**JONATHAN BISS**

# BEETHOVEN

Piano Sonatas Vol. 2
Nos 4,14 & 24

ORCHID CLASSICS

**PIANO SONATAS, Vol 2**
**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

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| | Piano Sonata No.4 in E flat major, Op.7 | |
| 1 | Allegro molto e con brio | 7.45 |
| 2 | Largo, con gran espressione | 8.11 |
| 3 | Allegro | 5.08 |
| 4 | Rondo: Poco allegretto e grazioso | 6.55 |
| | Piano Sonata No.14 in C sharp minor ('Moonlight'), Op.27 | |
| 5 | Adagio sostenuto | 5.07 |
| 6 | Allegretto | 2.05 |
| 7 | Presto agitato | 7.16 |
| 8 | Fantasy in G minor, Op.77 | 9.09 |
| | Piano Sonata No.24 in F sharp major ('Funeral March'), Op.78 | |
| 9 | Adagio cantabile – Allegro ma non troppo | 7.04 |
| 10 | Allegro vivace | 2.39 |
| | **Total time** | **61.25** |

Jonathan Biss, *piano*

**Sonatas 4, 14 ('Moonlight'), 24, Fantasy in G minor**

What is it that we talk about when we talk about The Beethoven Sonatas? About The Sonata Form? These questions (*pace* Raymond Carver) often occurred to me as I prepared to make this album. Other than their determination to confound every expectation (and, of course, their greatness, and the bloody-mindedness of their author), is there any common thread running through these works? Together they demonstrate that the form of the sonata – the idea of the sonata – is large and mutable enough to accommodate history's most restless and relentless musical imagination, over and over again, no matter his mood or his priorities of the moment.

In the thrilling Sonata, Op.7, Beethoven's first priority is bigness: this sonata alone gives the lie to the notion that his early works are less grandly conceived, or spiritually minded, than his later ones. In length – no sonata, save the 'Hammerklavier', is longer – in brilliance, and in its concerns, it is of a scope that is unprecedented for a sonata; few symphonies composed by that time are as long or as ambitious. Its first movement does not begin so much as spring into being, the bass pulsating beneath a two-note declamation. This motive is emblematic of the movement in that it is memorable less for its originality or its beauty than for its verve and its drive. Even in its most lyrical moments this movement retains a bubbling-over quality – despite its grand proportions, it never for a moment loses its buoyancy. The enormous pleasure this music brings comes from the power of Beethoven's enormous personality at its most exultant.

When the second movement arrives, Beethoven deploys the whole of this personality in an utterly different direction, as the physical gives way to the metaphysical: this music is one of Beethoven's earliest (and already breathtaking) surveys of the cosmos. Where the first movement is all certainty, the second is essentially a series of unanswered (perhaps unanswerable) questions: even in moments of harmonic resolution, this music is filled with mystery. But while the movement is filled with and shaped by its silences – they are almost more meaningful than the notes that surround them – it is somehow,

miraculously, seamless; until its final moments, it does not allow the listener to exhale fully.

The final two movements are on the surface more conventional – the third a minuet, the fourth a *grazioso* rondo. But just when we feel sure the work's drama is behind us, Beethoven pulls another trick from his sleeve, as the rondo's central episode, in a fist-shaking C minor, reappears, transformed, in a long coda – an extended, affecting, lyrical farewell. Apparently as early as 1797, the role of the sonata finale was on Beethoven's mind: he ultimately shifted the centre of gravity from the first half of the work to its conclusion, and Op.7 is a first, tentative step along that path.

That this work and Op.27 No.2 (the ill-nicknamed 'Moonlight') are both sonatas seems roughly as probable as a St Bernard and a dachshund both being dogs: in shape, size and character they have nothing in common with one another. If confounding expectations is a central theme of the Beethoven sonatas, Op.27 No.2 is most confounding of all – its first movement is perhaps the most surreal, suspended rumination Beethoven ever wrote. In this movement, the building-blocks are not the point any more. (And how Beethoven loved building blocks!) Not that it has no structure – if you squint, you can see a sonata form – but the essence of this movement is surely not its architecture, but its atmosphere. That atmosphere – tightly coiled yet spacious, eerily still but absolutely not peaceful – is so extraordinary, it is simply one of those pieces one hears once and then never forgets. After a wisp of a second movement – for all its charm, it has a kind of neutrality about it which is probably necessary given what has just elapsed – comes a finale as unrelenting and remorseless as the first movement is ambiguous. Here again is a new conception of the sonata finale – a barnstorming answer to every question posed earlier in the piece. An uninhibited expression of everything that is reined in previously, this movement is the work's terrifying id.

Eight years and a whole universe separate Op.27 No.2 from Op.78. Nothing

in this gem of a work – a special favourite of Beethoven – is normal. Not the number of movements – two, placing it in the company of only a handful of the sonatas. Not its proportions – save for the heart-stopping four-bar phrase which opens the work, it contains no slow music. Certainly not the key – F sharp major, the porcupine of tonalities. And yet, the predominant impression it leaves is not of awkwardness, or even strangeness, but of how very beautiful it is. Its warmth and generosity are all the more moving in light of how effortful composition was for Beethoven at the time. Beset with personal difficulties and reaching for a new style, he wrote only four piano sonatas in the decade this work comes in the middle of. But as he took baby steps to the future, certain jewels emerged, and this sonata is one of them. In its first movement, all of F sharp major's edges – all the porcupine's quills – have been smoothed, and what emerges is one of the composer's most mellifluous and songlike creations. The edges come back with a vengeance in the second movement, which is rowdy and happily absurd. Beethoven's sense of humour could on occasion be witty and refined, but here it is earthy, tongue not in cheek but sticking belligerently out at the earnest fellow who wrote the first movement – yet another view of the sonata's last movement in relation to what precedes it.

Appended to this sonata – and this album – is a curio: the Fantasy, Op.77. If it is, in fact, merely one of Beethoven's renowned improvisations, no one knows why he elected to write it, and none of the others, down. The most compelling theory is that it was intended as a companion to the sonata whose opus number immediately follows it: this would explain the otherwise inexplicable 'No.2' which appears on the manuscript of the sonata. The theory is further supported by the B major which closes the Fantasy, and the F sharp major which is the sonata's only tonality – both unique in Beethoven's output and altogether unusual, but closely related to one another. At any rate, the Fantasy is, in its own loony way, a masterpiece, filled with the taut, wiry energy that is among Beethoven's hallmarks, but totally lacking in the development and rigour that are in some of his others.

And even in this work – one so freewheeling that we ought to have no

expectations for it at all – Beethoven manages to confound. For many minutes, the Fantasy seems to be merely an 'idea parade' – they go as fast as they come, without elaboration, as if the possibility of exploring one motive could never be as entertaining as looking for the next one. Just when this seems sure to be the nature of the entire piece, he lands on a theme, and then absolutely fixates on it, devoting the second half of the work exclusively to a set of variations on it. And what a theme! Entirely rhythmically square, and remarkable in no way that could be identified, it is somehow deeply touching – a premonition of the Ode to Joy. And it is all the more so for being impossible to see coming. Of course the element of surprise is not all that keeps us listening to Beethoven – if the ideas themselves weren't extraordinary, if his personality weren't arresting, we would simply ignore them. But it is worth stopping to notice how many times Beethoven reinvented the wheel – how rarely he used one of his previous works (or anyone else's) as the model for the next one. With virtually every piece he wrote, he challenged himself, and us, to hear music anew. When we talk about The Beethoven Sonatas we talk about Everything.

**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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