



Beethoven Cello Sonatas
Alisa Weilerstein Inon Barnatan

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Complete Cello Sonatas

Disc 1

Sonata for Cello and Piano No. 1 in F Major, Op. 5, No. 1

- | | | |
|---|-------------------------------|--------|
| 1 | I. Adagio sostenuto - Allegro | 17. 29 |
| 2 | II. Rondo. Allegro vivace | 6. 45 |

Sonata for Cello and Piano No. 2 in G Minor, Op. 5, No. 2

- | | | |
|---|------------------------------------|-------|
| 3 | Ia. Adagio Sostenuto ed espressivo | 5. 48 |
| 4 | Ib. Allegro molto più tosto | 7. 34 |
| 5 | II. Rondo. Allegro | 9. 02 |

Total playing time: 46. 41

Disc 2

Sonata for Cello and Piano No. 3 in A Major, Op. 69

- | | | |
|---|--|--------|
| 1 | I. Allegro ma non tanto | 13. 26 |
| 2 | II. Scherzo | 5. 22 |
| 3 | III. Adagio cantabile - Allegro vivace | 8. 40 |

Sonata for Cello and Piano No. 4 in C Major, Op. 102, No. 1

- | | | |
|---|-----------------------------|-------|
| 4 | I. Andante - Allegro vivace | 7. 47 |
| 5 | II. Adagio - Allegro vivace | 7. 38 |

Sonata for Cello and Piano No. 5 in D Major, Op. 102, No. 2

- | | | |
|---|---|-------|
| 6 | I. Allegro con brio | 6. 53 |
| 7 | II. Adagio con molto sentimento d'affetto | 9. 24 |
| 8 | III. Allegro | 4. 34 |

Total playing time: 63. 51

Alisa Weilerstein, cello
Inon Barnatan, piano





I have enjoyed a remarkable musical partnership with Inon Barnatan since we first played together in 2008. We have performed nearly all of the cello and piano duo repertoire together around the world since then, as well as several transcriptions and other works of chamber music. Along the way, we have also become close friends.

It might be fitting then, that in 2020 we decided to record the complete sonatas by Beethoven, whose birthday year was eclipsed by the worst public health crisis in more than one hundred years. Over the course of one week at the beautiful Conrad Prebys Performing Arts Center in San Diego, we were able to immerse ourselves in compositions which, in my opinion, directly represent the humanity of music. The first sonatas already offer the first glances of Beethoven smashing conventions in favour of an entirely new and daring musical language. The emotional range, even in these early pieces, runs the gamut between childlike joy and innocence to visceral despair. The third sonata brims with generosity and confidence, and also brings into the fore the first truly equal partnership between cello and piano.

The last two sonatas have a fantastical, even wild quality about them, coupled with an almost unbearable vulnerability.

Diving into the formidable project of recording these touchstone works with Inon, especially at such a fragile, chaotic time, was an immensely rewarding experience. I feel incredibly lucky to have been able to go on this unique adventure with such a wonderful musical partner and friend, and I invite you to join us in our celebration of this profoundly moving music.

Alisa Weilerstein





One of my favourite things about performing Beethoven's complete cycle of sonatas for cello and piano is that in five relatively concise pieces I get to hear Beethoven through almost the entire span of his musical life, redefining the relationship between piano and cello as he goes along.

In the early, more Classical sonatas that relationship is far from simple or one-sided, and Beethoven asserts his original voice as much there as he does in the more wild and daring late sonatas. Even so, as we move toward the third sonata and beyond, the cello and piano become, arguably for the first time in musical history, truly equal partners.

This equal partnership is a central aspect of how Alisa and I make music together, and all five sonatas have been a part of our musical journey together from the very beginning. We love their beauty, their sense of adventure, and the way they communicate directly but with intricacy and complexity. At least one of them has made it into almost every one of our recital programs.

It has been a longtime goal to record all five sonatas together, not only to experience the fascinating journey they offer in its uninterrupted entirety, but to experience the sheer joy of not having to choose between them!

Inon Barnatan



Experiments for Cello and Piano

An essential truth in discussing Beethoven's music is that biography explains a great deal. Summarized in the brilliant work of Maynard Solomon, psychological crises and their positive or negative outcomes stimulated Beethoven's musical evolution at several key moments. These crises articulate the standard divisions between the composer's *early* (1790-1802), *middle* (1802-1810), and *late* (1818-1827) periods. Certain genres cultivated consistently over time, including the sixteen string quartets and thirty-two piano sonatas, allow us to perceive this stylistic change within a single medium.

Compared to these genres, the five sonatas for cello and piano would seem to offer only a meager footnote in Beethoven's evolution. However, they do stem from three very different times in his life, slotting rather neatly into the tripartite scheme. Indeed, the Cello

Sonatas Op. 102 shed important life on the often-overlooked transitional years (1810-1818) between the middle and late periods. The major challenge in such duets lay in balancing the cello's lyrical tenor against the piano's rather thin tone; pianos circa 1800 were still very much "works in progress" toward which Beethoven was often harshly critical. As we will see, the early Sonatas Op. 5, published as *sonatas pour Clavecin ou Forte-Piano avec un Violoncelle obligé* (sonatas "for harpsichord or fortepiano with obbligato cello") largely favour the keyboard apart from a few, albeit significant passages. The listener can judge, then, how the later "free sonatas" Op. 102 show a more developed, conversational balance between the instruments.

First Steps, Opus 5

When writing his first sonatas for cello and piano, Beethoven had almost no models upon which to rely. He entered the realm

of duo sonatas for an external reason: while touring Berlin in 1796, he would be presented to Prussian King Frederick William II. Frederick adored the cello, much as his famous father, Frederick the Great, favoured the flute. The monarch was suitably impressed when Beethoven performed two newly-written sonatas with court cellist Jean-Louis Duport. Six months later the Sonatas Op. 5 appeared in print in Vienna, headed by a dedication to the Prussian king.

That Beethoven was aware of balance issues is clear from the extended Adagio introduction to the Sonata in F (Op. 5 No. 1). It is highly chromatic and at times a bit wayward, especially in a composer typically lauded for motivic cohesion. Yet this introduction gives the cello time to breathe and sing, quite unimpeded by the piano. Once the fetching Allegro begins, all action is led from the keyboard, a tactic that etches each theme's rhythmic profile in our ears before the cello adds lyrical

warmth. Contrasts in timbre resurface near the close of the Allegro, where two brief pauses recall the tenuous Adagio. Ultimately they cannot hold back the piano's bustling energy that continues directly — because there is no central slow movement — into the vibrant finale. The Rondo is marked by virtuosic exchanges between cello and piano, as well as a topical musette complete with pizzicato strings and open-fifth drone intervals. Once again, Beethoven reverts to the Adagio element just before the end, as if the cello's lyric impulse has still not been fully realized.

The Sonata in G Minor (Op. 5 No. 2) mimics the same structure: slow introduction leading to vigorous Allegro, followed by a Rondo. Suffused with elements of the fantasia style (double-dotted rhythms, lengthy pauses, and diminished-7th harmonies), the G-Minor's slow introduction would make a fabulous movement on its own. Abundant key



changes and fully-developed themes give structural weight. The ensuing triple-meter Allegro section has sufficient similarities to a rondo to strengthen the impression of its being the finale — all of which serves to make the *actual* Rondo finale sound redundant. Not without its own merits, including virtuosity and Haydnesque good cheer, this movement in G Major makes a better encore piece. As it stands, it has the awkward charm of a witty riposte delivered well after the moment has passed.

Maturity

Of Beethoven's five cello sonatas, only the A-Major Sonata Op. 69 was written without a companion. It took shape between 1807 and early 1808 contemporaneously with monumental works, including the three *Rasumovsky* String Quartets, the D-Major Violin Concerto, and the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies. Beethoven was writing at

the pinnacle of his "heroic" middle period, full of taut motivic development, lyrical effusions, and dramatic power that redefined the narrative arc of instrumental music.

The A-Major Sonata benefits from the effort expended on these large-scale works. Notably, it opens with a singing theme for unaccompanied cello. Beethoven was making a point, pushing for a fairer power sharing relationship between the sustained string sound and the percussive, non-sustaining timbre of the piano. As Lewis Lockwood has shown, Beethoven's autograph shows innumerable revisions that all help delineate contrasting timbres. Within a moment, the solo cello theme is answered by the piano and just as quickly supplanted by a minor-mode transition citing the iconic "fate" rhythm from the Fifth Symphony. The evolving process spills over into the second theme, which inverts the initial rising interval to a falling gesture. Against a falling



arpeggio, Beethoven counterpoints a nearly three-octave rising scale. Thus even before the development section itself, we have been treated to motivic linkage and transformation, change of mode, and textural contrasts - all basic developmental tactics.

The Scherzo contrasts a syncopated main theme against a pastoral episode in A Major (note the chordal 6ths, the major mode, and pedal tones in the bass). Over the next few minutes Beethoven plays back and forth between these moods: between action and reflection, between the stop-and-start allure of syncopation and the lilting charm of the pastoral.

The third movement (Adagio) starts as a typical slow movement, but it turns out to be an introduction to the finale. At first blush, of course, we cannot know this, though our experience with Op. 5 may seem prescient. The Adagio moves in captivatingly broad phrases, with a

true *cantabile* duet between cello and piano. At its second occurrence, the song hesitates for a moment, and a sustained dominant-7th chord opens the door to a boisterous finale. In the finale Beethoven strikes a balance between competing textures. Through subtle thinning of harmony, Beethoven's glittering keyboard runs never obscure the cello's contribution. The development rides the five-note main theme into various keys before emerging into a radiant, unexpected C Major (the flat submediant key). With rhythmic energy pushing toward an inexorable conclusion, Beethoven hovers on a cadential "six-four" chord that creates a musical parenthesis, a momentary aside that serves only to amplify and comment upon what has been heard. Beethoven revisits the main theme before reinitiating the move toward closure. It is a strategy he used to great effect in many middle-period works. Even an intimate chamber composition like this Cello Sonata yields little to its more grandiose, symphonic cousins.



Late Period Freedom

Work on the Op. 102 cello sonatas occupied Beethoven during the summer of 1815, though portions of the first sonata appear alongside sketches for the Ninth Symphony made earlier that year. By this time Beethoven was no stranger to the accompanied sonata genre, and we find a curious mixture here between comfort with the medium and a restless desire to explore new principles of counterpoint, dialogue between instruments, and form. Beethoven referred to the Cello Sonata in C Major (Op. 102 No. 1) as a “Free Sonata for Piano and Violoncello,” but that designation was not retained for publication. Each of the two movements begins with an expansive slow introduction followed by a fast sonata-allegro form. This arrangement recalls the slow-fast-slow-fast structure of the Baroque Italian sonata, as in Corelli, Vivaldi, and others.

The C-major Sonata opens with a serene melody played by unaccompanied cello. Beethoven develops a meditative mood through slow tempo and his fixation on a single idea. That melody, shaped like an inverted arch, moves in close imitation between cello and piano. Further adding to the unhurried allure of this opening section is the static harmony. Despite occasional chromatic inflections, Beethoven seems reticent to leave C Major. Eventually he signals the end of the reverie with a scene-changing glissando across the keyboard, and we dive quickly into the minor-mode *Allegro vivace*. Beethoven draws on rhythm, rhetoric, and key change to heighten the dramatic shift out of the previous tranquility. A dense development section builds upon the rhythmic character of the *Allegro*'s first theme. The movement's final wrinkle comes in the coda, where a brief deflection toward the subdominant key and slower chord rhythm promise a relatively lengthy digression to come. But the end comes surprisingly quickly; the entire coda is nothing

more than one large cadential progression. Less can be more, of course, and Beethoven retains the upper hand by hinting a — and then denying — an elaborate coda.

The second movement (*Adagio*) uses relaxed tempo, close imitation, and broad harmonic rhythm to create serene expansiveness. But for all its lyricism, Beethoven trumps this theme's expressive impact by an even more striking gesture, resurrecting the first movement's inverted-arch theme. On our way to the concluding *Allegro vivace*, we experience Beethoven's late-period interest in “rhythmic crescendo” (gradually increasing rhythmic activity), which culminates in simultaneous trills spread across the parts. This energy spills over into a tripping snippet of theme, hesitant and searching. At first it seems like nothing more than a marginal comment. But knowing how Beethoven's mind works, we will not be surprised when this throw-away gesture becomes the seminal idea for the entire final section.

The *Allegro Vivace* projects the same clear sonata-allegro form as the fast portion of the first movement. But following the G-Major cadence that closes the exposition, Beethoven negates the previous energy with stark open fifths in the cello, thrice repeated. Recall how such intervals evoke the primordial void at the beginning of his epic Ninth Symphony. Rather than following any grandiose cosmography here, Beethoven glibly sends in the piano with a skipping dactyl. He heightens the comic deflection by giving an additional three-note echoing tag to the cello that, slightly out of rhythm, must surely have been played incorrectly. The irony is that such comedy requires perfect coordination between the performers, so that what “sounds wrong” is actually spot-on. Whereas earlier portions of this sonata were marked by touches of pastoral tranquility and *Sturm und Drang*, the enigmatic drone fifths help usher in a more playful side to Arcadian musings.



The companion D-Major Cello Sonata (Op. 102 No. 2) is often cited as a harbinger of the full-blown late style. But apart from the lengthy fugue-cum-finale, I find more retrospection here than experimentation. In contrast to the formal advances of the Op. 101 Piano Sonata and even Op. 102 No. 1, the themes and clear three-movement structure of this D-Major Sonata reflect Beethoven's middle-period practice. The opening theme is muscular and taut yet not without its subtle counterpoint. Despite frequent tampering with irregular phrase lengths, the larger markers of sonata form (for instance, arrival on the dominant of the dominant) remain audible throughout. The development is tonally adventurous, and Beethoven moves seamlessly into the recapitulation — nice touches, indeed, but not unprecedented. I do not mean to diminish the Sonata's grandeur. But the two works in this opus demonstrate that Beethoven's evolving late style had not cut all ties with more classical tendencies.

The haunting slow movement reinforces that thesis, for its pathos-laden D Minor looks back as far as the *Romeo and Juliet* "vault scene" programmatically captured in the String Quartet Op. 18 No. 1 (1798). Beethoven dispenses with every artifice in the opening phrase, allowing faint fluctuations between light and shadow to emerge. During the middle section the mood brightens considerably; new optimism inspires a delightful game of "tag" as the instruments continually find and lose one another. The reprised D-Minor material carries us to an incomplete final cadence, which in turn sets the stage for the fugal ending. Fugue, of course, was to become a leading element in Beethoven's transcendent late style, and in this regard the D-Major Cello Sonata deserves greater attention.

Jason Stell

Acknowledgements

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Table with 2 columns: Track Name and Duration. Tracks include: 1. Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 1 in G major, Op. 15 (18:45), 2. Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 2 in B-flat major, Op. 19 (20:15), 3. Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 3 in D minor, Op. 37 (25:30), 4. Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 4 in G major, Op. 58 (24:45), 5. Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 5 in E-flat major, Op. 72 (27:15), 6. Beethoven: Piano Concerto No. 6 in F major, Op. 81 (23:45).



Beethoven Piano Concertos Part 1
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Beethoven Piano Concertos Part 2
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Time Traveler's Suite
Inon Barnatan

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Sit back and enjoy

