JONATHAN BISS

BEETHOVEN

Piano Sonatas Vol. 8
Nos 8, 10, 22 & 31

ORCHID CLASSICS

PIANO SONATAS, Vol 8
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

	Piano Sonata No.8 in C minor, Op.13 ('Pathétique')	
1	Grave – Allegro di molto e con brio	8.27
2	Adagio cantabile	4.42
3	Rondo – Allegro	4.43
	Piano Sonata No.10 in G major, Op.14 No.2	
4	Allegro	7.10
5	Andante	4.42
6	Scherzo – Allegro assai	3.27
	Piano Sonata No.22 in F major, Op.54	
7	In tempo d'un menuetto	5.08
8	Allegretto – Più allegro	5.35
	Piano Sonata No.31 in A flat major, Op.110	
9	Moderato cantabile molto espressivo	6.44
10	Allegro molto	2.14
11	Adagio ma non troppo – Fuga: Allegro ma non troppo	10.46
	Total time	**63.43**

Jonathan Biss, *piano*

Sonatas 8 ('Pathétique'), 10, 22 & 31

When I was deciding how I would divide Beethoven's 32 sonatas into nine volumes, I had really just one priority: to showcase Beethoven's staggering range – of expression and of invention – as much as possible on each of them. This was not difficult to achieve: with Beethoven's restless imagination, nearly every sonata becomes an exploration of uncharted territory.

Still, from volume to volume, certain themes emerge. F minor drama runs through Volume 4: barely contained in Op.2 No.1, it is furiously unleashed in the 'Appassionata'. On Volume 7, Beethoven's Shakespearean way of spinning a story is hardly confined to the 'The Tempest': Op.109 is, if anything, a richer, more riveting narrative.

Here, on Volume 8, it is the merging of disparate elements in a single work that rules the day. The C minor Sonata Op.13, known as the 'Pathetique' – a name that tells us virtually nothing about the piece but at least does it no violence – is the first of Beethoven's sonatas to truly break ground by means of its structure. The main body of the first movement is a restless, agitated whirlwind: each of its three themes hurtles upward, and there is not a moment of it where either the tension or the propulsion abates. This music is preceded by a slow introduction which, while no less intense than the music that follows it, is as deliberate as the allegro is headlong.

There is nothing unprecedented in that: Haydn and Mozart wrote many fast movements with slow introductions. What makes the 'Pathetique' such a formal revelation is this slow introduction's refusal to go away. Reappearing at two critical moments – first at the juncture between the exposition and the development, then again before the coda – it brings the movement's motion to a screeching halt without providing the slightest respite. Quite the contrary: because these appearances of the introduction are so jarringly out of place – the movement has long since been "introduced" – they disorient and upset the listener. The classical period, for all the emotional depth and psychological

acuity and sheer beauty of its greatest music, is in large part about order – about things being in their proper place, serving their proper function. This was not to be Beethoven's *modus operandi*, and with the first movement of the 'Pathetique', we see for the first time the full extent of his disdain for existing rules. Beethoven makes (and then, usually, breaks) his own rules, and in the 'Pathetique', these rules produce music of fury and chaos.

Fury and chaos could not be further away from the Sonata in G major, Op.14 No.2. It is a modest but unfailingly lovely work: modesty and loveliness are qualities not often found in Beethoven's sonatas, and their combined presence here is not a coincidence. Freed from the need to barnstorm and break down barriers, Beethoven can devote himself to simpler pleasures: the unhurried, *dolce* lyricism of the first movement, the sly but gentle humour of the subsequent two.

But even if this sonata weighs in on the lighter side, it is still surprising in that its constituent parts show up in places you wouldn't expect them to. In the middle of Op.14 No.2 is not the usual slow movement, but a set of three variations on a theme that is so cheeky, it is essentially a wink in musical form. And the last movement is not a rondo, but a scherzo – a form almost always found on the inside of a sonata, rather than at the end. Beethoven is by no means reaching for the rafters with this small, enormously endearing work, but he is still busying himself rearranging sonata furniture.

It is hard to say *what* Beethoven was doing when he wrote the Sonata in F major, Op.54. It is without question the oddest of the 32 sonatas, and the one that most exemplifies the theme of this album: the way in which its events follow one another seems downright bonkers at times. Beethoven marks the first of this sonata's two movements "In tempo d'un menuetto", presumably because "Menuetto twice interrupted by a herd of stampeding elephants" felt cumbersome to him. The main, menuet sections of this movement are courtly and *grazioso*, if a bit foursquare, each phrase coming to a hard stop instead of dovetailing into the next; in between come torrents of *forte* octaves in both

hands, with accent after accent adding to the (mock, I think?) belligerence of the music. It makes no sense, the merging of these musics, but it is oddly compelling: the coda that follows the third, wildly embellished appearance of the menuet has a depth and a nostalgia that one could never have predicted listening to the alternately stilted and ridiculous material that preceded it.

And then, as if to apologize to the listener for the whiplash the first movement induced, Beethoven follows it with an Allegretto whose steady sixteenth note motion never once wavers. So the sonata as a whole is as much a meeting of opposites as the first movement was unto itself. A good composer would have rejected this work's shape as absurd; it took a great one to recognize the strength in its strangeness.

So, the unexpected way in which different material coexists in the 'Pathetique' creates heightened tension; in Op.14 No.2 it brings comfort; in Op.54 it inspires snort-laughter. In the Sonata Op.110, the astonishing sequence of events Beethoven puts forth leaves the listener in a state of awe. In none of the other 31 piano sonatas does Beethoven cover as much emotional territory: it goes from the absolute depths of despair to utter euphoria. Playing Op.110, or even listening to it, is an experience like none other: devastating and life-affirming in equal measure.

Formally, the Sonata Op.110 is a bit of a paradox: it is on the one hand a wild, woolly journey – its last movement has so many component parts, I'm not entirely sure it is properly described as a single movement. But in spite of this, it is also one of the most tightly-constructed works Beethoven ever wrote. Just nineteen minutes long, it is *unbelievably* compact, given its emotional richness, and its philosophical opening idea acts as the work's thesis statement, permeating the work, and reaching its apotheosis in its final moments.

Op.110's structure is not its only paradox. While much of its material is lofty, even exalted, it has moments of extreme earthiness – some of the second movement's themes were allegedly familiar to Beethoven from his time spent

in Viennese beer halls. And while the sonata is forward-looking and was a tremendous source of inspiration to 19th century composers, it also has a certain retrospective quality. There are numerous links to the preceding (and equally awe-inspiring) sonata Op.109: their opening ideas are close cousins, and when Op.110 reaches its most desperately dark moment, it does so with a direct quotation of Op.109. And in many ways, Beethoven is reaching even further into the past with this work: its sprawling final movement, composed of recitatives, ariosos, and fugues, is really the world of the baroque, viewed from a one hundred year distance.

"Bad composers borrow; great composers steal," Stravinsky is alleged to have said. While the forms of this last movement may come from Bach, Beethoven's theft of them is as undeniable as it is glorious – the forms themselves become almost incidental, a backdrop against which Beethoven can apply his profoundest thoughts and titanic personality. Beethoven takes one of the movement's ideas and literally turns it on its head – the second fugue's subject is a literal inversion of the first's – and this is a helpful metaphor for what he does to the baroque forms. Bach may have loved the recitative, but he would never have repeated the same note 27 (!) times in a row – a desperate, obsessive, cry into the void. He may have written hundreds of magnificent ariosos, but he would never have incorporated a massive crescendo, followed by a sudden *subito piano* – a musical representation of a dashed hope – into one. And he may have been the greatest master of the fugue of all time, but his fugues were ends unto themselves: they did not develop, and grow, and strive, until they turned into something else entirely – into outpourings of pure melody (pure spirit, really) at the extreme upper end of the piano, the accompanying left hand at the extreme lower end (because the piano was never, ever enough for Beethoven – he wants more, bigger, everything). Bach is the template here, but the music is Beethoven at his most sublime: at his most Beethoven. Having stolen from the very best, Beethoven gives his very best: Op.110 is a journey into the infinite.

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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