
CHANDOS
BEETHOVEN
The Last Three Sonatas
IMOGEN COOPER
PIANO

Pencil drawing by August von Kloeber (1793 – 1864) / Collection H.C. Bodmer / Beethoven-Haus, Bonn / AKG Images, London

Ludwig van Beethoven, 1818

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827)

The Last Three Sonatas

Sonata, Op. 109 (1820) **19:32**
in E major • in E-Dur • en mi majeur
Dem Fräulein Maximiliana Brentano gewidmet

1 Vivace, ma non troppo – Adagio espressivo –
Tempo I – Adagio espressivo – Tempo I – 3:47

2 Prestissimo 2:42

3 Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung. Andante molto cantabile
ed espressivo –
Variazione I. Molto espressivo –
Variazione II. Leggiermente –
Variazione III. Allegro vivace –
Variazione IV. Etwas langsamer als das Thema. Un poco meno andante
ciò è un poco più adagio come il tema –
Variazione V. Allegro, ma non troppo –
Variazione VI. Tempo I del tema. Cantabile 13:03

	Sonata, Op. 110 (1821 – 22) in A flat major • in As-Dur • en la bemol majeur	**20:35**
4	Moderato cantabile molto espressivo	6:52
5	Allegro molto – Coda	2:18
6	Adagio ma non troppo – Recitativo. Più adagio – Andante – Adagio – Meno adagio – Adagio – Adagio ma non troppo – Klagender Gesang. Arioso dolente – Fuga. Allegro ma non troppo – L'istesso tempo di Arioso – Ermattet, klagend. Perdendo le forze, dolente – L'istesso tempo della Fuga poi a poi di nuovo vivente (L'inversione della Fuga. Die Umkehrung der Fuge) – Meno Allegro. Etwas langsamer – Tempo I	11:24

Sonata, Op. 111 (1821 – 22) **28:56**
in C minor • in c-Moll • en ut mineur
Dem Erzherzog Rudolph von Österreich gewidmet (Vienna edition; London edition dedicated to Antonie Brentano)

7 Maestoso – Allegro con brio ed appassionato – Meno allegro – Adagio – Tempo I – Meno allegro – Adagio – Tempo I – Meno allegro – Tempo I 9:54

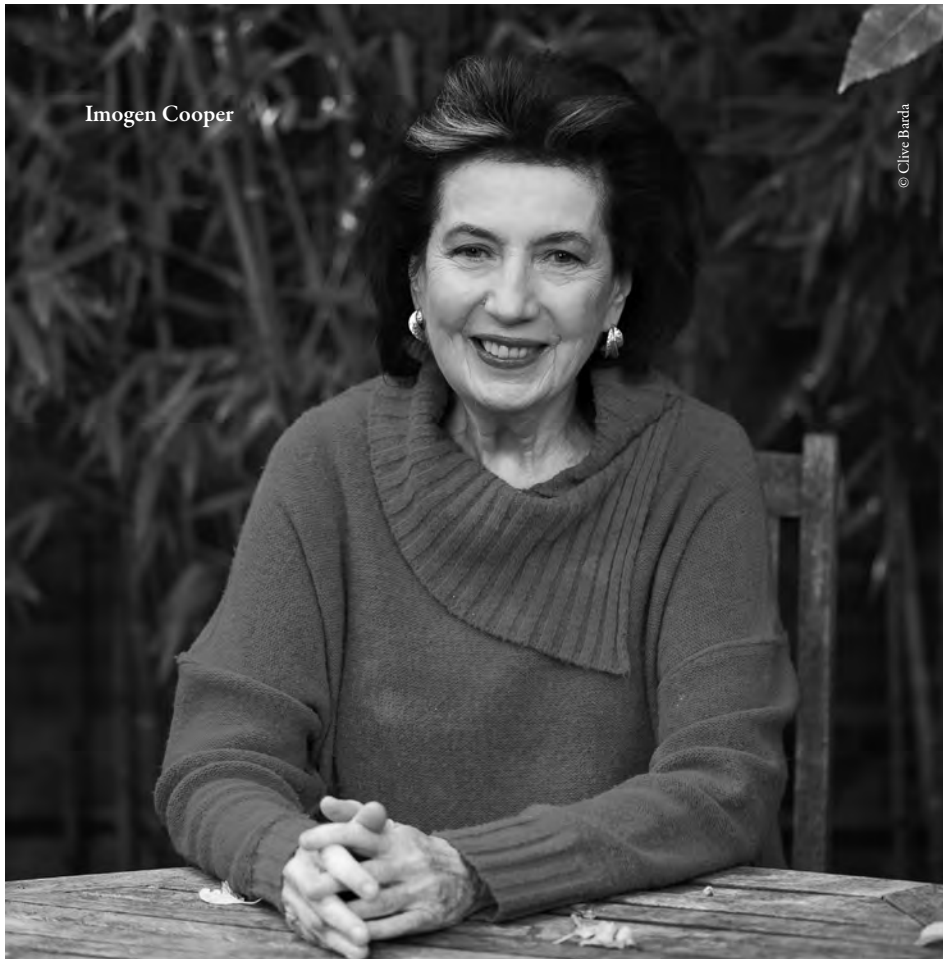
8 Arietta. Adagio molto semplice e cantabile – L'istesso tempo – L'istesso tempo 19:01

Béla Bartók (1881 – 1945)

9 **Dirge, Op. 9a No. 1, BB 58** (1909 – 10) **2:36**
from Four Dirges (*Négy siratóének*)
Adagio

TT 71:42

Imogen Cooper piano


Imogen Cooper
© Clive Barda

General background

> In late autumn [1820], when he returned from Mödling... he sat down and composed the three piano sonatas opp. 109, 110, and 111 'at a single stroke', as he expressed it.

Anton Schindler's account is, characteristically enough, palpably inaccurate. The composition of the final three piano sonatas by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770 – 1827) spanned the years 1820 – 22, and they were published in 1821, 1822, and 1823, respectively, by the Berlin- and Paris-based firm of Schlesinger. His most recent work in the genre had been the massive 'Hammerklavier' Sonata, Op. 106, of 1817 – 18, which appeared in 1819. That was also the year in which Beethoven began the 'Diabelli' Variations, Op. 120, the composition of which straddles Opp. 109 – 111, having been interrupted mainly by work on the *Missa solemnis*, also begun in 1819; the *Missa*, meanwhile, was itself variously interrupted by the composition of the three sonatas.

It is possible that the impetus for these works came from Schlesinger himself. This can be inferred from Beethoven's response on 30 April 1820 to a (lost) letter of 11 April from the publisher. Beethoven wrote,

> furthermore, I will gladly let you have new sonatas – but not at a lower price than forty ducats each. Hence a work consisting of three sonatas would cost 120 ducats.

Schlesinger responded positively the following month, though not without knocking Beethoven down to thirty ducats per sonata, a price that he grudgingly accepted on 31 May.

His April offer is nonetheless intriguing inasmuch as it projects a single three-sonata 'opus' of the conventional kind that Beethoven had abandoned after the three Op. 31 sonatas (1802, published 1803 – 04); thereafter piano sonatas appeared individually, as would these final three. All this notwithstanding, Opp. 109 – 111 are frequently understood, performed, and recorded, as here, as a trilogy of sorts, and they undoubtedly cohere aesthetically and formally in many respects: their tonic keys (E – A flat – C) stand a major third apart from one another, dividing the octave

symmetrically; both Opp. 109 and 111 conclude with variation movements; and all three evince in various ways a concern, notable in Beethoven's late music, with counterpoint and fugue. Schindler may have got his facts wrong, but his intuition was more secure when he suggested that

> those who are familiar with these three sonatas will understand what Beethoven meant by 'at a single stroke'.

Op. 109 is dedicated to Maximiliane Brentano, the daughter of Antonie, whom several scholars consider to have been Beethoven's 'Immortal Beloved'. Antonie herself received the dedication of the separately published London edition of Op. 111, while the Schlesinger edition appeared with a dedication to Beethoven's longtime patron and pupil Archduke Rudolph. Op. 110 bears no dedication.

Sonata in E major, Op. 109

Some time before 22 April 1820, Franz Oliva suggested to Beethoven in a conversation book that 'maybe you could use the little new piece in a sonata for *Schlesinger*'. Beethoven's sketches and contextual details point to the fact that 'the little new piece' can only have been what we know as the first movement of Op. 109; it must have been essentially complete by early April at the latest, well before any request for new sonatas could have been received. That it was evidently conceived as a stand-alone composition rather than as part of a larger work, let alone a three-work opus, goes a long way to accounting for many of its idiosyncratic features as the eventual first movement of a sonata.

While it may be construed along the lines of a textbook sonata form, with a discernible exposition, development, and recapitulation, those features are considerably attenuated; what is perhaps more immediately apparent to the listener is an alternation of quiet, relatively well-formed phrases, *Vivace, ma non troppo*, characterised by Lombardic (short – long) dotted rhythms (the initial phrase, with its bass octave descent and alternation of root-position and first-inversion triads, references the baroque *Romanesca* pattern), and more tempestuous improvisatory, fantasia-like material, *Adagio espressivo*, featuring wide-ranging arpeggios, octave doublings, and chromatic harmony (Beethoven himself identified the fantasia element in one of the sketches); the tempo contrast alone is highly untypical of a sonata first movement, even if the overall relaxed character can be placed in a sequence reaching back to the first movements of Op. 101 (1816) and Op. 78 (1809).

It is a property of all Beethoven's multimovement works in E (this and the piano sonatas, Op. 14 No. 1 and Op. 90, and the 'Razumovsky' String Quartet, Op. 59 No. 2) that, irrespective of the number of movements, they are 'monotonal', all movements being in E major or minor rather than any contrasting key. In Op. 109, it is the interior, second movement that provides modal contrast, exchanging the major mode of the outer movements for the minor. As in the first movement, the opening phrase (eight bars here rather than four) is based around a stepwise descent through the E octave (E – B, then A – E), the octave doubling giving the effect almost of organ pedals. The pace and drive are more characteristic of a first or final movement; the minor mode is maintained almost throughout (the secondary tonal area is B minor), the only settled major-key passages occurring in the very compressed development section and a brief moment in the transition within the recapitulation.

It thus falls to the finale, in variation form, to provide the slow movement of Op. 109. The sketches show that after composing the first movement, Beethoven returned to sustained work on the Credo of the *Missa solemnis*; then, after some desultory ideas for a second movement, he composed the variation theme. This sequence of events seems highly significant, for the variation theme and first movement are closely related to each other. The theme audibly traces a melodic arc, g sharp 1 – a sharp 1 – b 1 – a natural 1 – g sharp 1, across its sixteen bars; the very first two notes of the first movement are g sharp 1 – b 1, and the same arc, more registrally expanded, can likewise be traced across the entire movement. The relationship seems all the more meaningful in that Op. 109 is the only one of Beethoven's sets of variations to end with a literal reprise, save for some left-hand octave doublings, of its theme (did Beethoven have Bach's 'Goldberg' Variations in mind?); the sense of an ending here, not just of a movement but of an entire sonata, is remarkably profound.

Sonata in A flat major, Op. 110

If the ever-burgeoning *Missa solemnis* is the compositional backdrop to these three sonatas, Beethoven's health also had a bearing on their completion. The winter of 1820 brought rheumatic disorder, and the summer of 1821 was troubled by jaundice; it was not until the second half of that year, perhaps around August, that work commenced on Op. 110. The autograph manuscript of the whole work (there exists also a discarded

autograph of the final movement) is dated 25 December 1821, which probably marks its completion, though further corrections extended into early 1822.

Of the three sonatas, Op. 110 has the most diverse overall structure. The first movement, *Moderato cantabile molto espressivo*, follows Op. 109 in its eschewal of the usual expectations for the opening of a sonata. The second movement gives a nod to tradition in its recuperation of the scherzo-plus-trio design, though the F minor tonality, exaggerated dynamic contrasts, and extreme rhythmic disturbances impart a dark hue to any humour that might have been expected from such a piece. The frequently asserted claim that Beethoven derived some of this material from two folksongs, 'Unsa Kätz häd Kaz'ln g'habt' and 'Ich bin lüderlich, du bist lüderlich', has been discounted by more recent sketch studies.

It is questionable whether the conventional term 'third movement' is really appropriate to the remainder of this sonata, except inasmuch as what we hear is a continuous stretch of music. It is perhaps better to think in terms of two 'movements' (in the sense of differently paced units) being interleaved: something very similar would arise some years later in the slow movement of the Ninth Symphony, and it has already been suggested that the first movement of Op. 109 might be experienced similarly. In brief: three introductory bars of solemn chords lead to a 'Recitativo' in which Beethoven employs the technique of *Bebung* (a kind of keyboard vibrato) in an effort to translate the human voice into instrumental form, which in turn drew from him some of the most extreme and detailed notation anywhere in his music. This 'invocation' continues as recitative yields to an *Arioso dolente* (or 'Klagender Gesang'), which is tonally closed in A flat minor and from the concluding octaves of which a more conventionally 'pianistic' fugue subject emerges.

Just as the fugue seems to be reaching its climax, the dominant seventh of A flat resolves irregularly so as to shift the harmony toward G minor, a semitone below the tonic. It is from here that the *Arioso dolente* recommences and leads again to the resumption of the fugue, in G major and with the subject inverted, marked *poi a poi di nuovo vivente*. The A flat major tonic is eventually regained together with the subject in its original form, at the top of the texture, in a kind of apotheosis that leaves the fugal context behind.

Of all the music in these last three sonatas, it is this that most powerfully

invites a narrative or programmatic – even autobiographical – interpretation, whether one thinks in terms of a movement from despair to hope, ill health to recovery (parallels with the 'Heiliger Dankgesang' in the String Quartet in A minor, Op. 132, with its 'neue Kraft fühlend' sections, are unavoidable), or a more abstract 'darkness to light' paradigm, often associated with Beethoven's C minor – major compositions (see below). But neither should one miss the more technical subtleties: the way in which, for example, the first sixteen bars of the first movement offer a subtle pair of micro-variations of bars 1 – 4; or the close relationship between the melodic outline of these bars to the rising fourths of the fugue subject (to say nothing of their similarity to the equivalent bars of Variation 5 in Op. 109...); or the way in which the closing demisemiquaver arpeggios of the finale seem to hark back to the second micro-variation, again in demisemiquavers, at the beginning of the first movement.

Sonata in C minor, Op. 111

The composition of Op. 111, beginning in late 1821, overlapped to some extent with that of Op. 110, as can be seen from perusal of the relevant sketchbooks. The sonata was completed in early 1822, and involved the writing out of two autograph manuscripts, the earlier of which (only the first movement survives) Beethoven mistakenly gave to his copyist Wenzel Rampl, who then prepared the manuscript from which the sonata would be engraved. That Schlesinger thus first received the work in its non-final form was one complicating factor in the process of publication, which extended through 1822 to early 1823.

Beethoven could not have known, of course, that this would be the final piano sonata that he would compose. Nonetheless, there is something summative about this two-movement work, not only in relation to its two companions but in relation to his output in the genre as a whole at this stage in his career. Beethoven had composed two-movement sonatas before: Op. 90 (1814), Op. 78 (1809), Op. 54 (1804), and the two early works of Op. 49 (c. 1795 – 97, not published until 1805). And – as in Op. 109 – he had cast finales in variation form. But he had never done so in a two-movement context, which led both Schlesinger and his son Moritz (who ran the Paris office) to question whether there was in fact a third and final movement missing, variation sets being more typically encountered as interior

movements. Op. 111 starkly juxtaposes sonata and variation form – the two differently functioning but large-scale formal frameworks for so much of Beethoven's late music – movement by movement.

Summative also is the fact that Op. 111 is the last of Beethoven's extended engagements with the key of C minor, always associated with a particularly dark mood – the 'Pathétique' Sonata, Op. 13 and the Fifth Symphony, Op. 67 are the classic exemplars – and more particularly with the 'darkness to light' (the Fifth Symphony again) trajectory whereby C minor eventually yields to major. The initial minor mode is reinforced by the slow introduction (as in the 'Pathétique'), drenched in chromatic harmony and diminished-seventh intervals, characteristics that also transfer to the main theme of the *Allegro* (curiously, this theme had appeared, in F sharp minor, in the 'Kessler' sketchbook, of 1802: whether Beethoven sought it out there, or still remembered it after twenty years, or simply 'recomposed' it oblivious of its previous incarnation, cannot be known).

The transition from minor to major is already heralded in the first movement, both in the initial C major recapitulation of the second-group material (it eventually returns to C minor) and in the plagal cadences that bring the movement to its close. Thus the serene opening of the *Arietta* from which the variations flow is carefully prepared, such that it can seem more a continuation of the previous music rather than the beginning of something new.

The series of variations themselves draws upon the process of proportional diminution of note values (the sequence of time signatures – 9 / 16, 6 / 16, 12 / 32, then back to 9 / 16 – was probably unheard-of for the time) which results in a sense both of tempo acceleration and of increased content per bar as one variation succeeds another. Unlike the unbroken series of six variations in Op. 109, Beethoven here breaks the series with a passage of free material which modulates to E flat major before returning to the *Arietta* in its original melodic form though with new, variational accompaniment: this return thus tempers the 'stark juxtaposition' of forms noted above in that it takes on something of the quality of a sonata-form recapitulation following the free, 'developmental' passage: variation form accommodates sonata form, just as, in the opening of Op. 110, sonata form hosts a subtle instance of variation technique.

The final appearance of the *Arietta* (its first half only) is accompanied, first above and then below, by a continuous trill (compare

the sixth variation in Op. 109, which also exemplifies proportional diminution of note values from which the trill effectively evolves); this, together with the high register in both hands, lends an ethereal quality to the music, before its descent and close in the two-octave span below middle C. Thomas Mann's fictional musician Wendell Kretschmar, in *Doktor Faustus*, understood this as

> an end without any return. And when he said 'the sonata', he meant not only this one in C minor, but the sonata in general, as a species, as traditional art-form.

Summative indeed.

Bartók: Dirge, Op. 9a No. 1 (BB 58)

'An end without any return'; but this valedictory recording offers music beyond Op. 111. Béla Bartók (1881 – 1945) composed the Four Dirges, Op. 9a in 1909 – 10; a first, incomplete, public performance did not take place until 1917, when Ernö Dohnányi performed some of them in Budapest. In the first Dirge, *Adagio*, the repetition of melodic fragments above a gradual, partly stepwise descending series of triads comports with the dirge genre, the whole being contained within a dynamic arc from *pianissimo* to *fortissimo* and back again. The hands move apart until the closing B major harmony, with added sixth above, spans five octaves. Thus we end a semitone below the tonic of Beethoven's last sonata, although with broken rather than well-formed song: *arioso dolente*, not *arietta*. But there is something luminous, too, in this ending: the transfiguration, perhaps, of the already transfigured.

© 2026 Nicholas Marston

A note by the performer

It has taken many years for me to perceive the last three sonatas by Beethoven as the evolving journey I now feel them to be. A combination of wariness of Op. 109 and overawe of Op. 111 kept me solely concentrated on Op. 110, the which I can hardly regret. Nor do I regret thereby coming late in life to Opp. 109 and 111. Having come to see the shortcomings of my perception as surmountable, I found that the joys and riches of these wonderful works presented themselves with much more vivid colours than had I tussled with them whilst I was tussling with myself. The case was, incidentally, similar with the 'Diabelli' Variations, Op. 120, which I finally approached and embraced in my sixties, with crystal clarity of intention, and unadulterated joy.

Now, in my final year of performing, it would be hard for me to play any of the last three sonatas alone, so potent is the journey from first to last.

For me, the kernel of each work lies in its slow material – broadly, the variations from Op. 109, the *Arioso* (in both its forms) from Op. 110, and the *Arietta* from Op. 111. In these emotional centres, there is an evolution of profundity, an extraordinary variety of feeling, from the reflective, to the suffering, to the transcendent, each explored and expressed with searing veracity and human courage. The message in each case is clear, and how much clearer than speech. (Mendelssohn wrote of this phenomenon some years later: 'Music cannot be expressed in words, not because it is vague but because it is more precise than words.')

When playing, I have the distinct impression of telling a tale – except in the *Arietta* of Op. 111, when the tale is telling me... I must listen, and relay it further, I am in its hands...

And how privileged my hands feel, having wondered and wandered in the heavenly heights of the last pages of Op. 111, to travel down the keyboard and bring this astonishing last sonata, and indeed the whole body of thirty-two sonatas, to a close, with a quiet chord of C major – no long note value, no fermata.

Just silence

The Bartók dirge?
Dirge = 'a mournful song'.
A personal afterthought.

© 2026 Imogen Cooper

Regarded as one of the finest interpreters of classical and romantic repertoire, **Imogen Cooper** is internationally renowned for her virtuosity and lyricism. She has appeared with many of the world's leading orchestras, including the Berliner Philharmoniker, Wiener Philharmoniker, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Gewandhausorchester Leipzig, Budapest Festival Orchestra, and NHK Symphony Orchestra, Tokyo. In North America she has performed with the New York Philharmonic, Cleveland Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, and Boston Symphony Orchestra. She has appeared at the BBC Proms and played with all the major British orchestras, including the London Symphony Orchestra and Philharmonia Orchestra, and given solo recitals in New York, Tokyo, Paris, Vienna, Prague, and London.

Her most recent solo recording for Chandos Records, *…Le Temps perdu…*, features music by Fauré, Liszt, Ravel, and Respighi. Her discography also includes recordings of Concertos by Mozart with the Royal Northern Sinfonia and a cycle of works by Schubert for solo piano, recorded live in concert. Imogen Cooper was appointed DBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours in 2021. She has received many awards, among them the Queen's Medal for Music (2019), the Instrumentalist Award of the Royal Philharmonic Society (2008), and an Honorary Doctor of Music at the University of Exeter (1999). In 2015 she founded the Imogen Cooper Music Trust to support young pianists and give them time in an environment of peace and beauty. She has twice served as Chair of the Jury at the Leeds International Piano Competition (2021 and 2024).

Also available

CHAN 20085

Beethoven
Diabelli Variations • Bagatelles

You can purchase Chandos CDs and DVDs or download high-resolution sound files online at our website: www.chandos.net

For requests to license tracks from this CD or any other Chandos products please find application forms on the Chandos website or contact the Royalties Director, Chandos Records Ltd, direct at the address below or via e-mail at mhewett@naxosmusic.co.uk.

Chandos Records Ltd, Chandos House, 1 Commerce Park, Commerce Way, Colchester,
Essex CO2 8HX, UK.
E-mail: enquiries@chandos.net Telephone: + 44 (0)1206 225 200 Fax: + 44 (0)1206 225 201

 www.facebook.com/chandosrecords  www.x.com/chandosrecords

Chandos 24-bit / 96 kHz recording
The Chandos policy of being at the forefront of technology is now further advanced by the use of 24-bit / 96 kHz recording. In order to reproduce the original waveform as closely as possible we use 24-bit, as it has a dynamic range that is up to 48 dB greater and up to 256 times the resolution of standard 16-bit recordings. Recording at the 44.1 kHz sample rate, the highest frequencies generated will be around 22 kHz. That is 2 kHz higher than can be heard by the typical human with excellent hearing. However, we use the 96 kHz sample rate, which will translate into the potentially highest frequency of 48 kHz. The theory is that, even though we do not hear it, audio energy exists, and it has an effect on the lower frequencies which we do hear, the higher sample rate thereby reproducing a better sound.

Steinway Model D Concert Grand Piano (serial no. 622 236) courtesy of Snape Maltings
Piano technicians: Ulrich Gerhartz, Steinway & Sons, London (1 September), Graham Cooke (2 – 4 September), and Alexander Warcada-Wood, Alex Wood Piano Services (2 and 5 September)

Recording producer Rachel Smith
Sound engineer Jonathan Cooper
Editor Rachel Smith
A & R administrator Karen Marchlik
Recording venue Concert Hall, Snape Maltings, Suffolk; 2 – 5 September 2025
Front cover Photograph of Imogen Cooper © Clive Barda
Design and typesetting Cass Cassidy
Booklet editor Finn S. Gundersen
Publishers G. Henle Verlag, München (Beethoven), Rózsavölgyi és Társa, Budapest / Dover Publications, New York (Bartók)
UPC 0095115236222
℗ 2026 Chandos Records Ltd
© 2026 Chandos Records Ltd
Chandos Records Ltd, Colchester, Essex CO2 8HX, England
Country of origin UK


© Clive Barda
Imogen Cooper

CHANDOS DIGITAL CHAN 20362

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

The Last Three Sonatas

1-3	SONATA, OP. 109 (1820) in E major • in E-Dur • en mi majeur	19:32
4-6	SONATA, OP. 110 (1821–22) in A flat major • in As-Dur • en la bemol majeur	20:35
7-8	SONATA, OP. 111 (1821–22) in C minor • in c-Moll • en ut mineur	28:56

BÉLA BARTÓK (1881–1945)

9	DIRGE, OP. 9A NO. 1, BB 58 (1909–10) from Four Dirges (*Négy siratóének*)	2:36
		TT 71:42

IMOGEN COOPER PIANO

℗ 2026 Chandos Records Ltd
© 2026 Chandos Records Ltd

Chandos Records Ltd, Chandos House,
1 Commerce Park, Colchester,
Essex CO2 8HX, UK.
enquiries@chandos.net

Contact:
Naxos Deutschland Musik & Video
Vertriebs-GmbH, Gruber Str. 46b,
DE-85586 Poing, Germany.
info@naxos.de

BEETHOVEN: THE LAST THREE SONATAS – Cooper

CHANDOS CHAN 20362

CHANDOS CHAN 20362