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CLASSICS

Beethoven

Piano Sonatas
Opus 31, Nos 1, 2 and 3

Marios Papadopoulos Piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Piano Sonatas

Opus 31, Nos 1, 2 and 3

Sonata No. 16 in G major, Op. 31, No. 1

[1]	<i>I. Allegro vivace</i>	7.41
[2]	<i>II. Adagio grazioso</i>	2.40
[3]	<i>III. Rondo: Allegretto</i>	7.57

Sonata No. 17 in D minor, Op. 31, No. 2 'Tempest'

[4]	<i>I. Largo – Allegro</i>	9.09
[5]	<i>II. Adagio</i>	10.01
[6]	<i>III. Allegretto</i>	7.02

Sonata No. 18 in E flat major, Op. 31, No. 3 'The Hunt'

[7]	<i>I. Allegro</i>	9.20
[8]	<i>II. Scherzo: Allegretto vivace</i>	4.47
[9]	<i>III. Menuetto: Moderato e grazioso</i>	5.38
[10]	<i>IV. Presto con fuoco</i>	5.22

Total playing time 119.37

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Given Beethoven's emotional turmoil in the first two years of the 19th century with his dawning realisation that his encroaching deafness was incurable, it's possible that the second of his next trio of sonatas, the D minor 'Tempest' Op. 31 No. 2 was just as natural a reaction to his condition as was his bitter writing in his '*Heiligenstadt Testament*' on 6 October 1802.

But if so, how does one explain the calmer, even comic first and third sonatas flanking 'The Tempest' in the Op. 31 set, which were eventually published in 1804 (the first two having already been published together the previous year)? Most probably, all three sonatas were already completed before he committed to paper his '*Heiligenstadt Testament*', while he was sojourning in the Austrian village on the advice of his doctor during the summer of 1802. Yet Beethoven's Op. 31 set is commonly regarded as the first *real* fruits of his bold undertaking of forging a 'new way' and thus mark the start of Beethoven's 'middle period.'

Playfully, Beethoven opens his G major Sonata with an unusual chord, with the right hand entering an upbeat before the left hand. After a skittish semiquaver descent, there's a dotted rise and fall (again syncopated, with the right hand just before the left) which is repeated three times and topped by three crisp *staccato* chords. The whole process is repeated a tone lower before running semiquavers take over. A reprise of both ushers in the second theme, in B major, more songful but with a little semiquaver descent to end, before the left hand takes over. The development riffs on the initial theme before a recapitulation of sorts, and a surprise to end, as the smooth syncopated pattern seems to presage a *fortissimo* close but pulls the rug away at the very end, closing quietly.

By far the longest movement is the C major, aria-like *Adagio grazioso*. The opening right hand trill leads to a delicate melody accompanied by a gentle quaver pulse. When the left hand takes the theme the right hand takes the opportunity to spiral away in gossamer ornamentation, growing elaborately throughout the movement.

Time seems to stand still through the various treatments Beethoven conjures, but eventually, with a semiquaver ascent, the movement ends in rapt contemplation. The finale is in *rondo* form, albeit couched in terms of a rather relaxed *Allegretto*. Again the left hand takes up the theme after the initial presentation by the right hand, which now adds a triplet accompaniment. Various episodes separate the returning theme, and eventually – twice – the music slows briefly to *Adagio*, before melting into the *Presto coda*, where Beethoven uses a similar ploy to his ending of the first movement: building to a *fortissimo* climax of chords, which quickly evaporate away to the *pianissimo* end.

The second of Beethoven's Op. 31 is saddled with its nickname, 'The Tempest'. The story goes that years later Beethoven was asked by his secretary, Anton Schindler, what the D minor Sonata meant, and Beethoven – irascible as always – replied that he only need look to Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Various attempts to trace vestiges of Shakespeare's plotline in the music are mere speculation (for example, Beethoven seeing himself as Prospero, marooned from mankind with only his own (albeit phenomenal) powers to sustain him). Yet much of the music's stormy mood and the force with which Beethoven deploys it certainly makes sense of the epithet, as if harking back three decades to the Germanic works, both literary and musical, collectively known as '*Sturm und Drang*' – 'storm and stress' – epitomising their emotional and romantic preoccupations. The opening movement pits two separate moods against one another: the arpeggiated chord then two crotchets and a minim of the *Largo*, answered by agitated stepwise descending quavers for just three-and-a-half bars of the *Allegro*. Back comes the *Largo* for another bar-and-a-half, before the *Allegro*, which this time gains tighter control with more multi-directional quaver phrases devolving into left hand triplets over which the right hand picks its slower stepwise theme: this A minor passage replacing the expected 'proper' second theme in the major. The exposition ends with long chords which melt, seamlessly, back into the *Largo* for the expected repeat. After the second hearing,

these long chords again slip back into *Largo*, presaging the *Allegro* development. Here the stepwise theme, based on the notes of the preceding *Largo's* arpeggiated chord, is given in the left hand under furious triplets, before both hands settle back to running quavers. The music calms itself for a return of the *Largo*, heralding the recapitulation, which seems no more than an echo from a distant place (Beethoven is reported to have said 'from a vault'). Hence there can be little surprise that, despite the *Allegro's* finest last efforts, the music rumbles away down the keyboard to the closing quiet chords.

The central *Adagio* is simpler in form, basically sonata form but without development, so that the exposition runs straight into the recapitulation, albeit with elaborate decoration of the main theme. In B flat major, and again starting with an arpeggiated chord, this is more unruffled in mood, although a low recurring tattoo-like figure that heralds and accompanies the second subject reminds us of the drama that has gone before and offers a premonition of what is to follow. The final *Allegretto* follows the *moto perpetuo* style adopted in Beethoven's influential Op. 26 Sonata, but here encompassed within sonata structure. The story goes, as told by Carl Czerny, that Beethoven heard galloping horses outside his window in Heiligenstadt, which gave him the idea for the insistent rhythmic metre of the movement. But this is not triumphant battle charging, rather an escaped fugitive (we are, of course, back in D minor), fleeing fate (for which, perhaps, read deafness?). Thus, at the end, there are no victory cries, but a *diminuendo*, descending to a bottom D, as if the horses have just disappeared from view and they are still galloping hell-for-leather somewhere out of earshot.

Turning to the third and final sonata of the set, Beethoven returns to his mercurial side, the score littered with a plethora of sudden loud injunctions – *fortissimos* and *sforzandos* – and just as many sudden drops to *piano*. Rhythmically things seem out of kilter: the constant up-beat accents or off-beat rejoinders which are common to the movements; and harmonically the work begins enigmatically, with the first

seven bars assiduously refusing to give away any hint of the home key. That key – E flat major – it should be remembered would become the heroic key of the 'Eroica' Symphony, which was only a couple of years away, but here it forms the backdrop to perhaps Beethoven's most quirky sonata. Written during the summer of 1802 in the country town of Heiligenstadt which probably (as Thayer suggests) gave him far too few distractions to offset him thinking about his deafness, it was the last piano sonata he wrote in four movements, apart from the '*Hammerklavier*', 16 years later. With the harmonic sleight of hand at the very start making it feel as if the performer has started in the middle of the music by mistake, the movement unfolds with the opening first theme (with a built-in ebbing and flowing feeling) contrasted with the rippling nature of the second theme's accompaniment.

The downright scurrilous *Scherzo* which follows, is actually in sonata form, defying normal *scherzo* form by ignoring the usual imperative for a contrasting *trio* section. With the constant semiquaver motion characterising both themes (apart from the first theme's quieter falling phrases and their syncopated tattoo-like corollaries), and the sudden *fortissimo* that attempt (but fail) to interrupt the flow of the second theme, this is irreverent music. Calmer repose is found in the *Menuet* which, given the nature of the other movements, takes the place of the slow movement. Simple in form, the music flows in the outer minuet sections, with the *trio* plainer still, chordal, almost to the point of somnolence, with loud outbursts that sound rather forced.

It is left to the rollicking finale, with its triplet quaver opening accompaniment, to drag the audience back to consciousness. The second subject is particularly forceful, and here Beethoven is surely following Mozart in his hunting music (think of Mozart's horn concerto hunting-style finales, mostly couched in the same key). Perhaps Beethoven witnessed a hunt in Heiligenstadt? This music that is, in essence, a *perpetuum mobile*, apart from the final slowing at the end, before the flashy *coda*.





Marios Papadopoulos

Marios Papadopoulos is Founder and Music Director of the Oxford Philharmonic Orchestra. Described by *The Times* at his 1975 piano recital debut as having 'all the attributes of one of the world's greatest players', Papadopoulos has gone on to enjoy an international career both as pianist and conductor. He has appeared as soloist with, and conducted many of the world's greatest orchestras and has worked with a host of eminent musicians including Vladimir Ashkenazy, Anne-Sophie Mutter, Janine Jansen, Evgeny Kissin, Maxim Vengerov, Renée Fleming, Martha Argerich and Lang Lang. A great exponent of the German Classical repertoire, Papadopoulos has directed from the keyboard the complete cycle of all the Mozart and Beethoven Piano Concertos and has conducted all nine Beethoven Symphonies on three separate occasions.

A prolific recording artist, Papadopoulos's catalogue includes his critically acclaimed Beethoven sonatas, set on a level with Schnabel, Brendel, Barenboim and Wilhelm Kempff (Daily Telegraph, Classic FM Magazine Critics' Choice), performances of Stravinsky's Concerto for Piano and Wind with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (Hyperion), works by Mozart, Mussorgsky, César Franck, the 24 Preludes and Fugues by Shostakovich and new recordings of the Brahms and Sibelius violin concertos, conducting the Oxford Philharmonic with Maxim Vengerov as soloist. As a pianist, he and Vengerov have recorded the complete Brahms violin sonatas and also performed these in a recital at Vienna's Musikverein. In 2020, Papadopoulos released two new recordings on the Oxford Philharmonic Orchestra record label: Classical Favourites and Piano Favourites, featuring well-known works by Liszt, Chopin, Rachmaninov and more.

In the summer of 2021, Papadopoulos published his first book – a memoir titled *Beyond Dreams and Aspirations: My Journey to Oxford* which charts his early career, the creation of the Oxford Philharmonic Orchestra, and his thoughts on musical interpretation. Marios Papadopoulos was awarded an MBE in the Queen's 2014 New Year's Honours List for services to music in Oxford.

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‘... the many years of experience are almost palpably evident in his latest recording. He finds all the grace and playfulness of Opus 31 No. 1... Everything has time to breathe and tell; this is supremely civilized Beethoven.’

Bryce Morrison, The Art of Pianists

‘[Marios Papadopoulos] is clearly a pianist of distinction. His approach to these sublime works is leisurely to say the least, but what is more convincing is his ability to sustain a level of intensity in the slow movements. His exposition of the opening movement of 109, for example, is quite masterly in its understatement... there is much impressive playing in this recommendable performance.’

BBC Music Magazine

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