



Ludwig van Beethoven

(1770-1827)

Complete Sonatas for Piano, Vol. 4

Garrick Ohlsson, piano

Sonata No. 12 in A-flat Major, Op. 26 (21:26)

- 1 I Andante con Variazioni (8:41)
- 2 II Scherzo: Allegro molto (2:52)
- 3 III Marcia Funebre sulla morte d'un Eroe (6:36)
- 4 IV Allegro (3:08)

Sonata No. 15 in D Major, Op. 28 (26:08)

- 5 I Allegro (10:23)
- 6 II Andante (7:50)
- 7 III Scherzo: Allegro vivace (2:19)
- 8 IV Rondo: Allegro ma non troppo (5:22)

Sonata No. 27 in E Minor, Op. 90 (14:24)

- 9 I Mit Lebhaftigkeit and durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck (5:23)
- 10 II Nicht zu geschwind und sehr singbar vorzutragen (8:54)



...I wish things were different in the world.

Beethoven, to his publisher Hoffmeister, 1801

To a casual listener these three sonatas may at first seem largely to be serene examples of “easy listening;” to the intent listener, they are anything but. To the student of history, they show changes, often radical, in the very idea of what a sonata in Beethoven’s day could be. They abound in novelties of form, resemble no other works, and hold their places in the canonic “32” as securely as their more famous peers. Beethoven was making things different in the world – of music.

Received wisdom to the middle of the last century held that these were “transitional” sonatas. More recent opinion has it that each Beethoven sonata is a transition to the next, that each is a separate landmark in a great musical geography mapped out by the composer as by no one before or since. With the first two examples on this recording, that territory was marked out more than *two hundred* years ago (!) yet the music strikes our modern ears as ever fresh.

The Sonatas Opp. 26, 27 and 28 were all completed in the awesomely creative year 1801. Beethoven’s name was in every music shop where his newest publications were

proudly displayed: two piano concerti, two violin sonatas, a horn sonata, a quintet for piano and winds, a ballet, a symphony and six string quartets. Society’s most elevated families welcomed the young man into its palatial homes – hoping he might be persuaded to play their none-too-sturdy pianos. Common folk recognized Beethoven as he walked the streets of Vienna. He generated excitement everywhere. Although at age thirty-one he had not yet developed the leonine appearance we know too well, some persons found him intimidating. And, no matter how difficult the music he wrote, people rushed to buy it, to try it.

The **Sonata in A-flat Major**, Op. 26 – despite its blandishments – must have seemed peculiar, none of its movements being in the expected sonata form. Admirers of Mozart might have recalled an odd Sonata in A Major [K.331] of seventeen years earlier, itself lacking a sonata-form movement. Perhaps that had given Beethoven the idea for this work. No one knew then; no one knows today.

Dedicated to Beethoven's patron Prince Carl von Lichnowsky, its first movement, *Andante con Variazioni*, features a strolling 34-bar theme and five variations of comparable length, ending in a little coda – all notated in exactly the same tempo. The hands are together, then apart. Registers and textures change. Hovering above the melody, trills emerge. A spell is cast.

Eyebrows must have been raised at the Scherzo, *Allegro molto*, which sweeps away the earlier enchantment by its speed and curious proportions. Normally a two-part form with each half repeated, this piece has a first part of only 15 bars (which, the score instructs, must not be repeated) and a second of 51 bars (which must be repeated, a total of 102 bars). The further it goes, the harder it gets. By contrast, the central Trio neatly balances its two sections by repeating them in usual fashion, the pianist's hands rocking in paired octaves for a gentle lilt. Then the Scherzo reappears to be played through without any repeat, a breathless form of musical humor. Not for nothing does the word *scherzo* mean, literally, *joke*.

Marcia Funebre sulla morte d'un Eroe (Fu-

neral March on the Death of a Hero). Beethoven's hero is nameless but the musical occasion is as serious and ceremonial as any. It treads its solemn path resolutely in the manner of one of Gossec's slow marches which military bands across Europe were accustomed to play at grand events. With this bit of morbidity, Beethoven comes close to abandoning musical abstraction for a kind of pictorialism – further suggesting an uncommon intent to the sonata. The key, A-flat minor, is rare (Hummel used it in his Trumpet Concerto's slow movement two years later, so may have gotten the idea here). In the central Trio, drums seem to roll and trumpets blare. Eventually, the imagined cortege recedes into the dusk.

To say that the final *Allegro* trickles into being hardly conveys an idea of what an original idea it is. Not a melody, hardly a motive, it is more a texture of notes providing impetus everywhere!). Brilliant scales cascade down the keyboard before the showery trickles return. The movement's middle is marked by an outburst in C Major – all rising figures and snappy, lightning-like cadences. As the other sections return, it becomes clear that we are in a rondo, not

a rain shower. Beethoven's pupil Carl Czerny tells us that the fingery patterns of this score are purposeful reminders of the Clementi-Cramer passage work heard in Vienna by Beethoven a year earlier at the hands of a competitor.

Interestingly, this sonata evidently captivated Frédéric Chopin. He not only performed it publicly but taught it frequently and used its example to include a *Marche funèbre* in his own Sonata in B-flat Minor. The Soviet pianist Sviatoslav Richter featured this sonata throughout his career, including it among the works programmed for his first recital tour in the U.S. in 1960.

Beethoven's Sonata in D Major, Op. 28, dubbed *Pastorale* by its publisher Crazz of Hamburg, is dedicated to the elderly, esteemed Secretary of Vienna's Academy of Fine Arts, Joseph von Sonnenfels. What Sonnenfels thought of the piece has not been recorded, but, as soon as it was published 1802, the public took it off the shelves by the hundreds. A Beethoven sonata of such sweetness and placidity was something to cherish, all the more because the title may have evoked images of the meadows, fields

and forests which surrounded Vienna at the beginning of the 19th Century and which Beethoven was known to cherish as sources of inspiration.

Pulsing pedal tones (quiet repeating bass notes, faintly reminiscent of old-fashioned hurdy-gurdy music) drone beneath the first subject, an 8-bar melody, lulling us into an *Allegro* which is in no rush to show its sonata-form. The transition presents no less than four new motives to beguile the ears. So clever is all of this that we almost miss the way the fourth motive becomes the second subject. Perky disjointedness marks the closing subject. Like the Exposition, the Development and Recapitulation are marked by those pulsing pedal tones which also underpin the quiet Coda. In this charming movement, Beethoven is at his most genteel – an urbane man whose heart beats with the countryside.

The *Andante* in D minor, the composer's favorite among movements in his sonatas to date (according to Czerny, who says that Beethoven often played it for himself with satisfaction) is laid out with this plan: its three sections (ABA) each have two sub-

parts which are repeated in order during A and B, then varied in the final A. Such description reveals no more about the music than an x-ray does about a person. Then there is the matter of texture: Beethoven has laid out the lines of his score like those of a string quartet. When we notice that, our attention is snared – first by the imitation of a 'cello's strings being plucked under the sustained melody and harmony of bowed strings, then by the group playing short, jerky chords before and after lightly bowed notes from the first violin. And the point strikes us that this is a miracle of writing for a percussion instrument, the piano, which is made to evoke with a single performer the effect of four people playing other instruments.

The quirks of Beethoven's Scherzo, *Allegro vivace*, include an opening gesture of four notes falling through as many octaves, a jocular mood produced by more than two dozen two-beat musical hiccups, a Trio whose first part must be repeated but whose second part must not be repeated (a reference to the similar place in Op. 26?) and the sense, by the end, that we have been had, that Beethoven has put one over on us.

The Rondo, *Allegro ma non troppo*, is formed from the seven usual parts (ABACABA) which anyone would expect from this man but, unusually, opens with the first movement's pedal-tone Ds and a descending melody based on the same seven pitches. Its lilting rhythm tricks the ear into thinking that this is new while what it achieves so ingeniously is a demonstration of underlying unity. For sheer fun, the final A is treated both as a variation and, thanks to increased speed (*più allegro quasi presto*), as a Coda.

While some thirteen years separate the Sonatas Opp. 26 and 28 from the **Sonata in E Minor**, Op. 90, the music is a world apart. Beethoven's world in 1814, too, was very different: the Napoleonic Wars had devastated Europe; the aristocratic fortunes which had supported the composer before were reduced to fractions of what they had been; deafness had claimed much of the man's social life and his ability to earn money as a pianist. Obviously, writing piano sonatas no longer attracted Beethoven the way it once did. Vienna's pianists had had four years to stretch their fingers over his most recent effort, Op. 81a. Now at age forty-three,

Beethoven found himself inspired to write a new sonata in two movements of astonishing contrast and mutual dependence. He dedicated the work to Count Moritz von Lichnowsky, brother of Prince Carl who had died a few months earlier.

Instead of an Italian inscription at the beginning of the first movement, we find *Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck* (With liveliness and throughout with feeling and expression). A rhythmic motive presses impetuously forward four times, alternating dynamics **f** and **p**. Then the tempo changes. The music quietsens and slows. The original pulse returns, only to slow again. The primary subject thus has two faces – one intense, the other relaxed. From a brief silence, the transition takes flight across the keyboard, scales cascading downward four times. A terrific dissonance separates the two faces of the second subject – one frantically looking upward, the other turning its sober gaze downward. Brief silence precedes the Development which treats both aspects of the primary subject before reaching the tonic key 14 bars ahead of the Recapitulation – a radical departure from Beethoven's own

norm. Nothing is settled by what ensues, even with a Coda of 23 bars.

What resolves the high degree of tension generated in the listener by the first movement is the gentle finale, *Nicht zu geschwind und sehr singbar vorzutragen* (To be played not too fast and very singingly). An expansive, continuously lyrical seven-part rondo, which is marked *dolce* (sweetly) at the beginning and later *teneramente* (tenderly), it never rises above **f**. In fact, the player is reminded thirty-five times to play **p** and eleven times to play even softer, **pp**. The outcome is peace – for a different world.

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well as the Romantic repertoire. His concerto repertoire alone is unusually wide and eclectic—ranging from Haydn and Mozart to works of the 21st century—and to date he has at his command some 80 concertos, which he regularly performs with the world's leading orchestras. A musician of commanding versatility, Mr. Ohlsson is also a consummate chamber pianist. He has collaborated with many of the leading chamber groups of our time, including the Cleveland, Emerson, Takács and Tokyo String Quartets, and with violinist Jorja Fleezanis and cellist Michael Grebanier, he is a founding member of the San Francisco-based FOG Trio.

A prolific recording artist, Mr. Ohlsson can be heard on the RCA Victor Red Seal, Angel, Bridge, BMG, Delos, Hänssler, Nonesuch, Telarc, and Virgin Classics labels. For Bridge Records, he has recorded the following: Bach *Goldberg Variations*, BWV 988; Handel: *Suite No. 2*, HWV 427 BRIDGE 9193; Beethoven Sonatas, Vol. 1: Op. 7, Op. 78, Op. 101 BRIDGE 9198; Beethoven Sonatas, Vol. 2: Op. 2, No. 2, Op. 81, Op. 111 BRIDGE 9201; Beethoven Sonatas, Vol. 3: Op. 2, No. 3, Op. 14, No. 1, Op. 14, No. 2,

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A native of White Plains, N.Y., Mr. Ohlsson began his piano studies at the age of 8. He attended the Westchester Conservatory of Music and at age 13 entered the Juilliard School. His musical development has been influenced by a succession of distinguished teachers, most notably Claudio Arrau, Olga Barabini, Tom Lishman, Sascha Gorodnitzki, Rosina Lhévinne, and Irma Wolpe. Although he won First Prizes at the 1966 Busoni Competition in Italy and the 1968 Montréal Piano Competition, it was his 1970 triumph in the Chopin Competition in Warsaw, where he won the Gold Medal, that brought him worldwide recognition. Mr. Ohlsson was awarded Lincoln Center's Avery Fisher Prize in 1994 and received the 1998 University Musical Society Distinguished Artist Award in Ann Arbor, Michigan. Mr. Ohlsson won a 2008 Grammy Award in the "Best Solo Performance" category for his "Beethoven Sonatas, Vol. 3" (BRIDGE 9207). That, and the present disc, are part of his Complete Beethoven Sonata cycle, which will be issued by Bridge in 2008 and 2009.

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