K.282 • K.283 • K.310
K.331 • K.332
K.545 • K.576

Orli Shaham

COMPLETE PIANO SONATAS VOL.2 & 3

Mozart, composer and pianist

Orli Shaham in conversation with Andrew Stewart on all matters Mozart.

Andrew Stewart: It seems only fair to ask why anyone today should choose to record landmark works from the established classical canon. The catalogue is, by any measure, well stocked with the music of household-name composers and comparatively short of pieces by their contemporaries, many of them ripe for rediscovery. A simple question follows: Do we need another recorded cycle of Mozart's piano sonatas? It may be more interesting to consider the elements–physical, spiritual, psychological, autobiographical–that shape their interpretation. But let's begin with the "Why do it?" question.

Orli Shaham: That is the key question for this whole project. There's certainly no shortage of complete Mozart sonata recordings. Part of the answer lies in the personal journey of discovery; part of it is in wanting to share with as many people as possible the results of what could so easily be a selfish process. I've found some very cool things along the way. Look, for instance, at the opening theme from the slow movement of K.283, which is almost banal. That's a wonderful case of Mozart taking the barest elements–the minimum you need for musical beauty–and transforming the things around them. It's like a teacher who brings out the best in their students. It's not the greatest theme, but he raises it to its highest level. Being immersed in that is a joy I want others to experience.

I think it's very liberating not to feel you are making the "definitive" performance, recording, or whatever. It's good to let go of that and just allow the music to speak as you feel it in the moment. I believe that most of us have understood during the Covid pandemic what performers have known for a long time: that there is no substitute for live music. Although these are recordings, I am trying here to capture the spontaneous feeling of live performance.

AS: In a sense it sounds as if you were engaged in a creative dialogue with a living composer. What have you learned about Mozart from recording his piano sonatas?

OS: I feel so much closer to him. I looked at his autograph manuscripts, where in the piano part he has a note here, a note there, and three blank bars in between. So he shows you where you're starting from and going to but not how you're going to get there. For months leading up to the sessions, I would improvise every day on all the spots where I thought I was going to improvise. Before each day's sessions, I'd

look at the scores again and narrow down the possibilities for improvisation in those places but do nothing more than that. I'd then do something different with each take, which gave me a choice I've never had before when it came to editing. I know I will never play those passages the same way again as I did in the recordings, which is completely true to the spirit of improvisation.

The act of improvisation allows you to feel some sense of what Mozart would have felt. For all his genius he was a real flesh-and-bone human being, just like us. Of course, he could effortlessly access things that we all have but need a little help finding!

AS: Mozart left some tantalizing clues about how he might have embellished the sparse passages you mention in his autograph scores. The first edition of K.332, published in 1784, includes exquisite elaborations in the repeat of the Adagio's second half that are missing from the original manuscript. Almost certainly notated by Mozart, they show how he might have embellished a repeated section.

OS: While there's no direct evidence for it, I've often wondered if Mozart wrote these out for a student. Most of the sonatas were used as teaching pieces for his piano pupils, who were also often his composition students. The line between being a pianist and a composer was not so clearly drawn then as it is today. I think of it as being the same line as you would have for a jazz pianist today. A jazz pianist is, of course, also a composer. Mozart was probably working with a pupil who wasn't that good at improvising yet and was saying: "Here's how you can do this."

AS: What we're talking about, I think, is freedom and flexibility within the context of music preserved on the page. It's a spontaneity that runs deeper than embellishing a given melodic line or adding a few grace notes here and there.

OS: This begins with the skeleton that supports the work of music. Clearly the harmony is the most basic thing, but there's also the question of how you pace harmonies so they become intelligible to the listener. The sense of time and of pacing in music are very much up to the composer and the performer. I think all performers of Mozart's time, not just Mozart, were much more keenly aware of this ebb and flow of time than performers often are today; at least, it was more at the forefront for them. Raise your hand if you think Mozart ever played a piece the same way twice. No!

I was already heading this way before this project, but have realized in recording all the sonatas that we habitually come at them as if they are the Holy Bible, not to be changed in any way. But Mozart understood the structure of the skeleton that a piece needed for it to be a success. The skeleton, the scaffolding, call it what you like, was sacrosanct. Beyond that it was all about Creation with a capital C; it was about being spontaneous. In the *Sonata in D major K.576* he gives so much detail that there's little room for spontaneity, but in other works he gives the performer a template and says, "Make this yourself". I definitely feel that K.545 is a perfect example of that. To be able to improvise freely in that way, you have to internalize the meaning of the music differently than if your aim is just to get the notes. One of my secret ambitions of this project is to encourage any piano students who happen to listen to these recordings to take license with the printed music and be free. They'll hear how in the *Sonata in C major K.545*, especially in the third movement, I go a little wild!

AS: Friedrich Schiller's essay "On Naïve and Sentimental Poetry", published within five years of Mozart's death, identifies two types of poets: the naïve, given to the direct expression of what she sees, and the sentimental, aware of the difference between what she sees and the feelings it stimulates. Mozart appears to combine the two conditions, not least in the way he transforms simple, direct themes into infinitely subtle reflections of the personal emotions they aroused in him, and does so while reimagining the musical language of his day.

OS: Mozart's music is so deeply human and deeply personal. Just listen to the *Sonata in C major K.545*, which is easily one of his most famous works. I love many things about this piece, one of which I use to teach sonata form (which is so not a form, by the way). He's playing to the true connoisseurs: Here I am, here's my antecedent, here's my consequent, here's the balance, here's the bridge, here's the sequencing–every element a knowledgeable audience might have expected. Yet the development section begins in the minor, which is unusual, and the recapitulation arrives in the subdominant, in other words, the "wrong" key. It's so telling that he introduces this complex teaching point to what is supposedly a "simple"piece. Formally speaking, the second movement of the C-major sonata is insane: it has none of the conventional structures, not at all what you'd expect. The third movement, as written, is a template for the student, but there's no way Mozart played it like that. Those repeats were surely not meant to be identical each time.

AS: The first volume of this series grouped Mozart's three sonatas in B-flat major together to show the remarkable breadth of his invention and artistic development from his late teens to full maturity. The works on these disks, comprising compositions from the same period, created between 1775 to 1789, emphasizes the intrinsic relationship between Mozart the composer and Mozart the pianist. They so often reveal a consummate performer-composer ditching convention's life jacket, something Mozart did with ease. He broke the accepted rules of composition as a young man, not for the sake of rule-breaking but to make space for strong musical ideas and their development. And he knew precisely how to turn those rules to advantage: the formal logic of the *Sonata in G major K.283*, for example, supports its free-flowing, joyful lyricism.

OS: He had internalized standard musical tropes completely by the time of K.283, written while he was in Munich to compose *La finta giardiniera.* He was already so fluent in the compositional language of the day that he was able to steer things in directions that nobody else would have considered. In the first movement's development section, for instance, he plays with where the beat falls, with upbeats versus downbeats, and how that fits with the minuet-like main theme. It completely changes your perception of time, of flow, of tempo even. And he's just nineteen! Even at that age he had a vast knowledge of the recent repertoire and of music of the past, but none of it was so deeply ingrained in him that he couldn't move beyond it.

AS: Only three years separate K.283 and K.310, but the latter represents a giant stride forward in its expression and dramatic pacing. How do you account for such a shift towards full artistic maturity?

OS: There are only two minor-key Mozart piano sonatas, just as there are only two minor-key piano concertos. I've lived with the *Sonata in A-minor K.310* since I first discovered Dinu Lipatti's recording as a teenager. I think there are two radically different ways to go with it. I'm not going to say which is more legitimate, although it's pretty clear which one I favour. Often people play it like it's one among all other Mozart piano sonatas, which is perfectly legitimate: it's an early piece yet completely within the style of the later sonatas.
The 22-year-old Mozart, though, was experimenting so broadly with style during this period, pushing the boundaries to make way for what he wanted to express.

I can see from my students, and with hindsight, that at that age you're completely open, you take ideas from here, you take them from there and see what works for you.

open, you take ideas from here, you take them from there, and see what works for you. There are certain things in his biography–the death of his mother in July 1778 and separation from the young soprano Aloysia Weber, with whom he was infatuated–that tie into the minor-key feel. There are other things, too, like modal harmonies and experiments with texture, that may have come from exposure to ancient sacred music, older even than the works favoured in fuddy-duddy Salzburg. It's quite possible he discovered early compositions while on his travels around Europe and played with their textures and timbres in the A-minor sonata.

As I've already suggested, you can put K.310 in the context of all the other sonatas or you can place it in its own separate category. Maybe the second approach, where the work's fluctuating rollercoaster of emotions is on full display, somehow relates to what we've lived through in recent times: we've all gotten closer to our feelings during the coronavirus pandemic, negative as well as positive ones, perhaps in ways we hadn't before. I believe Mozart at this time in his life was experimenting with something that wasn't the norm. You weren't supposed to go there then–this was an age of powdered periwigs! The constant pulsation in the first movement, for instance; the way he uses dotted rhythms to propel things and builds tension through harmonic progressions; the constant conflict that's happening, all add to the pathos of the whole. By the end of the first movement, I feel the music is completely breathless.

Once he's stirred up those big emotions, he finds brief respite from the whirling sea of life in the loving, warm, major-key opening of the second movement. But even here, where he appears to be heading to a simple time and place, the movement's center has at its core an emotion that is so powerful. Again, as in the first movement, there's this insistence on sitting on a harmony or a pitch. So much of Beethoven comes out of Mozart's two minor-key sonatas, right?

Mozart in a minor key is always powerful. Over the years, I've developed my own theory about what that meant to him and have come to understand the reason he didn't write so often in minor keys. Their raw emotional power was probably too strong for him; it was just too difficult to go there. Mozart's ideas for pieces in the major poured out of him at such a high level of invention. But to delve into those darker places in minor-key pieces took its toll on him. When he does go there, the music is so powerful and touches us so deeply.

AS: While the A-minor sonata is about inner turmoil and private despair, the

Sonata in F major K.332 seems to seize life by the collar, shake out tremendous emotional contrasts, and package them for public consumption.

OS: I think of the two works almost as paired sonatas. The F-major sonata is quintessential Mozart, with its beautiful, singable melodies that just flow in an inventive and extroverted way, its wealth of ideas, and the exuberance he brings to the work. It's interesting how that contrasts with K.310, where you can sense the struggle, the personal conflict, the opening up of something that's not so clearly visible. And then we find the culmination of both works in the *Sonata in D major K.576*. If the piano had a *"Jupiter" Symphony, then K.576* would be it.

AS: The D-major Sonata K.576 was composed at a low point in Mozart's life. Prince Lichnowsky intervened to introduce Mozart to the Berlin court of Frederick William II of Prussia, the famously indolent, pleasure-seeking successor to Frederick the Great. We know he performed for the king and queen and that he returned home with a commission to write six "easy" keyboard sonatas for Princess Friederike and six string quartets for the king. He completed three of the "Prussian" quartets and a single piano sonata of such technical difficulty and complexity that it would have defeated many of the finest players of the day, let alone a princess.

OS: No other of the sonatas is more physically difficult to play. The A-minor and C-minor sonatas are difficult in their physicality, but mostly it's their emotional content that makes them so tough to pull off. In terms of sheer virtuosic finger-work, the D-major sonata is by far the crowning achievement and reminds me of when Chico Marx would play the piano! When you have this sonata in your fingers, it's terribly satisfying to play. It is so symphonic in scope. Right from the opening theme, on a unison, you already feel the grandness of what he's trying to pull off.

AS: You've mentioned Mozart's debt to earlier music. We hear it again in the counterpoint of the D-major sonata's rondo finale, which at times feels like an homage to J.S. Bach but never sounds anachronistic. There's no doubt this music is "modern", as it were, not stuck in search of a lost past.

OS: What it shows, beyond pianistic virtuosity, is his compositional virtuosity. He's incorporating things that came before and turning them out in a clear vision of what you can do with music today. Masterful doesn't even begin to describe what he's doing here. I didn't know this sonata as a kid–obviously not, because

of its difficulty and I don't think any of my colleagues played it when we were students. I remember coming to it in my early thirties and thinking how incredible it was. There are no barriers blocking what he's trying to do and his ability to do it; there's no sense here of: "How do I…?"

AS: Your interpretations arise from the lyrical and expressive qualities that Mozart drew from the human voice and applied to his instrumental works; indeed, you have said that he "taught the keyboard to sing". How did you find your own "voice" in the sonatas?

OS: Music's power is primal. That was brought home to me when I became a mother. Obviously I'm a musician; I'm always surrounded by music. But I hadn't sung a note since graduating from high school until I had my first child about fourteen years later. The first thing I wanted to do was to sing to my kids. It was so innate and felt like the most natural form of communication with them. It taught me something I'd heard about but never experienced, the proposition that music predates spoken language. You don't need words to have music, whereas you need some sense of music to have words. That connection is so deep and so ancient within us. I sense that in the *Sonata in E-flat major K.282*, which is the first of Mozart's sonatas I can remember being taught as an eight-or nine-year-old. With its opening slow movement and two minuets, it doesn't fit with standard sonata expectations. But it does sing! I loved it so much as a child, the gestures of that opening melody, the depth of meaning in each interval; it's heartbreakingly beautiful.

AS: From what you've just said about the impression made on you during childhood by K.282 and of your desire to sing as a new mother, your approach to Mozart's music owes perhaps as much to your personal experiences as to your study of his scores.

OS: I think that hits several nails on the head! And it's absolutely true.

AS: In discussing the B-flat major sonatas, you've stressed the influence of the keyboard instruments of Mozart's time on his sonatas, how readily he absorbed improvements made by manufacturers to their pianos during the 1770s and 1780s.

OS: It wouldn't surprise me if the musical qualities of the six early sonatas, K.279 to K.284, were directly influenced by the pianos he found in Munich in 1775. You can hear him say,"Ah, so you can do this!" Being a traveling pianist today, even in a world of standardization, there's no question that whatever instrument I'm playing on completely influences my performance.

My personal level of satisfaction with a performance is increasingly tied to what the piano inspired me to be able to do that day, and I think that would have been the same for Mozart.

AS: And what of the instrument at Mechanics Hall in Worcester, Massachusetts?

OS: I love that piano and feel I can do anything with it. Erica Brenner, my wonderful producer, sent me to several halls to find the right instrument and venue before I recorded late Brahms seven years ago. I took the long drive from New York to Worcester in February, when everywhere was covered with snow, sat down at that piano and didn't move for three hours. It felt so good!

AS: So much of the music here conveys an emotional intensity which is far greater than anything ordinarily found in works written as teaching pieces for aristocratic or bourgeois piano pupils, or for the private entertainment of an elite audience. Even more remarkable is the way he can take popular themes or echoes from street music, as he does in K.331, for example, and transform them in such original and surprising ways.

OS: The Sonata in *A-major K.331*, with its rondo "Alla turca", is among the most famous of all Mozart pieces. It consciously mines popular genres. Its minuet, which is such a unique vision of what a minuet can be, and the "Alla turca", show he knew what was in vogue and what his audience would go for. The "Alla turca" is an expression of pure joy. One of the most interesting things about it for me is the first movement's variation form, which is based on a Czech folksong that was also popular in its German translation. He uses variation form in some of the piano concertos, but it does not appear elsewhere in the sonatas.

I think that's revealing about Mozart's understanding of the essential elements that music needs in order to have meaning. How do you give meaning to a musical structure? Is it with little gestures, grandeur, differences in character, or alternations of texture? He shows how it can be all of these and more in this opening movement. I love the way he plays with texture, for instance, and how each variation is a complete vision with its own integrity as a work of art yet flows with such ease as part of a whole. These are not unusual variations for the time, but Mozart plays with different characters here just as he had not so long before with characters in *Die Entführung aus dem Serail*. You feel that each variation has a fascinating backstory.

Orli Shaham, piano

A consummate musician recognized for her grace and vitality, Orli Shaham has established an impressive international reputation as one of today's most gifted pianists. Hailed by critics on four continents, Ms. Shaham is in demand for her prodigious skills and admired for her interpretations of both standard and modern repertoire. The *New York Times* called her a "brilliant pianist," The *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* has praised her "wit, passion, delicacy," and The *Chicago Tribune* referred to her as "a first-rate Mozartean."

Orli Shaham's performance schedule brings her to concert halls from Carnegie Hall to the Sydney Opera House and most of the major venues in between for recitals, chamber music, and concerti. Ms. Shaham has performed with nearly every major American orchestra as well as many in Europe, Asia, and Australia and is a frequent guest at major summer festivals around the world. Since 2007, she has served as curator and performer in the Pacific Symphony's chamber music series in Costa Mesa, California.

Ms. Shaham's wide variety of repertoire is reflected in her discography, which includes "Mozart Sonatas, Volume 1" (K.281, K.333, and K.570, on CC19), "Mozart Concertos" (K.453 and K.491) with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra, conducted by David Robertson (CC18), "Brahms Inspired" (CC15), and "American Grace" (CC11), featuring Steven Mackey's piano concerto *Stumble to Grace* with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and conducted by David Robertson. Other recordings include "Nigunim, Hebrew Melodies" (CC10), "Dvorak for Two," "The Prokofiev Album" (CC02), and "Mozart in Paris" (CC01), all with her brother, the violinist Gil Shaham; "Saint-Saens *Carnival of the Animals*" with pianist Jon Kimura Parker and the San Diego Symphony; and "John Adams' *Grand Pianola Music*" with pianist Marc-André Hamelin and the San Francisco Symphony led by John Adams (SFS0063).

Driven by a passion to bring classical music to new audiences, Orli Shaham maintains an active parallel career as a respected broadcaster, music writer, and educator. On radio, she is Co-host and Creative for NPR's weekly program "From the Top," airing across the United States, and has hosted the nationally broadcast Dial-a-Musician and America's Music Festivals series. Ms. Shaham is on the piano and chamber music faculty at The Juilliard School.

Inspired by her enthusiasm for introducing young children to the pleasures of music, Ms. Shaham created and hosts Orli Shaham's Bach Yard, a series of classical concerts for young children, and the video series Bach Yard Playdates, both of which have devoted followings.

For more, visit: orlishaham.com

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)

Volume 2 (Total Time 61:11)

1–3	Piano Sonata in A Minor, No.9, K.310
4–6	Piano Sonata in F Major, No.12, K.332
7–9	Piano Sonata in D Major, No.18, K.576

Volume 3 (Total Time 69:34)

1–3	Piano Sonata in C Major, "für Anfänger", No.16, K.545
4–6	Piano Sonata in E-flat Major, No.4, K.282
7–9	Piano Sonata in G Major, No.5, K.283
10–12	Piano Sonata in A Major, "Alla turca", No.11, K.331

Orli Shaham, piano

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