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NAXOS

# BEETHOVEN

Larry Weng  
Piano

Variations on themes by  
Grétry • Paisiello • Righini • Winter

Sonata in C, WoO 51

## Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) Piano Variations on themes by Grétry, Paisiello, Righini and Winter Piano Sonata in C major, WoO 51 • Waltzes, WoO 84 and 85

Born in Bonn in 1770, Ludwig van Beethoven was the eldest son of a singer in the musical establishment of the Archbishop-Elector of Cologne, and grandson of the Archbishop's former Kapellmeister, whose name he took. The household was not a happy one. Beethoven's father became increasingly inadequate both as a singer and as a father and husband, with his wife always ready to draw invidious comparisons between him and his own father. Beethoven, however, was trained as a musician, however erratically, and duly entered the service of the archbishop, serving as an organist and string player in the archiepiscopal orchestra. He was already winning some distinction in Bonn, when in 1787 he was first sent to Vienna, to study with Mozart. The illness of his mother forced an early return from this venture and her subsequent death left him with responsibility for his younger brothers, in view of his father's domestic and professional failures. In 1792 Beethoven was sent once more by the Archbishop-Elector to Vienna, now to study with Haydn, whom he had met in Bonn.

Beethoven's early career in Vienna was helped very considerably by the circumstances of his move there. The archbishop was a son of the Empress Maria Theresa, and there were introductions to leading members of society in the imperial capital. Here Beethoven was able to establish an early position for himself as a pianist of remarkable ability, coupled with a clear genius in the necessarily related arts of improvisation and composition. The onset of deafness at the turn of the century seemed an irony of fate. It led Beethoven gradually away from a career as a virtuoso performer and into an area of composition where he was able to make remarkable changes and extensions of existing practice. Deafness tended to accentuate his eccentricities and paranoia, which became extreme as time went on. At the same time it allowed him to develop his gifts for counterpoint. He continued to revolutionise forms inherited from his predecessors, notably Haydn and Mozart, expanding these almost to bursting point, and introducing innovation after innovation as he grew older. He died in

1827, his death the occasion of public mourning in Vienna.

The art of variation lies at the heart of a great deal of music. Extended works may include movements consisting of variations, whether so titled or not. In improvisation variation is essential, since a performer was, and is, often obliged to offer variations on a given theme as a demonstration of this skill. Beethoven's earliest variations date from 1782 when he wrote a set of variations on a theme by the singer Ernst Christoph Dressler. His last set of variations for the piano were completed in 1823 – the *Diabelli Variations* on a waltz by the composer and publisher Anton Diabelli.

Peter Winter's German heroic-romantic opera *Das unterbrochene Opferfest* ('The Interrupted Sacrifice') was staged in Vienna at the Kärntneror Theatre in June 1796. Born in 1754 in Mannheim, Winter had played, even as a boy, in the famous court orchestra there, becoming an official member of the ensemble in 1776. He followed the electoral court to Munich, where he later became Kapellmeister, a title he retained until his death in 1825. His professional career involved various excursions abroad, including a stay in Italy, where he wrote Italian opera, and in Vienna, where he stayed from 1796 to 1798. A prolific composer of stage works of various kinds, Winter won particular success with *Das unterbrochene Opferfest*, with its exotic tale of an intended sacrifice to the Inca sun god, arranged through duplicitous rivals, and a final triumph of good over evil. Beethoven took his theme for variations from a second act quartet, *Kind, willst du ruhig schlafen* ('Child, will you sleep quietly'). The publication of Beethoven's variations was announced in December 1799, a year in which Winter's work had six performances, testimony to its continuing popularity. The seven variations include a fourth in rapid triplets, a contrapuntal fifth and a sixth in F minor. The seventh is followed by an extended coda.

The Italian composer Giovanni Paisiello (1740–1816) enjoyed great popularity as a composer of opera, employed for much of his career in Naples, where he had varying

relations with the changing governments of the period, as Bourbons replaced Bonapartists and vice versa. Paisiello served at the court of Catherine II in Russia for eight years, and spent time in Vienna and Paris. His opera *La molinara* ('The Mill Girl'), otherwise known as *L'amor contrastato* ('Love Contrastated'), was originally written for carnival in Naples in 1789. It was given several performances in Vienna in 1794, when Beethoven is said to have heard it, and he gallantly and quickly composed a set of variations for a female companion, who had remarked on the apparent loss of the variations she had written. The set of nine variations on another theme from the opera, *Quant' è più bello l'amor contadino* ('How Much Fairer Country Love') date from the same period, and is dedicated to Prince Karl Lichnowsky. The theme is followed by a triplet and then a semiquaver variation. The fourth variation is in A minor, the major key restored in the following version of the material. The sixth promises counterpoint and the final ninth variation is marked *Tempo di minuetto*.

Beethoven's *Waltz in E flat major, WoO 84* was written for the collection of 40 waltzes by different composers brought together by the actor Carl Friedrich Müller in 1824. The *Waltz in D major, WoO 85* of 1825 was written for a similar purpose. The first of the two has an A flat major trio section, over a repeated bass. The second has a similar charm, revealing an unusual aspect of the composer at this late stage in his career.

Beethoven, in a letter of 1794 to his friend from earlier days in Bonn, Eleonore von Breuning, mentions a sonata that he had promised her long ago but that had remained a sketch, hard for anyone else to transcribe. Now known as *Piano Sonata in C major, WoO 51*, the work was found among the composer's papers after his death, was published posthumously in 1830 and survives in the form of a classical first movement and a slow movement, the latter completed by Ferdinand Ries who added the final eleven bars of the *Adagio* in a similar style. There was, presumably, a third movement, of which nothing remains.

The opera *Richard Coeur-de-lion* ('Richard the Lionheart') by André Grétry (1741–1813) was first performed at Fontainebleau in 1785. The plot centres on the imprisonment of Richard, taken captive as he returns from the Third Crusade, and sought by his faithful minstrel, Blondel. *Une fièvre brûlante* ('A Burning Fever') has an important part to play, heard by Richard, who joins in his favourite song, hearing Blondel sing from outside the castle where he is imprisoned. Beethoven's variations were written in 1795. After the theme comes a variation with running quavers, followed by a version with triplets. The fourth variation is in C minor, after which the major key returns. The seventh variation calls for crossed hands and the final variation breaks off for a moment, before a coda and concluding *Presto*.

Distinguished as a singing teacher, Vincenzo Righini (1756–1812) held various court positions, serving as director of Italian opera under Joseph II, as Kapellmeister in Mainz and in Berlin as director of the Italian opera. Righini had written twelve *ariette*, including *Venni amore* ('I Came, Love') with five vocal variations. Beethoven was persuaded to add further variations, creating a set of 24, dedicating the work to the Countess of Hartzfeld. From his friend Franz Wegeler we hear of the cheerful journey of the musicians of the Archbishop-Elector to their ruler's residence at Mergentheim and the diversion that allowed some to visit, at Aschaffenburg, the Abbé Sterkel, distinguished as a pianist, and a court musician and chaplain at Mainz. The delicacy of Sterkel's playing was said to be a revelation to the young Beethoven, whose own playing, until then, had been rough and coarse. It was only in response to a challenge from Sterkel that Beethoven was persuaded to play his own demanding variations on Righini's theme, expanded now to a much larger number. The variations on the short theme include two – the twelfth and thirteenth, in D minor, some versions demonstrating wit, a longer penultimate *Adagio sostenuto* and a final version that brings its own surprises.

Keith Anderson

**Larry Weng**

A laureate of the 2016 Queen Elisabeth International Piano Competition, Larry Weng has been critically acclaimed by *The New York Times*. He also garnered critical praise for his 2014 New York debut at Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall from the *New York Concert Review*, and from Harry Rolnick of *ConcertoNet* for his performance of Ravel's *Alborado del Gracioso*. He has played in major venues around the world as both a soloist and chamber musician. As of the 2017 season, Weng is a full-time member of the icarus Quartet. Weng graduated from the highly selective joint degree programme between Columbia University and The Juilliard School under the tutelage of professors Jerome Lowenthal and Matti Raekallio. He continued his studies with professor Boris Berman at the Yale School of Music, earning his Doctor of Musical Arts in 2019.

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Even so great a composer as Beethoven wrote music that is now almost completely neglected and unperformed. This sequence brings together a portfolio of such works that focuses on his variations on popular operatic music of the time by Giovanni Paisiello, Peter Winter and André Grétry, and includes the witty and inventive variations on an arietta by Vincenzo Righini. The *Piano Sonata in C major, WoO 51* was found among Beethoven's papers after his death and published in 1830. While it lacks a finale, it too offers a revealing look at an overlooked composition as do the two charming and unusual waltzes.

Ludwig van  
**BEETHOVEN**  
(1770–1827)

Variations on themes by Grétry, Paisiello, Righini and Winter  
Piano Sonata in C major, WoO 51 • Waltzes, WoO 84 and 85

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|---|--|--------------|
| 1 | 7 Variations in F major on the quartet 'Kind, willst du ruhig schlafen' from Winter's <i>Das unterbrochene Opferfest</i> , WoO 75 (1799) | 11:42        |
| 2 | 9 Variations in A major on the aria 'Quant' è più bello' from Paisiello's <i>La molinara</i> , WoO 69 (1794)                             | 5:49         |
| 3 | Waltz in E flat major, WoO 84 (1824)   | 1:50         |
| 4 | Waltz in D major, WoO 85 (1825)<br>Piano Sonata in C major, WoO 51 (pub. 1830)   | 0:36<br>7:45 |
| 5 | I. Allegro   | 4:48         |
| 6 | II. Adagio (completed by Ferdinand Ries, 1784–1838)  | 2:56         |
| 7 | 8 Variations in C major on the romance 'Une fièvre brûlante' from Grétry's <i>Richard Cœur-de-lion</i> , WoO 72 (1795)                   | 7:23         |
| 8 | 24 Variations in D major on Righini's arietta 'Venni amore', WoO 65 (1790–91)  | 24:18        |

Larry Weng, Piano

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