

Beethoven Hammerklavier
Sonata & Eroica Variations
Pierre-Laurent Aimard





Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 29 in B-flat Major, Op. 106, "Hammerklavier"

1	I. Allegro	11. 57
2	II. Scherzo: Assai vivace	2. 53
3	III. Adagio sostenuto	16. 46
4	IV. Largo - Allegro risoluto	12. 05

15 Variations and a Fugue in E-flat Major, Op. 35, "Eroica Variations"

5	Introduzione col Basso del Tema	3. 25
6	Variation 1	0. 38
7	Variation 2	0. 50
8	Variation 3	0. 43
9	Variation 4	0. 40
10	Variation 5	0. 52
11	Variation 6	0. 39
12	Variation 7	0. 39
13	Variation 8	0. 53
14	Variation 9	0. 40

15	Variation 10	0. 37
16	Variation 11	0. 47
17	Variation 12	0. 42
18	Variation 13	0. 40
19	Variation 14	1. 16
20	Variation 15	4. 30
21	Finale. Alla Fuga	4. 31

Total playing time: 67. 00

Pierre-Laurent Aimard, piano

How to act in the face of the incomprehensible, the immeasurable? Closing your eyes without letting yourself be too distressed — remaining prostrate in a type of comfort only humans can experience? Or open them fully, at the risk of getting lost, of slipping into a stupor?

The Hammerklavier Sonata surpasses all understanding. Facing it is one of the most frightening tests of a performer's life. But it is as irresistible as it is insurmountable. To dare to embody it can only be an attempt to wrest the unfathomable from sound matter.

Postponed many times, this recording was finally made possible thanks to the inspiring turmoil and the fascinating recess that the "Corona crisis" engendered.

RLA

Pierre-Laurent Aimard



Beethoven's Hammerklavier Sonata and Eroica Variations

By the time of the Congress of Vienna in 1815, Beethoven had become an international celebrity, helped in no small part by the recent success of the final version of *Fidelio*, first performed at the Kärntnertortheater in Vienna on 23 May 1814. But apart from the piano sonata Op. 101 and the two cello sonatas Op. 102, the years 1815–17 were mostly devoted to less ambitious projects, including a large number of folksong arrangements. By the end of 1817, Beethoven had embarked on a new piano sonata, conceived on a hitherto unimagined scale: the Sonata in B-flat Major Op. 106, known as the *Hammerklavier*. This is one of the few major works by Beethoven for which the autograph manuscript is lost, and so too are any proofs corrected by the composer. There are, however, a number of surviving sketches as well as the first edition of the work, published in 1819 by the Viennese firm

of Artaria, and the earliest English edition, produced in parallel and issued the same year by the Regent's Harmonic Institution in London. The work at once acquired a formidable reputation, on account of its difficulty and its extraordinary dimensions.

One of the first documented public performances of the *Hammerklavier* Sonata was given by Franz Liszt in 1836, at the Salle Erard in Paris. Liszt had been a pupil of Carl Czerny, who had studied the work with Beethoven himself — and it is tempting to speculate that Czerny may have passed on some of Beethoven's wisdom to his most gifted pupil. A long review (under the heading 'Listz' [!]) appeared in the *Revue et Gazette musicale de Paris* on 12 June 1836, written by Hector Berlioz. The work was already well known, and had earned notoriety on account of its musical and technical challenges. As Berlioz put it, 'Beethoven's great sonata, that sublime poem which, for almost all pianists, has seemed like the riddle of the Sphinx.' But

Liszt's performance was a revelation, and one that also treated Beethoven's musical text with the utmost respect: 'Like a new Oedipus, Liszt interpreted it in a way that would have made its composer — if he could have heard it — shudder with joy and pride in his tomb. Not a note was omitted, not a note was added (I was following the score), no tempo was altered that had not been indicated in the text.' Such fidelity to the score was evidently something of a novelty at the time.

It was the slow movement that left the deepest impression on Berlioz: 'In the Adagio especially, in the account of this incredible hymn that the genius of Beethoven seems to have sung to himself while soaring alone into the immensity, he [Liszt] constantly sustained the same level as the composer's own thought.' This was a significant public revelation of the *Hammerklavier*, 'the ideal performance of a work reputed to be unperformable', and it led Berlioz to conclude that 'Liszt,

by playing in this way a work that is still misunderstood, proved that he is the pianist of the future. Honour to him!' Aside from Berlioz's enthusiasm for Liszt's performance, and his poetic description of the Adagio, what is notable here is that the work was deemed 'unperformable' and 'still misunderstood' — helping to explain why so few pianists were prepared to play the work in public. Only a year earlier, an unnamed critic in the Parisian journal *Le Pianiste* described Beethoven's late sonatas as being 'imbued with a kind of mysticism that is impenetrable to the general public', even making the outlandish claim that the composer himself did not know what he was doing: 'There is no doubt that Beethoven — more deaf than ever at this time — did not himself understand what he wrote.'

When Ignaz Moscheles played the *Hammerklavier* in London in 1839, the critic for *The Musical World* wrote that 'It would be idle presumption to pronounce on such a sonata at a single hearing, more

especially as the attention was frequently distracted by the wonderful difficulties of execution'. But the same review went on to describe the 'wild, abstracted, *other-world* sort of style, genuine beauties of modulation, or melodious phrase that touched the feelings', adding that 'if such be a test of excellence then there is much to be developed by a full and perfect acquaintance with this work.' This prediction was borne out by a long article published in *The Musical World* on 9 April 1853 including extensive quotations from a very detailed analysis by George Macfarren (1813–1887). He described it as 'the most extensive, the most elaborately developed, and in many respects, the most remarkable composition for the piano ever produced.' This pioneering account of the work was written for an equally remarkable concert given a few days later, on 14 April 1853. Arabella Goddard (1836–1922), then aged 17, chose the *Hammerklavier* for her solo debut — one of the few public performances in London since Moscheles.

As a child prodigy who had been a pupil of both Kalkbrenner and Thalberg, Goddard undoubtedly had the necessary technical command, but reviews of the concert suggest she also had plenty of musical insight too. One critic wrote that the work was played 'with a vigour and perspicuity unfailingly perfect' — adding that by playing the first three movements from memory, it was 'a feat absolutely without parallel'. Not only that, the same review reported that 'every musician of any eminence was present, and the unexampled skill and wonderful power of memory evinced by the young pianist were facts that filled everyone present with amazement. ... The performance altogether produced a palpable sensation.'

These remarks (and MacFarren's commentary) suggest that a quarter of a century after Beethoven's death, the *Hammerklavier* was starting to be understood as one of the pinnacles of Beethoven's creative output. As *The Musical*

World put it, it was 'the longest, the most profound, and the most difficult piece of music ever composed for the piano.' The first movement, marked simply *Allegro*, is a gigantic sonata form structure that begins with one of Beethoven's most arresting gestures. In the introduction to his edition of the work, Donald Francis Tovey writes about the 'improvisatorial character of its abrupt statements and dramatic pauses'. He also makes a telling comparison with the Fifth Symphony, at the same time revealing something of Beethoven's infinite inventiveness in presenting musical ideas: 'These [statements] are essentially different from those of the opening of the C minor Symphony, which is a case of building huge paragraphs on one figure; whereas the present opening throws three totally contrasted ideas together, and then makes its main transition abruptly.' Tovey also makes an important point about the 'orchestral' character of this music — something that had led Felix Weingartner to produce a version of the

sonata for full symphony orchestra. But as Tovey put it, this is piano music and nothing else: 'Liszt himself never produced pianoforte chords more gorgeously orchestral and more hopelessly beyond the capacity of an orchestra to imitate.' The contrast between the first movement and the Scherzo neatly embodies what Alfred Brendel termed Beethoven's 'New Style': 'Synthesis and expansion of resources — that is where a description of Beethoven's late style would have to begin. Direct opposites are forced together: a new intricacy is matched by its antithesis, a new naïveté. Apparent exaggeration is juxtaposed with apparent artlessness, abruptness with a novel, relaxed lyricism.' Still, Beethoven has plenty of surprises in this movement, not least the brief central *Presto* in B-flat Minor, growing in the space of a few bars from the simplest of ideas in octaves to a furious climax before the return of the opening material.

The *Adagio sostenuto*, subtitled *appassionato e con molto sentimento*, is

one of the most grandly conceived of all Beethoven's slow movements, but also one of his most heartrendingly eloquent, in which the composer pays unusually close attention to expressive detail. The main theme, in F-sharp Minor, is directed to be played *una corda*, *mezza voce*. Though Beethoven's deafness was worse than ever (he had just started to use conversation books), his awareness of the subtlest gradations of tone and timbre is at its most acute in the glorious expanse of this slow movement. So, too, is his attempt to convey musical expression in notation: 'espressivo', 'molto espressivo' and 'con grand' espressione' are markings found throughout the movement. The finale begins with a long slow introduction before launching into a gigantic fugue. In his study of Beethoven's last decade, Martin Cooper wrote that Beethoven's achievement here demonstrated 'an instinct to push every component part of the music ... not just to its logical conclusion but beyond.' Beethoven dedicated the work to one of his

favourite patrons — Archduke Rudolf — and the opening theme of the first movement was derived from the start of an unfinished birthday cantata, a musical fanfare to the rhythm of the words 'Vivat, vivat, Rudolphus'.

The theme of the 'Eroica' Variations Op. 35 was one to which Beethoven turned on multiple occasions: in an early set of Contredanses WoO 14 (from about 1800), as the finale for the ballet *The Creatures of Prometheus* (1801) and — most famously — in the finale of the *Eroica* Symphony (1803–4). Between the ballet and the symphony, Beethoven composed a set of fifteen piano variations on the same theme. As in the symphony, Beethoven reveals from the outset that his idea comprises two equal and distinctive components: the bass line and the melody. It's the bass that is first presented here. Beethoven offered these Variations — along with their companion set Op. 34 — to the publisher Breitkopf & Härtel on 18 October 1802, he stressed that they

had been 'composed in a truly completely new manner'. While this may have been partly motivated by a desire to ask a larger fee for the rights to the work, it's also the case that the 'Eroica' Variations broke new ground. It was his most extended set of variations until the much later Diabelli Variations, and Beethoven ranges from the high spirits of the opening variations to a rather uneasy calm beginning with Variation 8, and plunging into a much darker Minor key in Variation 14. This leads to the long, sublime Variation 15, which in turn gives way to an exciting closing Fugue. As well as dithering over the title (at one stage he wanted to call them 'Prometheus Variations'), after originally planning to dedicate the work to Abbé Stadler, Beethoven eventually asked Breitkopf to change the dedication to Moritz Lichnowsky, as he 'recently did me an unexpected favour'. With this work, Beethoven repaid the favour in magnificent style.

Nigel Simeone

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