

Ludwig van Beethoven

(1770-1827)

The Last Three Sonatas

Sonata No. 30 in E Major, Opus 109 (22:15)

- 1 I Vivace ma non troppo (4:25)
- 2 II Prestissimo (2:29)
- 3 III Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo (Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung) (15:21)

Sonata No. 31 in A-flat Major, Opus 110 (21:46)

- 4 I Moderato cantabile molto espressivo (7:49)
- 5 II Allegro molto (2:13)
- 6 III Adagio, ma non troppo Arioso dolente (Klagender gesang) (3:52)
- 7 IV Fuga: Allegro, ma non troppo L'istesso tempo di Arioso (5:26)
- 8 V L'istesso tempo della Fuga poi a poi di nuovo vivente (nach und nach wieder auflebend) (2:26)

Sonata No. 32 in c minor, Opus 111 (30:29)

- 9 I Maestoso - Allegro con brio ed appassionato (9:48)
- 10 II Arietta: Adagio molto semplice e cantabile (20:41)

Victor Rosenbaum, piano

A note from the performer...

I first performed these three works together at a concert in Boston's Jordan Hall on October 19, 1973. While performing them individually many times since, I did not revisit these sonatas as the monumental trilogy that they are until thirty years later, in November of 2003. A few months afterwards, on the afternoon of January 8, 2004, I recorded them, once again in Jordan Hall.

Beethoven wrote these works between 1820 and 1822 at a time when he was suffering from a variety of maladies including nearly total deafness. While it is not known whether he knew at the time that these would be his last sonatas (he did go on to write more piano music: two sets of *Bagatelles* and the "*Diabelli*" *Variations*), the music does convey a sense - particularly in the last movement of Opus 111 - of being what Lewis Lockwood so aptly describes (see notes which follow) as "a self-consciously, final statement."

While the works are poignantly retrospective and internal, they are, at the same time, forward looking, both in the transcendent character that emerges from the depths of emotion and also in a compositional sense - exploring vast new territories of the imagination and writing for the instrument in startling ways that foreshadow virtually all piano music to come.

For the convenience of the listener and for study purposes, the present CD lists the movements and sections of each sonata. (Opus 109 has three distinct movements and Opus 111 two, the last in each case being a theme and variations, but in Opus 110, with its alternating ariosos and fugues, the traditional movement demarcations are less clear). However, on concert programs I have often chosen not to list the movements, encouraging the listener to follow, not the parts of these sonatas, but rather the whole and continuous narratives that

unfold, much like an epic poem, play or novel. Again, as Lockwood puts it so well, "the concealment of formal juncture is a basic aspect of the late style, and it is in its glory in these three works."

Clearly, each of these sonatas stands alone as a great artistic statement. Taken together, however, – joined by a myriad of thematic and motivic relationships as well as by tonalities a major third apart which finally settle in the pure and ultimate wisdom of C Major – the three sonatas constitute a powerful and, perhaps, unparalleled musical and emotional journey.

~ Victor Rosenbaum

**Excerpt from *Beethoven: The Music and the Life*
by Lewis Lockwood (published by W.W. Norton and Company)**

With the publication of Opus 106, seemingly unfathomable and to most musicians unplayable, the piano sonata could never be the same again. It is against the background of this monumental achievement that we must see the last three piano sonatas. Resolutely original, independent, fully realized masterpieces that they are, we can nevertheless dimly perceive that they form a trilogy, the more so as they originated as a group from a commission by Adolph Martin Schlesinger in Berlin in a letter to Beethoven of April 11, 1820. Although Schlesinger's letter is lost we know what it must have said, since Beethoven told him on April 30 that, in addition to their discussions about other, lesser works, for forty ducats each he could supply "an opus of three sonatas." As usual he was rushing ahead of himself, for he had only just begun to jot down some ideas for what turned out to be the first movement of Opus 109 while the others were at best dimly imagined visions waiting to be fleshed out. Beethoven was then in the midst of work on the *Missa solennis*, and when the deadline for its presentation passed on March 9, 1820, with Archduke Rudolph's inauguration as archbishop of Olmütz, it was clear that he would need much more time for the completion of the Mass but also that he could turn his attention to some smaller-scale projects – like the three piano sonatas. The first to be finished was the E Major Sonata, Opus 109, which became his main project during the summer of 1820 and was ready by the fall. He then began the next sonata, Opus 110, in the spring of 1821, finishing it by December. Then came his first work on the C Minor Sonata, Opus 111, which he finished much more quickly than the previous two, and he was able to send both Opus 110 and Opus 111 to Schlesinger around February 1822. Still, there was work to do,

as Beethoven then revised the second movement of Opus 111 and dispatched the revision in early April 1822. Besides his continuing preoccupation with the Mass, the magnum opus of these years, he managed to finish a set of Eleven Bagatelles for Piano, Opus 119, early in 1821 and also, in the fall of 1822, his overture for the reopening of the Josephstadt Theater, *The Consecration of the House*.

Beethoven's pianistic imagination is stamped on every page of these three sonatas. Deaf as he was, his sustained ability to compose at the keyboard – to use his fingers to unleash his imagination – must have released a wealth of new ideas. Undreamed-of sonorities and multivariate figuration patterns appear in each of these works, exploiting both keyboard and pedals in ways that went beyond even his most innovative earlier keyboard works. We find arpeggiated cadenzalike passages through several octaves; rapid parallel thirds and sixths; delicate figurations; use of *una corda* pedal effects; and sustained trills in extreme registers against continuing melodic and contrapuntal lines in other parts. In each case these pianistic effects were grounded in the structural marrow of the individual movement and of the work as a whole. Moreover, each sonata has an idiosyncratic design in which the form arises even more dramatically from the material than it had in even the most original middle-period works. Here the macroscopic formal shaping is even more fully detached from the expected norms because Beethoven had moved away from the processive developmental methods that tended to govern his major works before 1815 (except those experimental, fantasialike works such as the "Moonlight" and "Tempest" Sonatas). In the late sonatas we feel that the form is in process of emerging as the material of a given movement realizes its potential from beginning to end. Though such a feeling can always be inferred from true masterworks, here it is more palpable than almost anywhere else in Beethoven.

The psychological aspect of what I call the "process of emergence" is given primacy, and the traditional means by which formal expectations were created and satisfied in classical sonatas, even in his most path-breaking earlier ones, are often suspended, elided, or concealed. This concealment of formal junctures is a basic aspect of the late style, and it is in its glory in these three works.

Sonata Opus 109

If we consider the three sonatas as totalities we see that Opus 109 is somewhat ambiguous in the weight and balance of its movements. It has a curious three-movement plan: Vivace, a short and intense rapid-tempo first movement in the tonic, E major; Prestissimo, a still more rapid Scherzo in the tonic minor; and Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo in E major (theme and six variations plus coda), a calm, deeply expressive movement, the longest of the three, to conclude. The sequence of tempos is unprecedented: Beethoven had previously used a first-movement Vivace only in the Seventh Symphony, reserving it mainly for finales, as in the Fourth Piano Concerto and the *Lebewohl* Sonata. Even for this purpose he had only begun to use Vivace to replace Allegro or Presto as a finale tempo in a few middle-period works; it was becoming more frequent in his last works, above all in the Scherzos of the last quartets. As for Prestissimo as a faster variant for Presto, he had used it as a main tempo in three early piano works but not since. And as for ending with a variation set, this in itself is not a radical step, but the intensity of this movement and its many tempo changes breaks with its precedents (such as the finale of the "Harp" Quartet, Opus 74). The theme itself, which Beethoven labeled in German "Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung" ("Songlike, with the greatest inwardness of feeling"), is a magnificent specimen of "hymnlike"

Sonata Opus 110

melodies in Beethoven slow movements. Each variation then carries its own tempo or character designation and in some cases a new meter: (1) *molto espressivo*; (2) *Leggiermente*; (3) *Allegro vivace*, 2/4; (4) "Etwas langsamer als das Thema" ("A little slower than the theme"), 6/8; (5) *Allegro, ma non troppo*, 4/4; and (6) "Tempo I del thema" ("Original tempo of the theme") for the final peroration. There is evidence in Beethoven's autograph that the first movement goes right on to the second without pause, despite his having written "attacca" and then canceled it. And Nicholas Marston has shown that the same immediacy of connection is wanted between the *Prestissimo* and the variations finale.

Even more surprising is Marston's discovery that the order of composition of the movements, as disclosed in the sketches, is quite unusual. To begin with, the first movement was apparently planned as a separate composition, intended for a piano method by Friedrich Starke, and Beethoven's friend Franz Oliva spurred him to use the "little new piece" as the first movement of the new sonata he needed for Schlesinger. It seems clear that, once he decided on the change, Beethoven went ahead and composed, first, the third-movement theme; then the second movement; then the third-movement variations. Afterward he undoubtedly revised the whole to bring it all into its fully mastered coherence, in which, as Marston remarks, the third-movement theme "effectively recomposes the first movement and concludes its [structural] 'unfinished business' while also foreshadowing the structure of the third movement."

The compactness and brevity of the first movement of Opus 109 is mirrored in that of Opus 110 (a fairly short *Moderato cantabile* movement), but the continuation of this second sonata brings an entirely different pattern. The F-minor Scherzo is a fierce counterpart to the *Prestissimo* of Opus 109, but then the sonata turns in a wholly new direction. A short *adagio* introductory phrase gives way to a dramatic and atmospheric *Recitativo* that closes into a "Klagender Gesang" ("Song of Lament") in A^b minor. This "arioso," of transcendent beauty and depth, turns out to be a lyrical preparation for the main body of the finale, which emerges as a fully developed fugue in the home tonic of A-flat major on a subject that clearly derives from the opening theme of the first movement.

This poetic fugue is another example of Beethoven's late-period blending of cunning contrapuntal artifice with his most expressive modes of utterance. It finds room halfway through for a return of the "Klagender Gesang" in G minor, a key remote from the home tonic, even in Beethoven's uses of extended tonality. The fugue subject then returns in inverted form in G major. After further modulatory and contrapuntal adventures, including augmentation and diminution, the subject finds its way back to A-flat major and launches into a coda that synthesizes all earlier complexities, while it also confirms the sense of homecoming by bringing the subject triumphantly in high register and in full chordal style while the left hand rolls sixteenth-patterns below. Finally the whole suggests a circular time-space by its closing reference back to the cascading tonic arpeggios of the first movement.

Sonata Opus 111

The last sonata gives every sign of being a self-consciously final statement. There is no evidence that after Opus 111, Beethoven ever thought of writing another piano sonata, as he moved on to complete his other grand projects. Nothing in the general literature is more familiar than speculation as to why this C-minor sonata has "only" two movements, and no controversy is more useless. In July 1822 Maurice Schlesinger, by now established in Paris, wrote to Beethoven to thank him for entrusting "your masterworks" to him and his father for publication, but also asked "most submissively, if you wrote for the work only one *Maestoso* and one *Andante*; or if perhaps the [final] *Allegro* was accidentally forgotten by the copyist." Ten days later his father wrote from Berlin with the same question. If Beethoven bothered to reply we don't know; the chances are that he simply passed it over in grim silence. Schindler also claimed to have been worried about the absence of a third movement, and writes that he asked Beethoven for an explanation. This time Beethoven replied that he hadn't had time to write one, an answer whose irony was probably lost on Schindler. The lack of any sketches or even jottings for a potential third movement makes it apparent that Beethoven never intended the *Arietta* to be anything other than the final movement. Even so, the question continued to be asked, as when Wendell Kretzschmar, Thomas Mann's Pennsylvania-born music teacher in *Doctor Faustus*, found himself lecturing to a bored general audience on just this issue, stuttering violently as he tried to convey to his lay audience what premonitions of greatness and death lay in this movement, which could not possibly be followed by anything else.

This opening of the *Maestoso*, with its *forte* jagged downward leap of

a diminished seventh followed by a full diminished seventh chord on F \sharp , creates an immediate instability, a harmonic crisis that defines no tonic, until it finds its way in a softer dynamic to an apparent clarifying cadence in C minor. But then in succession we encounter the other two diminished sevenths of the tonal system, those on B \flat and on E \flat , expanding the last of these through winding ways until, finally, the dominant of C minor breaks the suspense, preparing the way to the *Allegro* first movement. The diminished-seventh leaps of this extraordinary opening have a strong impact on the later course of the first movement. So striking and pre-Romantic, this opening has a precedent in another genre: it is, again, the introduction to Florestan's dungeon scene that opens Act 2 of *Fidelio*, which uses all three diminished-seventh chords of the tonal system and a two-note, heartbeat figure in the tympani tuned to a diminished fifth. The larger shape of the sonata grows organically from this opening *Maestoso*. The C-minor *Allegro* movement not only has strong affinities with other representatives of Beethoven's "C-minor mood" but its opening theme was consciously associated by Beethoven with two great precedents – one is the fugue subject of the *Kyrie* in the Mozart *Requiem*, the other is the subject of the fugal finale of Haydn's F Minor String Quartet, Opus 20 No. 5; Beethoven wrote both of these out on a sketch leaf that contains a draft of the beginning of the *Maestoso*. There are indications that at a preliminary stage of composition Beethoven considered writing the first movement of the sonata as a fugue, based on a subject he had originally sketched as early as 1801 while working on the Opus 30 violin sonatas. He even wrote out a full fugal exposition, which was suppressed in favor of the sonata-form movement as we have it. What these drafts show is the decisive importance of contrapuntal thinking in his last piano sonatas and in his last maturity altogether. It also appears that the *Maestoso* introduction only emerged in the plan of the work when Beethoven had given up

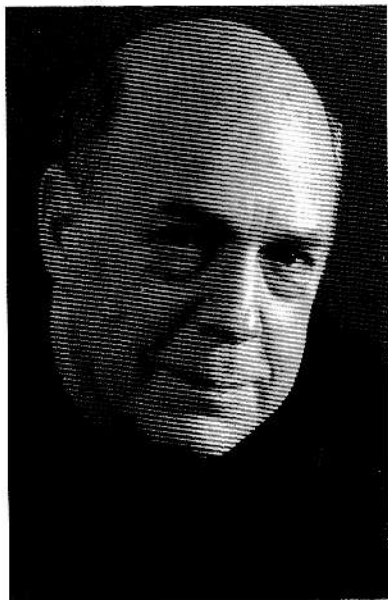
the idea of a fugal first movement and reshaped it into sonata form, thus providing an introduction that would be integral to the whole work. "[H]e considered using it at the end of the development section, to prepare the recapitulation of the main theme, [and] he contemplated bringing it back towards the end of the second movement." We see here the malleability of Beethoven's formal thinking in mapping out the larger plans of his late works, something we also find in the late quartets, in which at least two movements were transferred from one work to another.

The Arietta with its variations is in every sense a slow finale, not a slow movement that lacks a further movement as confirmation. Labeled "Adagio molto semplice e cantabile" ("Adagio, to be played very simply and in a singing manner"), it presents a theme of absolute directness and clarity. It is followed by four intricate variations that, as always, closely follow the contour and harmonic pattern of the theme, then a modulatory episode that breaks out of the C-major framework for an excursion to E-flat major and C minor, then a vast reprise of the theme with new figuration patterns streaming forth in the lower voices, and at the end a soaring conclusion with high trills in the upper register over a final statement of the first part of the theme, plus a poignant chromatic inflection. Mann's fictional music teacher, Wendell Kretzchmar, is speaking of this moment when he says that it represents

something entirely unexpected and touching in its mildness and goodness...[T]his added C# is the most moving, consolatory, pathetically reconciling thing in the world. It is like having one's hair or cheek stroked, lovingly, understandingly, like a deep and silent farewell look. It blesses the object, the frightfully harried formulation, with overpowering humanity, lies in parting so gently on the hearer's heart in eternal farewell that the eyes run over.

The Arietta's ending, in which the basic melody, now wreathed in accompanying figures, soars to higher regions, raises the conclusion of this work to the level reached at the end of Opus 109 by the quiet return of its Andante theme, and to the end of Opus 110 by its arpeggiated harmonies flying downward and then upward in a vast registral arch. In each instance we have the feeling that an incomparable musical experience has come to its end, has reached a wisdom that is granted only to the greatest artists. In early February 1820, Beethoven wrote the Conversation Book entry quoting Kant: "The moral law within us, and the starry heavens above us. Kant!!!" It is just this spirit, of the mortal, vulnerable human being striving against the odds to hold his moral being steady in order to gather strength as an artist to strive toward the heavens – it is this conjoining that we feel at the end of Opus 111 and in a few other moments in Beethoven's last works. They are moments that few composers before or after him ever quite achieved.

Pianist **Victor Rosenbaum** has performed widely as soloist and chamber musician in the United States, Europe, Asia, Israel, and Russia in such prestigious halls as Tully Hall in New York and the Hermitage and Philharmonia in St. Petersburg, Russia. He has collaborated with such artists as Leonard Rose, Arnold Steinhardt, Robert Mann, Joseph Silverstein, Malcolm Lowe, and the Cleveland and Brentano String Quartets, among others. Festival appearances have included Tanglewood, Rockport, Kfar Blum (Israel), Yellow Barn, Musicorda, the International Keyboard Institute and Festival, and Masters de Pontlevoy in France. Recent seasons have brought him to Chicago, Minneapolis, Tokyo,



St. Petersburg, Tel Aviv and Jerusalem for recitals. His early teachers were Elizabeth Brock, Martin Marks and Rosina Lhevinne (at Aspen) and he later studied with Leonard Shure. Now a renowned teacher himself, he is on the faculties of the Mannes College of Music, New England Conservatory, and the Longy School of Music, where he was Director and President from 1985 to 2001. Mr. Rosenbaum gives master classes and lectures at venues worldwide, including the Jerusalem Music Center, London's Royal Academy, Royal College, and Guildhall School, the Toho School in Tokyo, St. Petersburg Conservatory, Juilliard, Eastman, and many others. His highly praised recording of Schubert, which *Classical disCDigest* described as "a powerful and poignant record of human experience" is also on Bridge Records.

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