist Jonathan Biss's approach to music is a holistic one. In his own words: *I'm trying to pursue as broad a definition as possible of what it means to be a musician.* As well as being one of the world's most sought-after pianists, a regular performer with major orchestras, concert halls and festivals around the globe and co-Artistic Director of Marlboro Music, Jonathan Biss is also a renowned teacher, writer and musical thinker.

His deep musical curiosity has led him to explore music in a multi-faceted way. Through concerts, teaching, writing and commissioning, he fully immerses himself in projects close to his heart, including *Late Style*, an exploration of the stylistic changes typical of composers – Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Britten, Elgar, Gesualdo, Kurtág, Mozart, Schubert, and Schumann – as they approached the end of life, looked at through solo and chamber music performances, masterclasses and a Kindle Single publication *Coda*; and *Schumann: Under the Influence* a 30-concert initiative examining the work of Robert Schumann and the musical influences on him, with a related Kindle publication *A Pianist Under the Influence*.

This 360° approach reaches its zenith with Biss and Beethoven. In 2011, he embarked on a nine-year, nine-album project to record the complete cycle of Beethoven's piano sonatas. Starting in September 2019, in the lead-up to the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth in December 2020, he will perform a whole season focused around Beethoven's Piano Sonatas, with more than 50 recitals worldwide. This includes performing the complete sonatas at Wigmore Hall and Berkeley, multi-concert-series in Washington, Philadelphia, and Seattle, as well as recitals in Rome, Budapest, New York and Sydney.

One of the great Beethoven interpreters of our time, Biss's fascination with Beethoven dates back to childhood and Beethoven's music has been a constant throughout his life. In 2011 Biss released *Beethoven's Shadow,* the

first Kindle eBook to be written by a classical musician. He has subsequently launched *Exploring Beethoven's Piano Sonatas,* Coursera's online learning course that has reached more than 150,000 subscribers worldwide; and initiated Beethoven/5, a project to commission five piano concertos as companion works for each of Beethoven's piano concertos from composers Timo Andres, Sally Beamish, Salvatore Sciarrino, Caroline Shaw and Brett Dean. The latter will be premiered in February 2020 with the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra and subsequently performed by orchestras in USA, Germany, France, Poland and Australia.

As one of the first recipients of the Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award in 2003, Biss has a long-standing relationship with Mitsuko Uchida with whom he now enjoys the prestigious position of Co-Artistic Director of Marlboro Music. Marlboro holds a special place for Biss, who spent twelve summers there, and for whom nurturing the next generation of musicians is vitally important. Biss continues his teaching as Neubauer Family Chair in Piano Studies at Curtis Institute of Music.

Biss is no stranger to the world's great stages. He has performed with major orchestras across the US and Europe, including New York Philharmonic, LA Philharmonic, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra, CBSO, London Philharmonic Orchestra and Concertgebouw. He has appeared at the Salzburg and Lucerne Festivals, has made several appearances at Wigmore Hall and Carnegie Hall, and is in demand as a chamber musician.

He was the first American to be named a BBC New Generation Artist, and has been recognised with many other awards including the Leonard Bernstein Award presented at the 2005 Schleswig-Holstein Festival, Wolf Trap's Shouse Debut Artist Award, the Andrew Wolf Memorial Chamber Music Award, 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.

Surrounded by music from an early age, Jonathan Biss is the son of violist and violinist Paul Biss and violinist Miriam Fried, and grandson of cellist Raya Garbousova (for whom Samuel Barber composed his cello concerto). He studied with Leon Fleisher at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, and gave his New York recital debut aged 20.

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