

JONATHAN BISS

BEETHOVEN

Piano Sonatas Vol. 3

Nos 15, 16 & 21



ORCHID CLASSICS



PIANO SONATAS, Vol 3
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No.15 in D major, Op.28

1	Allegro	9.15
2	Andante	6.19
3	Scherzo: Allegro vivace	2.20
4	Rondo: Allegro ma non troppo	4.58
Piano Sonata No.16 in G major, Op.31 No.1		
5	Allegro vivace	6.22
6	Adagio grazioso	10.09
7	Rondo, allegretto – Presto	6.29
Piano Sonata No.21 in C major, Op.53 ('Waldstein')		
8	Allegro con brio	10.40
9	Introduzione: Adagio molto – Attacca (in F major)	3.50
10	Rondo. Allegretto moderato – Prestissimo	10.00
Total time		70.26

Jonathan Biss, *piano*

Sonatas 15, 16, 21 ('Waldstein')

Beethoven wrote his 32 piano sonatas over the course of 27 years; only four of those years, from the turbulent centre of Beethoven's altogether turbulent life, are represented on this album. And yet, despite that narrow span of time, the range of *expression* in these sonatas is anything but narrow. (That this would be the case with more-or-less any three of the 32 sonatas explains why the project of recording the lot of them is so irresistible.) It is, in fact, infinite, moving in turn from subtle to sly, to, finally, cosmic.

The first two sonatas heard here were written primarily in 1801, a year that brought dramatic shifts in Beethoven's conception of the sonata. It was in that year that Beethoven announced to Czerny that he would be taking a "new path". And it is true that while from Opus 1 onwards Beethoven is never anything other than original, 1801 finds him relentlessly testing the sonata's limits, terrible two's style. A slow set of variations in lieu of a proper sonata allegro (Op. 26); a multi-movement work played without pause (Op. 27 No.1); a ghostly, *sotto voce* rumination which is somehow, improbably, also a fully realized sonata form (Op. 27 No. 2, the 'Moonlight'); a set of halting, increasingly operatic recitatives fully incorporated into an otherwise tersely-argued sonata (Op. 31 No. 2, the 'Tempest') – all of these are among Beethoven's 1801 experiments, and most are without precedent.

The innovations in Opp. 28 and 31 No.1 are no less significant but decidedly less arresting. In fact, the defining features of Op. 28 – sometimes saddled with the rather generic nickname 'Pastorale' – are its soft-spokenness and, particularly, its subtlety: it is subtle in its innovation, in its character, and even in the way it announces itself. Unlike so many of Beethoven's sonatas, whose first notes are declamatory or combative (or both), Op. 28 murmurs its way into being; the gentle pulsation in the bass gives the impression of having existed silently for all eternity, becoming audible just at the moment the sonata begins.

While there is nothing dull or self-serious about this work – it is full of wit and play

and, in its second movement, a quiet pathos – its serenity is rarely disturbed. The effect of this is to make its few real outbursts all the more powerful: the sonata's free-wheeling, exultant conclusion and, above all, the remarkable passage in the first movement's development in which Beethoven bloody-mindedly repeats an F sharp major chord for 28 consecutive measures. This eventually involves the elimination of all other musical elements: there is no melody, no rhythm, just this chord, a harmonic intruder in the midst of a sonata in D major. The insane length and all-around improbability of this passage force us to rehear everything that has preceded it. When Beethoven is finally finished with this chord, and effortlessly modulates us back home in three little phrases – what F sharp major? – the work's peace, now knowing what it is to be disturbed, takes on a more fragile, tender quality. This is vintage Beethoven: even what on the surface seems merely lovely, upon closer examination is revealed to be complex and fraught with meaning.

No less layered and finely wrought is Op. 31 No. 1, but here the brilliant detail is placed at the service of high comedy – if Op. 31 No. 2, its companion, is *The Tempest*, number 1 is *Much Ado About Nothing*. It is a work that both begins and ends with a joke, and while what comes in between is on occasion truly moving, it never abandons its central mission: to explore every variety of musical humour, rough or refined. The first movement revolves around one ingenious premise: the inability of the two hands to play together – the right hand keeps anticipating the beats, making the left, which is the one actually doing what it is supposed to, sound slothful. It's already funny in its first appearance, but turns uproarious as the hands' inability to get it together leads first to (mock?) rage, and then to a zany and fruitless race up and down the keyboard – an early 19th century Wile E. Coyote and Roadrunner routine.

In the second movement, the humour takes the form of parody: it is a devastating imitation of an aria from an Italian opera, complete with an oom-pah-pah accompaniment and ornamentation that is at times absurdly florid. At the same time, though, Beethoven *loved* Italian opera – he admired Cherubini more than practically any other composer – and whatever else it

might be, this movement is uncommonly beautiful. It is a send-up, to be sure, but it is simultaneously a tribute. And in the hands of Beethoven, perhaps the most powerful musical personality who ever lived, it becomes something its source material never could be: transcendental.

The wit of the finale is of a gentler variety, and the movement itself is not as immediately arresting as the first two. But it was a crucial source of inspiration to no less a genius than Schubert, who used it as a very literal model for the finale of one of his last masterpieces – the A major Piano Sonata, D959. Phrase by phrase, he follows Beethoven's shifts of register, character, note values – everything. Both the Beethoven and the Schubert end with a quick-as-a-flash presto, in each case immediately preceded by the movement's most striking moment: a silence-filled iteration of the finale's main theme, the theme itself seeming to break down. In the Schubert, this gives the material a new and heartbreaking vulnerability. In the Beethoven, once again, the innovation is played for laughs: the silences have knocked a rather suave theme charmingly off-kilter. It's as if Beethoven is mocking himself for any hint of earnestness he displayed earlier; however dazzlingly and lovingly crafted it might be, earnestness has no place in this work.

Op. 31 No. 1, played less frequently than the two sonatas that follow it, needs to be rescued from obscurity; the 'Waldstein' needs rescuing from its own success. It is so often played, it is difficult to hear with open ears, and it is done no favours by the hordes of piano students who tear into it with mostly misdirected enthusiasm. I often wish that like its similarly abused companion, the 'Appassionata', it had been given a nickname derived not from its dedicatee, but its primary affect: *Sonata Misterioso*. For while it is undeniably a piece of tremendous energy, that energy is often more potential than kinetic: a great deal of the sonata unfolds in the piano-pianissimo range, and nearly all of it, in a good performance, should convey a sense of wonder. Even the brilliant first movement is not without its shadows; all of its motives feature moments that hover between major and minor. The movement ends in triumph, but afterward,

the uncertainty it hinted at comes right to the fore: the introduction to the finale is a masterpiece of indistinctness. Most of its phrases pose unanswered questions, its tonality is frequently in flux, and even its metre is not always clear – it is a portrait of instability in sound. When it finally resolves itself into the finale proper, C major has never sounded so open, so life-affirming. The 'Waldstein' is known primarily for a certain athletic quality, but what makes it a masterpiece is the way in which, with ever-increasing power and rapture, it conjures the infinite. Among the many great gifts Beethoven gives us, this vision of the beyond may be the greatest and most unfathomable of them all.

Jonathan Biss

Pianist Jonathan Biss's approach to music is a holistic one. In his own words: *I'm trying to pursue as broad a definition as possible of what it means to be a musician.* As well as being one of the world's most sought-after pianists, a regular performer with major orchestras, concert halls and festivals around the globe and co-Artistic Director of Marlboro Music, Jonathan Biss is also a renowned teacher, writer and musical thinker.

His deep musical curiosity has led him to explore music in a multi-faceted way. Through concerts, teaching, writing and commissioning, he fully immerses himself in projects close to his heart, including *Late Style*, an exploration of the stylistic changes typical of composers – Bach, Beethoven, Brahms, Britten, Elgar, Gesualdo, Kurtág, Mozart, Schubert, and Schumann – as they approached the end of life, looked at through solo and chamber music performances, masterclasses and a Kindle Single publication *Coda*; and *Schumann: Under the Influence* a 30-concert initiative examining the work of Robert Schumann and the musical influences on him, with a related Kindle publication *A Pianist Under the Influence*.

This 360° approach reaches its zenith with Biss and Beethoven. In 2011, he embarked on a nine-year, nine-album project to record the complete cycle of Beethoven's piano sonatas. Starting in September 2019, in the lead-up to the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth in December 2020, he will perform a whole season focused around Beethoven's Piano Sonatas, with more than 50 recitals worldwide. This includes performing the complete sonatas at Wigmore Hall and Berkeley, multi-concert-series in Washington, Philadelphia, and Seattle, as well as recitals in Rome, Budapest, New York and Sydney.

One of the great Beethoven interpreters of our time, Biss's fascination with Beethoven dates back to childhood and Beethoven's music has been a constant throughout his life. In 2011 Biss released *Beethoven's Shadow*, the

first Kindle eBook to be written by a classical musician. He has subsequently launched *Exploring Beethoven's Piano Sonatas*, Coursera's online learning course that has reached more than 150,000 subscribers worldwide; and initiated *Beethoven/5*, a project to commission five piano concertos as companion works for each of Beethoven's piano concertos from composers Timo Andres, Sally Beamish, Salvatore Sciarrino, Caroline Shaw and Brett Dean. The latter will be premiered in February 2020 with the Swedish Radio Symphony Orchestra and subsequently performed by orchestras in USA, Germany, France, Poland and Australia.

As one of the first recipients of the Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award in 2003, Biss has a long-standing relationship with Mitsuko Uchida with whom he now enjoys the prestigious position of Co-Artistic Director of Marlboro Music. Marlboro holds a special place for Biss, who spent twelve summers there, and for whom nurturing the next generation of musicians is vitally important. Biss continues his teaching as Neubauer Family Chair in Piano Studies at Curtis Institute of Music.

Biss is no stranger to the world's great stages. He has performed with major orchestras across the US and Europe, including New York Philharmonic, LA Philharmonic, Boston Symphony Orchestra, Cleveland Orchestra, Philadelphia Orchestra, San Francisco Symphony, Danish Radio Symphony Orchestra, CBSO, London Philharmonic Orchestra and Concertgebouw. He has appeared at the Salzburg and Lucerne Festivals, has made several appearances at Wigmore Hall and Carnegie Hall, and is in demand as a chamber musician.

He was the first American to be named a BBC New Generation Artist, and has been recognised with many other awards including the Leonard Bernstein Award presented at the 2005 Schleswig-Holstein Festival, Wolf Trap's Shouse Debut Artist Award, the Andrew Wolf Memorial Chamber Music Award, Lincoln Center's Martin E. Segal Award, an Avery Fisher Career Grant, the 2003 Borletti-Buitoni Trust Award, and the 2002 Gilmore Young Artist Award.

Surrounded by music from an early age, Jonathan Biss is the son of violist and violinist Paul Biss and violinist Miriam Fried, and grandson of cellist Raya Garbousova (for whom Samuel Barber composed his cello concerto). He studied with Leon Fleisher at the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, and gave his New York recital debut aged 20.

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