

JOHN O'CONNOR

BEETHOVEN: DIABELLI VARIATIONS



STEINWAY & SONS



The Irish pianist John O'Connor has been gathering wonderful reviews for his masterly playing for over forty years — his unanimous 1st Prize at the International Beethoven Piano Competition in Vienna in 1973 opening the door to a career that has brought him all around the world. His recordings of the complete Beethoven Piano Sonatas led CD Review to say that he “by now should be recognized as the world’s premier Beethoven interpreter.” His recordings of the complete Beethoven Piano Concertos with the London Symphony Orchestra and Andreas Delfs have also been greeted with acclaim.

O'Connor is Chair of the Piano Division at Shenandoah University in Virginia, a faculty member at the Glenn Gould School of the Royal Conservatory of Music in Toronto, International Visiting Artist at the Royal Irish Academy of Music and Visiting Professor at Showa University in Japan. For his services to music he has been decorated “Officier de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres” by the French Government, awarded the “Ehrenkreuz für Wissenschaft und Kunst” by the Austrian Government, the “Order of the Rising Sun” by the Japanese Government and has received many other awards.

O'Connor is a Steinway Artist.

ALL OR NOTHING AT ALL

The Diabelli Variations (Op. 120, 1823) are the summation of Beethoven's solo piano output, following a year after his last statement in the sonata genre. They are neither easy to play nor easy to listen to. Even the enormous Op. 106 *Hammerklavier* Sonata strikes as more accessible. There is an intimidating, elusive quality to the work and it is no coincidence that another *magnum opus* of Beethoven's, composed with the same zeal and similarly difficult — the *Missa Solemnis* — was written at the same time.

Beethoven could not resist a good temptation. When in 1819 the call went out from composer-publisher Anton Diabelli to 50 composers that a variation of predetermined length should be provided by each to his 32-measure long waltz, Beethoven did not respond in the manner prescribed. For whichever reason (depending on which misleading tall tale you believe; you'll find most of them on Wikipedia), he eventually set about the task with maniacal effort. Rather than turning out a ditty on the fly, he wrote his grandest piano composition. Instead of filling out the lines on the provided piece of manuscript paper, he filled 83 more pages. Because the *Missa* and the last three piano sonatas were squeezed in between, it took him until 1823. Still, that was early enough for Diabelli, who recognized the work's genius, and published Beethoven's set even before the 50 responses he had gotten — Schubert, a teenage Franz Liszt, and Mozart *figs* among them.

Variations No. 8 and No. 20 share a musical kinship with the variation movement of Opus 111. Bach gets such a vigorous nod in variation No. 24, you might forget you are listening to Beethoven. The penultimate variation is a towering Fugue, the turbulent, deliberate contrast of which bewilders us: how could Diabelli's sweetly little waltz ever have ended up thus? And the last Variation is a humble Minuet like that a very young Beethoven might have written — as if he were coming full circle in a description of himself as a composer. On the topic of why it is less popular than admired, fortepianist Andreas Staier suggests that, apart from being musician's music, it has to do with Beethoven toying with severe irony: "Where Haydn was refreshingly surprising, Beethoven is unsettlingly sarcastic." Well, if this be sarcasm, Beethoven might have thought, let's make the most of it!

— *Jens F. Laurson*

Beethoven: Diabelli Variations
was recorded September 28-30, 2015 at
Sono Luminus Studios, Boyce, VA

Executive Producer: Jon Feidner

Producer: Dan Merceruio | Engineer: Daniel Shores

Equipment: Pyramix using Merging Technologies Horus Converters;
mixed and mastered through Merging Technologies HAPI Converter

Production Assistant: Robert Hillinck

Administrative Assistant: Joanne Hong

Design: Cover to Cover Design, Anilda Carrasquillo

Cover Photo: Hugh O'Conor

Piano: Steinway Model D #590904 (New York)

Piano Technician: John Veitch

JOHN O'CONNOR PIANO

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Irish pianist John O'Connor, whose distinguished recordings of the complete Beethoven Sonatas and Concertos have been celebrated for years, now turns his attention to The Diabelli Variations (Op. 120, 1823), the summation of Beethoven's solo piano output.

Variations (33) for Piano on a Waltz by Diabelli in C major, Op. 120

Playing Time 53:17



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