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A Beethoven Cycle: The Complete Piano Sonatas

Recital VIII: Sonatas Nos. 30–32

Jiayan Sun, piano

Thursday, April 18, 2019

8:00 PM

Sweeney Concert Hall, Sage Hall



SMITH COLLEGE

PROGRAM

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Sonata No. 30 in E Major, Op. 109 (1820)

Vivace ma non troppo – Adagio espressivo –
Prestissimo

Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo. *Gesangvoll mit innigster Empfindung*

Sonata No. 31 in A-flat Major, Op. 110 (1821)

Moderato cantabile molto espressivo

Allegro molto

Adagio ma non troppo – *Klagender Gesang*. Arioso dolente –

Fuga. Allegro ma non troppo –

L'istesso tempo di Arioso. *Ermattet, Klagend*. Perdendo la forze, dolente –

L'istesso tempo della Fuga, poi a poi di nuovo vivente. *Nach und nach
nieder auflebend* (L'inversione della Fuga. *Die Umkehrung der Fuge*)

Sonata No. 32 in C Minor, Op. 111 (1821–1822)

Maestoso – Allegro con brio ed appassionato

Arietta. Adagio, molto semplice e cantabile

(The program is presented without an intermission.)

Smith College Department of Music will host a reception immediately following the concert at the Conference Center, 49 College Lane.

The Josten Performing Arts Library has created a LibGuide to facilitate access to literature and resources on Beethoven's life and work.

<http://libguides.smith.edu/beethovencycle>

Please silence all cell phones and other electronic devices before the performance.

“Like Mont Blanc over the Alps,” the last three sonatas seem to rise above all the others. The simile is Franz Liszt’s. He was speaking about Wagner, but he might have been speaking about Beethoven, whose most celebrated works for the piano are celebrated precisely because they were played, frequently and brilliantly, by the nineteenth century’s most famous and flamboyant virtuoso. The special fame of the “Pathétique,” the “Waldstein,” the “Appassionata,” the “Hammerklavier,” and these, Beethoven’s final contributions to the category, is due, of course, to their intrinsic qualities; it is due, also, to their appropriation by Liszt—for that is how legends are born, bred, and brightened.

The E-Major Sonata, **Op. 109**, composed in 1820, begins with a melody that, without the arpeggiation, would be a chorale. The autograph is marked *Vivace*, the first published edition, *Vivace ma non troppo*. But what is “not too much”? That is always the question, in music as in life. Here the question barely has time to sink in. The arpeggiated passage begins in E; it will return moments later beginning on B—after an intervening passage that serves, in the entirely new tempo of *adagio espressivo*, as a kind of “second theme group,” even if sonata-form terminology, because of sudden changes of tempo and extreme brevity, is here not a good fit. A tiny “development” begins with the arpeggiated music (in B) and returns, *forte*, to E, which we must therefore call a recapitulation. The *adagio* “second group” recurs in the expected key, and leads to a coda that includes a new, touching, and true chorale that precedes the final arpeggiation of E Major.

However fast the *vivace*, the second movement, *prestissimo*, must go faster. It functions as a *scherzo*, but presents a binary tonal structure (E Minor, transition, B Minor; E Minor, pseudo-transition, E Minor) that (to dusty analysts) again suggests the sonata form. The insistent minor mode renders this music not warm and fuzzy, but weighty, and even fierce.

The lyrical theme that opens the final movement is simplicity itself. We have an eight-bar phrase that takes us from tonic to dominant (this is repeated); and an eight-bar phrase that returns us from dominant to tonic (this, too, is repeated). That description could apply to sixteen bars of music from Bach to Brahms and beyond. As always, it is not the *what*, but the *how*, that distinguishes Beethoven from the others. Such simplicity lends itself to variation, because in order to *feel* that a variation *is in fact* a variation (that is, as a former president might put it, in order to know what *is is*), you must simultaneously feel what is varied and what *is not* varied—the latter being, in this case, the periodic structure, the 8+8. In this sense, the first four variations are entirely “regular”;

but the surface is so complex that merely counting the bars is a challenge. The fifth variation has an “added” eight bars at the end; the sixth variation, an “added” three—which bring us back to the theme, set down, as at the beginning, with elegant, singing, heartbreaking, simplicity.

What could possibly follow something so moving, so delicate? Something rather more objective—which is how one might wish to characterize the A-flat Major Sonata, **Op. 110**, composed in the following year, 1821. The first movement plays out in a full-fledged sonata form, although the exposition, with no repeat, leads directly to the development; the development treats uniquely the opening motif; and the recapitulation, in order to shake things up, finds in E Major a substitute for the expected dominant of A-flat. At one point, here, you might notice a moment featuring three conspicuous, downward, chromatic steps, a weird sonority, as Beethoven sinks from the realm sharps (E) to the realm of flats (A-flat), and offers a final reminiscence, in the coda, of the opening theme.

The second movement, a *scherzo*, follows directly from first, with almost no pause. The joke here, not a knee-slapper, turns on metric ambiguity: where is the upbeat, where is the downbeat? (We ask the same question at the opening of Op. 109.) Like ambiguous harmony, ambiguous meter is the stuff of musical delight. As elsewhere among the late sonatas (and more among the late quartets), Beethoven here, too, continues to merge the movements, as the slowed-down coda of the *scherzo*, lingering on an F-Major chord that is the dominant of B-flat, prepares for the arrival of a new movement—actually just a section, marked *Adagio ma non troppo* (“not too much” again)—that is clearly trying to *tell us something*: it is a “recitativo,” the operatic texture in which information is not reflected upon, as in the aria, but *conveyed*. Because this recitative is followed by a *sorrowful song* (“Klagender Gesang”), we know that the message, whatever it may be, is not gay. Was Beethoven thinking of impending death? In the fugue that follows—interrupted by the “Klagender Gesang” sung again—the marking reads “poi a poi di nuovo vivente,” or “little by little coming back to life,” as Charles Rosen translates it in his lively note for pianists about a piece that has been *analyzed* to death. Fugue here is expressive in a way different from that of the surrounding music, for it adds a peculiar kind of intellectual authority to the melodic and harmonic elements of the sonata texture. Perhaps you will be able to hear all three voices of the fugue as they enter, one voice at a time (the third enters resoundingly in the bass); perhaps you will be able to hear (after the intervention of the slow music) the return of the fugue, now with its “subject”—its first nine notes—“inverted,” that is, literally turned upside down. This *tour de force* can indeed

be heard, internally, as a kind of resurrection. It is also possible to hear it, externally, as a public demonstration of contrapuntal mastery.

The A-flat Sonata ends with a bang that is conclusive but not fully satisfying. It leaves you—me—with the feeling that there might still be something more to come. That would be the C-Minor Sonata, **Op. 111**, completed in 1822, the thirty-second and last of Beethoven's contributions to the eternally most solemn category of music for the piano. He had five more years to live: these would be filled with the *Missa Solemnis*, the Ninth Symphony, and the string quartets, Opp. 127, 130, 131, 132, and 135. He was at the peak of his fame. His health was poor, but, as a composer, never was he more in fighting trim.

You can describe the first movement of Op. 111 as a characteristic sonata-form movement in C Minor, with a slow introduction, a repeated exposition in C Minor and A-flat Major, a development section that moves us suddenly to G Minor and prepares us for the return to the tonic, employing contrapuntal devices, a recapitulation in C Minor and C Major, and a coda in C Major. But that tells you almost nothing of what is astounding about this music, which is its might, its imagination, and its combination of the sophistication of counterpoint with the contrasting textures, dynamics, registers, and tonalities of the sonata style.

The second movement of Op. 111 is structured, like the closing movement of Op. 109, as a theme, a series of variations, and a return to the theme (although here, the theme is once again varied). Now, any pedant can describe the form. But it takes a poet to describe a melody—as we shall see in a moment. Melody is of the essence here: Beethoven overlays the movement with vocal terminology: *Arietta, adagio molto semplice et cantabile*; in his head, he is hearing voices—the ghosts of the gods of music itself.

The first variation is “regular”: it follows the structure of the theme, two halves, each of eight bars, each repeated, the first remaining in C Major, the second, moving from A Minor to C Major. The second variation is likewise regular, but the rhythmic complications may cause you to lose the beat. The third variation, also regular, will cause you to wonder if the real inventor of jazz was the composer of this music. The fourth variation maintains the regular structure, but the eight-bar phrases, on repetition, are varied. This is an otherworldly meditation on music and the meaning of life. Then comes the otherworldly coda that brings Beethoven's sonata career to a close.

In Thomas Mann's great novel of 1947, *Doctor Faustus: The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend*—the novel that confronts the terrifying closeness of the adulation of high art and the advent of barbarism, as it

offers an explanation of the German catastrophe of the twentieth century—the figure of Wendel Kretzschmar, the narrator and Leverkhuhn’s music teacher, speaks of Beethoven’s final sonata. In particular, he speaks of why, in Op. 111, *there is no third movement*. One has only to *hear* the piece, he says, in order to answer that question for oneself. “A third movement? A new beginning, after *that* farewell? A return—after *that* parting? Impossible! What had happened was that the sonata had found its ending in its second, enormous movement, and had ended *never to return*.” Now, when Kretzschmar said “the sonata,” the boys realized, “he did not mean just this one, in C Minor”; he rather meant “the sonata *per se*, as a genre, as a traditional artform.” The sonata itself “had been brought to an end, to its end, had fulfilled its destiny, reached a goal beyond which it could not go; canceling and resolving itself, it had taken its farewell—the wave of goodbye from the D-G-G motif, *consoled melodically by the C-sharp*, was a farewell in that sense, too, a farewell as grand as the work, a farewell from the sonata.” (I am quoting from the translation by John Woods.)

The “D-G-G motif,” and the “consoling” C-sharp, are the stuff of one of Mann’s most acute observations. Let me explain. The principal melody of the second movement, the eight-bar theme I have mentioned, begins with a two-note upbeat that falls from C to G; the upbeat to the second measure is a parallel figure that falls from D to G. These upbeats are heard, in one form or another, throughout the movement (whose structure I have described). In the coda, after a surprising modulation to E-flat (the modulation is accomplished via exhilarating trills, which were always the hallmark of Beethoven’s own keyboard playing), we have a gentle and deeply affecting return to C; we have a new presentation of the principal theme, with an enriched accompaniment; and we have an epilogue. Eight bars before the very end of the movement, before the D of the upbeat figure, *Beethoven adds a C-sharp*. “This added C-sharp,” wrote Thomas Mann, “is the most touching, comforting, poignantly forgiving act in the world”: “dieses hinzukommende cis ist die rührendste, tröstlichste, wehmütig versöhnlichste Handlung von der Welt.”

Most writers on music get things slightly wrong. Thomas Mann gets this exquisitely right. His choice of the word “Handlung” (“act”) is not arbitrary. Mann applies *to a single note*, a single C-sharp, the very word that Richard Wagner applied to *Tristan und Isolde*... in its entirety.

In Germany, it is the custom, when the final notes have sounded, *to pause*, to allow the silence to settle in, and *only then* to applaud. As I write these words, I look upwards—not there, but at an image of Beethoven, on the uppermost shelf in my study—and express the hope that here, at the end of the last sonata, *you*, we, all of

us, will remain momentarily *SILENT* before expressing our thanks to the artist (with whom I have had the extraordinary pleasure of discussing this extraordinary music): the extraordinary Jiayan Sun.

—Peter Bloom

Grace Jarcho Ross 1933 Professor of Humanities, Emeritus

ABOUT THE ARTIST

Praised by the New York Times for his “revelatory” performances, and by the Toronto Star for his “technically flawless, poetically inspired and immensely assured playing,” pianist **Jiayan Sun** has performed with the Cleveland Orchestra, the Hallé Orchestra, the Chinese and RTÉ (Ireland) National Symphony Orchestras, the Fort Worth and Toledo Symphony Orchestras, the Toronto and Aspen Concert Orchestras, and the Suwon Philharmonic Orchestra, and he has conducted from the keyboard the Meiningen Court Orchestra. His performances have been broadcast by the BBC, the RTÉ, China Central Television, and classical music radio stations in North America. He has performed at and participated in the Verbier Festival, the Gstaad Menuhin Festival, the Klavier-Festival Ruhr, the Aspen Music Festival, the Sarasota Music Festival, and PianoTexas. Under the mentorship of Sir András Schiff, he was invited to give a number of solo recitals in Europe as part of Schiff’s “Building Bridges” project for the 2017-2018 season.

Jiayan Sun has been awarded prizes at many of the major international piano competitions, including third prize at the Leeds International Piano Competition, second prize at the Dublin International Piano Competition, fourth prize and the audience prize at the Cleveland International Piano Competition, the first prize at the inaugural CCC Toronto International Piano Competition, among others. Playing early keyboard instruments and studying historical performance practice have played a significant role in his musical activities, with critically acclaimed appearances with the American Classical Orchestra in Alice Tully Hall.

Hailing from Yantai, China, Jiayan Sun received Bachelor's and Master's degrees from The Juilliard School. He continues his studies at Juilliard as a doctoral candidate under the tutelage of Yoheved Kaplinsky and Stephen Hough. His other mentors include pianists Malcolm Bilson, Richard Goode, Robert Levin, and harpsichordist Lionel Party. His devotion to the art of composition led him to study with the composer Philip Lasser. He is the Iva Dee Hiatt Visiting Artist in Piano and Lecturer in Music at Smith College. For more information, please visit <http://www.jiayansunpianist.com>.

Smith College Orchestra Spring Concert
Saturday, April 27, 4 PM
Sweeney Concert Hall

Jiayan Sun performs Tchaikovsky's Piano Concerto No. 1 in B-flat Minor, Op. 23, paired with an exploration of Romeo and Juliet themes in Prokofiev's Suite No. 2 and in Bernstein's Symphonic Dances from West Side Story. Jonathan Hirsh conducts.

Free and open to the public.

A Beethoven Cycle: The Complete Piano Sonatas
Jiayan Sun, piano
Eight Recitals at 8 PM on Thursdays
Sweeney Concert Hall, Sage Hall

I. Thursday, September 20, 2018
Sonatas Nos. 1-4

V. Thursday, January 31, 2019
Sonatas Nos. 16-18 & 21

II. Thursday, October 18, 2018
Sonatas Nos. 5-8 & 19-20

VI. Thursday, February 21, 2019
Sonatas Nos. 22-26

III. Thursday, November 8, 2018
Sonatas Nos. 9-11 & 3
"Kurfürstensonaten" performed by Smith
student pianists

VII. Thursday, March 21, 2019
Sonatas Nos. 27-29

IV. Thursday, November 29, 2018
Sonatas Nos. 12-15

VIII. Thursday, April 18, 2019
Sonatas Nos. 30-32



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