
JONATHAN BISS
BEETHOVEN
Piano Sonatas Vol. 5
Nos 3, 25, 27 & 28
ORCHID CLASSICS

PIANO SONATAS, Vol 5
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

	Piano Sonata No.3 in C major, Op.2 No.3	
1	Allegro con brio	9.45
2	Adagio	7.15
3	Scherzo: Allegro	3.02
4	Allegro assai	5.09
	Piano Sonata No.25 in G major, Op.79	
5	Presto alla tedesca	4.23
6	Andante	2.25
7	Vivace	1.55
	Piano Sonata No.27 in E minor, Op.90	
8	Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck	5.22
9	Nicht zu geschwind und sehr singbar vorgetragen	6.36
	Piano Sonata No.28 in A major, Op.101	
10	Etwas lebhaft, und mit der innigsten Empfindung. Allegretto ma non troppo	3.58
11	Lebhaft, Marschmäßig. Vivace alla marcia	6.14
12	Langsam und sehnsuchtsvoll. Adagio, ma non troppo, con affetto - Geschwind, doch nicht zu sehr, und mit Entschlossenheit. Allegro	10.22
	Total time	**66.29**

Jonathan Biss, *piano*

Sonatas 3, 25, 27 & 28

20 years, and an entire cosmos, separate the sonatas that bookend this recording. The evolution that takes place within Beethoven between the C major Sonata, Op.2 No.3, and the A major, Op.101, is monumental, almost impossible to overstate: I struggle to think of an artist – not Picasso, not Schönberg, not Joyce – who changed so profoundly over the course of a working life.

But what *was* the change, really?

The question has occupied me for at least 20 of my own years. For while something in the *sound* of late Beethoven makes it seem as though without precedent, virtually every aspect of the *personality* at work can be found in the early music. The spirituality of Beethoven is as much in evidence in the slow movement of Op.2 No.3 as it is in any late sonata. The same is true of his transcendental use of silence: Beethoven could turn a declarative sentence into an entreaty, or a koan, with no more than an eighth note rest, and at the start of Op.2 No.3's *Adagio,* he does so no fewer than 10 times before offering even the most tentative of resolutions.

And it's not that late Beethoven offers a pared down version of the composer: in Op.101, as in all the late works, the spiritual and the *very* gritty exist side by side. The humour, the gruffness, and the rough-and-tumble that so enliven the early sonatas are there in Beethoven's music until the bitter, glorious end.

So, with nothing essential added, and nothing taken away, what has changed so profoundly? I don't pretend to offer a definitive answer – I neither can nor would wish to demystify this most mysterious of music – but more and more, I feel it has to do with Beethoven's embrace of vulnerability.

Certainly, of the many words one might attach to Op.2 No.3, "vulnerable" would not be high on the list. It is daring, ambitious, muscular, jocular, occasionally tender – and nearly always brimming with confidence. The Beethoven who

wrote this sonata is in his mid-twenties, and a recent arrival to Vienna, then the unchallenged centre of the musical world. And so, the tremendous scope, originality, and virtuosity (both compositional and instrumental) on display here probably aren't entirely pure in their motivations: Beethoven is out to *impress* the listener, to show what he can do.

And what he can do, it turns out, is most anything he wants to. Ingeniously, Beethoven binds the sonata's four disparate movements with a common opening idea – a sort of curlicue which winds its way around one note before falling to the one below. This is such a simple motive, even calling it an "idea" is a bit grand – and yet it is enough to marry the athletic first movement to the searching second, to the playful last two. Beethoven could pull meaning out of thin air, if he put his mind to it.

The motivic unity of the movements is only one way in which Beethoven's ambition manifests in this early work. Its 25 minute length, its four movements, and the extreme brilliance of the writing set it sharply apart from anything Haydn or Mozart produced in the genre. So, too, do the symphonic proportions of the first movement, which features not only an extensive, structurally superfluous bridge passage in a minor key, but a full blown cadenza, which ought not to belong in a piano sonata, and which arrives with a big bang that temporarily blows the music off its otherwise confident path.

The Sonata Op.79 is another country entirely – highly uncharacteristically for Beethoven, it is really not an ambitious work *at all.* Written in 1809, in a relatively fallow period and one in which the piano sonata does not seem to have been foremost on his mind, this work is not a destination, but rather a very delightful rest stop. It may have been intended for children – it is sometimes called a "sonatina", and its difficulty is moderate, at least by Beethoven's formidable standards – and it is certainly child*like*, in the best sense of the word. The first movement has a harmonic surprise or two, and a couple of formal tricks up its sleeve, but it is predominantly a happy romp. The second movement is just as

atypical – a sweetly sad gondolier's song, it is a sort of travelogue, Beethoven touring Venice and recording his impressions. And the last movement, which clocks in at an almost comically short two minutes, may anticipate the great Sonata Op.109 in its opening phrase, but bears it no resemblance on any deeper level; the only ambition here is to charm, which it does, in spades.

Five years later comes the strange and magnificent Sonata Op.90. It, too, is a work that seems to be on the road somewhere, but it is an incomparably more profound affair than Op.79. This is one of just six Beethoven sonatas with only two movements (four, if one discounts the two relatively inconsequential essays that comprise Op.49); in each case, the relationship between the two movements is one of the main sources of tension and drama. With all due respect to the towering Sonata Op.111, in this particular respect, Op.90 may be the most remarkable of all. The first movement has often been likened to a conflict, perhaps between lovers, and while its turmoil is not of the explosive 'Appassionata' variety, it is indeed ever-present. Did Beethoven ever write anything with more appoggiaturas, or with more intervals that plunge downward – both musical evocations of the sigh? When the last of these brings the movement to a close, the sense of loss seems absolute, and irreversible.

With the second movement comes a miraculous turnaround, both literal and figurative. Beethoven takes the falling gesture that ends the first movement, and turns it into a rise; takes its E minor, and turns it into E major; and takes its despair, and turns it into song. If the second movement of Op.79 could have been written by an imaginary Venetian composer, the second movement of Op.90, so generous and so mellifluous, should have been written by Schubert. The warm-heartedness of this music would be wonderful on its own, but so much of its power comes from the way it emerges from the intense resignation of the first movement.

This movement is a rondo, and it features frequent and welcome reiterations of its opening material, as rondos will. But whereas the rondo is traditionally an orderly form, one that gets tied up neatly, this sonata ends less with a conclusion

than with a sort of disintegration. It's as if Beethoven doesn't fully trust the *rapprochement* of the second movement. The work's ending doesn't *relive* the pain of the first movement, but in losing its way and evaporating into thin air, it certainly acknowledges it.

So perhaps the road that Op.90 is on is the road to vulnerability, because when we reach Op.101, the very next sonata, that quality is imprinted into the music's DNA. The work comes into being with a nebulousness that is remarkably reminiscent of the ending of Op.90, despite a gap of several years. So nebulous is this opening, in fact, that it doesn't even establish the work's tonality of A major – remarkably, that does not happen with any firmness until near the end of the movement. This tonal wandering is just one manifestation of the work's overall character: boldly inventive, but suffused with fragility and uncertainty. Comparing the opening of this sonata with that of Op.2 No.3 is instructive: in the earlier sonata, the key and metre are established so effortlessly, Beethoven has energy left over to wink at the audience. Op.101, by contrast, begins with a stutter, a profound uncertainty about its way forward – which is precisely what makes that way forward so affecting.

Op.101 does eventually come into focus, of course, but only bit by bit. The second movement, a march, has all the bustle and bluster that the first movement lacks, but it is a strange sort of bustle: it ranges all over the keyboard as if it has something to prove, and its confident progress is undermined by forays into strange key areas.

And what comes next is more vulnerable still: the briefest of slow movements – a mere three lines in the score – which captures the very essence of loneliness. It looks inward with the same intensity that Op.2 No.3's slow movement looks outward, in this case without finding any answers. This music hovers around what is nominally its tonality (A minor) with even less confidence than the first movement did, and when Beethoven arrives at a half-cadence and comes to a staggering halt there, he seems to be at a total loss about how he might continue.

Well. He might *seem* to be at a loss, but this is Beethoven, after all, and therefore everything – even apparent disorientation – is a part of the master plan. What follows is a series of events both stunning and, somehow, utterly inevitable. A brief, exploratory cadenza leads, by some strange alchemy, to a return to the opening of the *first* movement, with silences now separating the phrases, and the mood therefore more questioning than ever. Never before had a piano sonata been *cyclical*, and yet this reappearance of the first movement is so exquisitely prepared, it cannot be called a surprise – it is an emotional necessity. The return, so halting at first, quickly works itself up into a lather and, bursting out at the seams, leads straight into the finale, which is exultant, nearly start to finish.

But this exultance has been seriously *earned*. Earlier sonatas such as the 'Appassionata' might be darker, but the sense of doubt, of fragility, of a devastating aloneness that has to be worked through – this is new in Op.101. Beethoven's 32 sonatas might use the same toolbox, and ask many of the same questions, but only in these late works is Beethoven's soul, bruised and bolstered by the shock of life, on full display.

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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