JONATHAN BISS

BEETHOVEN

Piano Sonatas Vol. 7
Nos 2, 17, 20 & 30

ORCHID CLASSICS

PIANO SONATAS, Vol 7
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

	Piano Sonata No.2 in A major, Op.2 No.2	
1	Allegro vivace	6.49
2	Largo appassionato	5.41
3	Scherzo. Allegretto	3.16
4	Rondo. Grazioso	6.24
	Piano Sonata No.20 in G major, Op.49 No.2	
5	Allegro ma non troppo	4.00
6	Tempo di menuetto	3.00
	Piano Sonata No.17 in D minor, Op.31 No.2 ('The Tempest')	
7	Largo. Allegro	7.45
8	Adagio	6.40
9	Allegretto	6.08
	Piano Sonata No.30 in E major, Op.109	
10	Vivace ma non troppo. Adagio espressivo	3.54
11	Prestissimo	2.20
12	Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung. Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo	12.45
	Total time	**68.45**

Jonathan Biss, *piano*

Sonatas 2, 20, 17 ('The Tempest') & 30

It is Mozart, not Beethoven, who is the most Shakespearean of composers. He has the dramatic instinct, the equal knack for comedy and tragedy (and the understanding that the two are next-door neighbours), and most of all, the razor-sharp psychological acumen that is Shakespeare's signature. Beethoven knows what people wish to be; Mozart understands what people *are*.

Be that as it may, Mozart never wrote a work rooted in Shakespeare. (Though I haven't given up hope that the manuscript to a *Much Ado About Nothing* or *Twelfth Night* opera might still turn up in some Austrian attic.) Instead, it is Beethoven's Sonata Op.31 No.2 that will forever be known as 'The Tempest'. Beethoven didn't himself give the work this title, but it has stuck, and for good reason: it does a fine job of conveying the extraordinary character of this altogether extraordinary sonata.

'The Tempest' makes its uniqueness felt immediately. Classical works, with few exceptions, begin by announcing themselves, like addicts in recovery programmes: I'm Op.2 No.2, and I'm in A major and 2/4 time. The opening of 'The Tempest', by contrast, tells the listener nothing: its first measures, a ghostly arpeggio suggesting a recitative that does not come, offer almost no clue as to the work's metre, key, or tempo. To listen to this opening is to grope in the dark: to feel unmoored.

And while the metre (*alla breve*) and key (D minor) are soon sorted out, a tempo is *never* firmly established: the movement is, in the main, a highly driven allegro, but the largo that began the work in such disorienting fashion returns again and again – more often than in any other sonata movement Beethoven wrote. And each time it does, it becomes a more deeply destabilizing force: what is at first just one arpeggio eventually becomes three, and finally expands into the lengthy recitative that seemed to be imminent the first time around. This music is determinedly, magnificently amorphous: as lacking in direction and focus as the rest of the movement is full of those qualities. The music thus

becomes a dialogue of opposites: fast and slow, determined and exhausted, certain and filled with doubt.

The subsequent two movements of 'The Tempest' are less radical but not less wonderful. The second movement, like the first, begins with an arpeggio, but this one leads not to mystery, but radiance: this movement is an oasis in B flat major -- as stable and at peace as the first movement was not. The third movement is also stable, on the surface; just beneath, it is anything but. It is a moderately-paced perpetual motion: a deliberate but constant stream of sixteenth notes that is virtually never interrupted over six minutes and hundreds of measures. But the ever-churning motion conveys not groundedness, but high anxiety. This is music in search of something, but the search provides no answers: the movement ends with the same aura of worry and sadness with which it begins. The contentment of the slow movement turns out to have been a respite, or a mirage: unlike Shakespeare's play, this *Tempest* is, indeed, a shipwreck. And further unlike Shakespeare's play (and so many of Beethoven's other sonatas), there is hardly a trace of comedy to be found.

For comedy, though, look no further than the aforementioned Op.2 No.2, a work full of both hijinks and reverence, as befits a sonata dedicated to Haydn. While it lacks the heft and grandeur of some the other earliest sonatas – certainly Op.2 No.3 and Op.7, the two sonatas that immediately follow it – Op.2 No.2 is both a constant delight and evidence of how fully formed Beethoven's musical personality was at just 26 years of age. While it begins and ends with music of great charm, in between the emotional range is vast. The impish, fits-and-starts opening turns out to be predictive of no more than one minute of the piece: soon, the staccato bird calls and brilliant scales of the first theme disappear, as the piece seems to lose confidence, to lose its way. The motion slows and, in preparation for the minor key second theme, the mood darkens. *Seriously* darkens: I struggle to think of any other early classical sonata that takes such a stark turn so quickly. This detour into melancholy lasts no longer than the mischievous opening did, and soon, high spirits are restored, but this dramatic

and abrupt shift of mood is only the first of many times this sonata explores emotional territory far removed from its playful opening. In the development, the first theme is transposed from A major to A flat – neighbours in name, distant as can be in reality – and from coy to heroic. And when the slow movement comes, Beethoven drops all traces of rambunctiousness: in its place is some of the most *pious* music he was ever to write. Juxtaposing the sacred and the profane was one of Beethoven's specialties, but this remarkable movement has a prayerful quality which is unusual for him, and deeply moving as a result. Marked *Largo appassionato* – also very unusual – the opening is a slow-moving chorale for three horns, or perhaps men's voices, with a walking bass line marking time with stoic precision. Many of Beethoven's early slow movements have a spiritual dimension – look, again, to the subsequent two sonatas – but usually they tend towards the metaphysical: they ask question upon question, most of them unanswered and in fact unanswerable. But Op.2 No.2's slow movement is not like this: it is not a dialogue with the universe, but a thanksgiving.

The last two movements are not nearly as arresting – this is early period Beethoven, after all, where the action is reliably found in the front half of the sonata. But they are a constant pleasure, particularly the last movement, which more than earns the "grazioso" in its marking: even when Op.2 No.2 is not aiming for the fences, it is a pure to joy to listen to.

The Sonata Op.109 is also not without grace, but its grace is never the point: this awe-inspiring work is all about the metaphysics. Written two years after Beethoven completed the 'Hammerklavier', a self-portrait of the composer at his most belligerent, Op.109 manages to be every bit as profound while simultaneously being surpassingly, almost unbelievably beautiful. And he achieves this in less than half the time taken by the 'Hammerklavier'; never has infinity been so economical.

In the first two movements, the economy is the point: this is Beethoven showing us sonata form stripped down to its very essence. In no more than 6 minutes,

Beethoven gives us not one, but two examples of the psychological power of this form. (By contrast, the first movement of the 'Hammerklavier' was 10 minutes long, and really just a warm-up act for the rest of the piece.)

The first movement of Op.109 is defined by the absolute opposition of its two themes: the first is flowing in tempo, concise, rhythmically and harmonically stable, possessed of an easy beauty; the second is broad, discursive, rhythmically various and in constant state of harmonic search, and hugely fragile. These musics, improbably, make perfect sense together: a further demonstration of the magic of sonata form. The second movement is even more stripped down: it is not just the shortest, but the *tersest* sonata movement Beethoven ever wrote. One idea follows another without elaboration, and when the movement comes to an end (two minutes after it started!), there is no air left in the room.

Having demonstrated – twice – how much emotional meaning can be packed into a short space, Beethoven now goes to the other extreme. In one of his greatest sets of variations (which is to say: one of the greatest sets of variations), Beethoven shows us what happens when you take a theme and explore its every crevice, its every expressive possibility. Unlike his earlier variation movements, which are primarily about embellishment, what the theme undergoes here is more like psychoanalysis; Mozart, and Shakespeare, would be proud. The theme itself is both beautiful and awe-inducing – filled with love, but with the simplicity of a hymn – and with every variation, it undergoes a dramatic transformation: it becomes first a ländler, then a sort of child's game, and then a romp.

Each of these variations finds the mood lightening and the pulse contracting; with the fourth variation, this pattern reverses, with not just the pulse but the universe itself expanding to accommodate Beethoven's ambitions. This variation, a sort of tapestry woven between three voices, is the point at which this movement goes from philosophical to cosmic: in it, and in the two

subsequent variations, Beethoven continually stretches or ignores the limitations of the instrument, using the extreme reaches of the piano, asking at times for a sonority that is enormous and enormously intense, yet free from duress.

Having said everything there is to be said about this sublime theme, Beethoven brings it back, as the piece comes full circle. It is both unchanged and utterly transformed: having been turned inside out and put under a magnifying glass, it has acquired meanings that it simply did not have the first time around. Among Beethoven's greatest gifts is his ability to conjure the infinite; he did so time and time again. But he may have never done so with as much simplicity as in Op.109; it is the most unassuming of miracles.

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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