JONATHAN BISS

BEETHOVEN

Piano Sonatas Vol. 6
Nos 9, 13 & 29

ORCHID CLASSICS

PIANO SONATAS, Vol 6
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

	Piano Sonata No.9 in E major, Op.14 No.1	
1	Allegro	6.29
2	Allegretto	3.37
3	Rondo. Allegro comodo	3.10
	Piano Sonata No.13 in E flat major, Op.27 No.1 ('Sonata quasi una fantasia')	
4	Andante	4.28
5	Allegro molto e vivace	1.55
6	Adagio con espressione	2.22
7	Allegro vivace	5.19
	Piano Sonata No.29 in B flat major, Op.106 ('Hammerklavier')	
8	Allegro	10.51
9	Scherzo. Assai vivace	2.49
10	Adagio sostenuto	15.32
11	Largo. Allegro risoluto	12.14
	Total time	**68.48**

Jonathan Biss, *piano*

Sonatas 9,13 & 29 ('Hammerklavier')

The 'Hammerklavier' Sonata is impossible.

I refer not to its technical difficulty, though that would be true enough: even two centuries later – after Brahms, Alkan, Ligeti, and Rachmaninoff, to toggle between the sublime, the less sublime, and the ridiculous – the positions that the 'Hammerklavier' forces the pianist's hands into still seem perverse.

But the physical demands of this work, punishing as they are, are ultimately beside the point: it is the very *existence* of the 'Hammerklavier' that is impossible. Beginning and ending with gestures of stubborn defiance, in between, it doesn't so much break with precedent as simply ignore it. It is a psychodrama of behemoth proportions that absolutely demands your attention without making the minutest play for your affection; it is Beethoven at his grittiest, and most devastating.

Ignoring precedent is an area in which Beethoven already had decades of experience when he wrote the 'Hammerklavier'. (The two other sonatas on this album, in spite of being among the slenderest of the early period, provide ample evidence of this: the first is orchestrated so much more like a string quartet than a piano sonata that Beethoven eventually went ahead and turned it into one. And the second, given the title 'Sonata quasi una Fantasia', blurs the line between the two genres, and does away with the lines between its own movements entirely – sections of implacable serenity are interrupted by music of enormous drive and intensity, and vice versa. This gives the entire work an improvisatory feel which is entirely new in a classical sonata.)

But even by Beethoven's own standards, the 'Hammerklavier' is a brave new world. Its length – anywhere between 40 minutes and...much longer, depending on one's commitment to realizing Beethoven's deranged but thrilling metronome markings – separates it instantly from the other 31 sonatas. Beethoven was a composer of immense ambition, and this ambition manifests in his piano sonatas as much as in any other genre, but he was no maximalist. The emotional scope of these works is achieved through a variety of means, but length is not one of them. The 'Hammerklavier' aside, none of Beethoven's

sonatas takes 30 minutes to play; the 'Hammerklavier's' last two movements, linked together, are themselves nearly that long.

Its length can be misleading, however: this sonata is neither spacious nor valedictory. Schumann used the phrase "heavenly length" to describe Schubert's epically scaled 9th symphony; he would not have been tempted to use it for the 'Hammerklavier'. It is generously proportioned, but it is rarely, if ever, serene. Instead, the 'Hammerklavier' is as long as it is because it is constantly bursting at the seams: its emotional intensity cannot be contained, and thus it spills over, everywhere.

That spillover – that sense of the music being uncontainable – begins at the beginning: the opening phrase is two upward salvos, featuring enormous leaps, spanning virtually the entire keyboard. Not only does this motive announce the work's wild ambition, it establishes the movement's character, which is somehow simultaneously magisterial and frenetic. That is a neat trick, and one that Beethoven improbably manages to sustain for the duration of the movement. The grandeur of the movement is undeniable: never before or after this work did Beethoven use the piano so orchestrally. Again and again, he asks the pianist's two hands to cover the piano's six octaves all at once. He asks – explicitly, through dynamic markings, and implicitly, through the music itself – for the pianist to make a sound that is broader and brawnier than the instrument wants to make. And when he turns down the volume, as he does in the flighty second theme, or in the somewhat neurotic third, or at the start of the development's fugato, one does not need a wild imagination to hear individual instruments – darting woodwinds, muted strings.

But this orchestral grandeur is undercut (or, depending on how one looks at it, balanced) by a nearly unrelenting propulsion. Particularly if one approximates Beethoven's perilous metronome marking, the movement's progress is not measured but headlong. More vital still to the opening movement's frenetic character is its harmonic strangeness: in brief, its heroic B flat major is repeatedly

threatened by incursions of B major and minor. This juxtaposition of B flat and B permeates the entire sonata, and if the spelling of those notes makes it sound like a friendly meeting of neighbours, please know that it is not: sometimes the neighbour really *is* an axe murderer. An unfettered B flat major might sound majestic, but each intrusion of B – and the fixation on the interval of the half-step it brings with it – makes the movement as a whole sound more shifty, unanchored. The movement ends in wild B flat major triumph, but the sense of danger remains.

Beethoven being Beethoven, this immense and tumultuous opening movement is followed by a scherzo, in the most literal sense: the 'Hammerklavier's' second movement is a joke. Clocking in at under three minutes, it is a madcap, miniature distillation of the first. The relationship between the two movements is roughly analogous to that of *Hamlet* and *The Fifteen Minute Hamlet*: the raw materials and fixations are the same, but the latter, trimmed of all fat, winkingly asks if the former might have taken itself and its dramas just a *bit* too seriously. Even when the second movement goes a bit melodramatic itself at its conclusion – with B flat and B getting into another dustup before the movement seems to disappear into thin air – it does so with an arched eyebrow.

Enthralling as this all is, nothing in the sonata thus far has prepared us for what is coming; nothing could. The 'Hammerklavier's' third movement is the longest slow movement in the literature, and – no hyperbole here – perhaps the greatest tragic utterance western art has produced. Its unbearably raw despair in no way undermines its dignity, and the meeting of those two qualities – so often, it is one or the other – make this movement an experience like none other.

Beethoven's scalding intensity, profundity, and gigantic personality need no elaboration here: they are much discussed, and they are anyway self-evident, right there for the hearing. Given those qualities – given Beethoven's capacity to translate into sound depths of feeling we hardly knew existed– it is surprising that, in the late period above all, he so rarely wrote *tragic* slow movements. Time

and again, in the great final piano sonatas and string quartets (and the ninth symphony), Beethoven went for transcendence in his slow movements. That is yet another way in which the 'Hammerklavier' is not just an outlier, but a one-off: it has, by an enormous margin, the longest span of tragic music to come from Beethoven's final years.

But in keeping with a sonata that attracts and repels in equal measure, this slow movement begins not with a great vocal lament, like the Arioso from Op.110, but with a chilling austerity. The barren octaves of the movement's first measure were apparently an afterthought, added after the rest of the movement had already been completed, but the piece would be unimaginable without them. So stripped down that they don't even quite establish the movement's F sharp minor tonality, these two plain octaves somehow predict and necessitate the whole vast movement that follows: its plainspoken but grief-stricken central theme, its dramatic, even catastrophic outbursts, its heart-stopping moments of repose.

Trying to describe the terrible power of this music is an exercise in frustration: its greatness lies precisely in its evocation of a despair beyond words. And when, just occasionally, Beethoven alights on a major key, the tenderness in it is almost physically painful: it is the consolation you offer to someone whose pain, you understand, cannot be eased. But still, you try.

Inevitably, the end comes. The movement does not really conclude; it gives up, having neither any hope nor any fight left in it.

Only Beethoven could have written such a movement, and only Beethoven could have found his way out of it. While nothing can match the slow movement of the 'Hammerklavier' for sheer emotional force, the introduction to the finale is, in terms of imagination and structural ingenuity, the most remarkable part of the piece. The mournful F sharp major chords that bring the slow movement to a close are followed, without pause, by a ghostly expressionless series of Fs, played on every octave of the piano. This is less a modulation than a gear shift – into the lowest of all gears.

F being the dominant of B flat major, we are now halfway home. (F sharp was very much a foreign country.) But the second half of the journey proves much more circuitous: having found his way to F in a matter of seconds, Beethoven needs minutes to close the deal and return to the sonata's home key. This music is suggestive of a person groping in the dark, and in a series of passages all in different keys, Beethoven starts out placidly, only to grow, bit by bit, totally unhinged.

At the point at which Beethoven seems to have lost the plot, his bearings, everything, the music takes yet another turn, and we suddenly, as if by magic, are back in B flat major and in the finale proper, which is a fugue. Of course it's a fugue. This craggiest of works demands a craggy conclusion, and, suffice it to say, with this fugue, it gets one. But unlike the heroic, defiant opening of the first movement, the fugue subject is, above all, loony. Consisting of a large leap, a trill, and an almost comically long sequence of sixteenth notes, evoking nothing more than a dog chasing its own tail, this subject is willfully peculiar, and just plain willful. It does not seem to be designed to form the foundation of a massive edifice.

Well. That is, of course, precisely what it is. Whereas the first movement's surface majesty masked a quirky, neurotic essence, here the quirkiness is the surface aspect. Bit by bit, the fugue grows to titanic proportions, as Beethoven gives the subject every imaginable treatment: he expands it rhythmically, he transposes it, threateningly, into B minor, he plays it backwards and turns it upside down, he introduces a second subject and pits it against the main one – he does everything but pick it up and throw it across the room.

It adds up to something monumental, ambiguous and exhausting enough to summate this altogether monumental, ambiguous and exhausting work. To the end, the 'Hammerklavier' is unapologetically enigmatic: the very last phrase is a blaze of glory, but it is also so totally rhythmically off-kilter, one struggles to even identify its metre. It's a pig-headed, my-way-or-the-highway ending to a piece that, from start to finish, dares to be unlovable, and is all the more riveting for it.

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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