Ludwig van Beethoven
(1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 23 in F minor, Op. 57, "Appassionata" (23:52)

1 I. Allegro assai (9:56)
2 II. Andante con moto – attacca (5:51)
3 III. Allegro, ma non troppo – Presto (8:05)

Piano Sonata No. 9 in E major, Op. 14, No. 1 (15:10)

4 I. Allegro (6:29)
5 II. Allegretto (5:52)
6 III. Rondo - Allegro comodo (2:49)

Piano Sonata No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111 (25:02)

7 I. Maestoso; Allegro con brio ed appassionato (8:40)
8 II. Arietta: Adagio molto, semplice e cantabile (16:22)

Vassily Primakov, piano

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In his memoir of Beethoven published in Vienna in 1874, *Aus dem Schwarzspanierhaus*, Dr. Gerhard von Beuning, who had known Beethoven personally, heard him play and improvise, and even inherited his piano, comments that:

> *It was as a consequence of Beethoven's sonatas that the piano was altered and strengthened into its present state. Indeed, it had almost to be made afresh. His gigantic piano sonatas must be regarded as inventions in a double sense, for he must already have had in mind the piano as perfected today, the piano of the future.*

The three piano sonatas on this disc, from the comparatively modest example that is Op. 14, No. 1, through the tumultuous and flamboyant *Appassionata* to the near-cosmic vision of Beethoven's final sonata, Op. 111, vividly demonstrate his developing conception of a music for the piano that transcended the capabilities of the instruments of his day, even as they formed a powerful spur to further technical improvements that eventually produced instruments capable of playing them. Von Breuning went so far as to write that it would be fully justified, in 1874, 'to call the modern piano the Beethoven piano'.

Yet if anything Beethoven's **Piano Sonata No. 9 in E major, Op. 14 No. 1** lags slightly behind these boundary-expanding achievements. It was composed in 1798, and appeared,

therefore, right after he had written one of his boldest works to date in the genre, the Sonata No. 8 in C minor, Op. 13. That sonata is generally known by the title *Pathétique* because its first publisher (with Beethoven's approval) had it printed under the appellation of *Grande Sonate Pathétique*. The *Pathétique* Sonata is, among other things, a classic expression of Beethoven's temperamental affinity for the key of C minor, a tonality he used to express urgency, dynamic drive, the inevitable force of fate and the individual's resistance to it. By contrast the two sonatas of Op. 14 (both of them dedicated to Baroness Josephine von Braun, whose husband was director of the Court Theatre in Vienna) are not at all of this character, being set in comparatively sunny major keys and laid out on a smaller scale. Indeed their expression is altogether more intimate, harking back more to the sonatas of Mozart, as Op. 14 No. 1 well exemplifies. But there is no sign that Beethoven considerd it a 'lesser' utterance than Op. 13. On the contrary, he clearly esteemed the piece, for in 1801-2 he made an arrangement of it for string quartet, thus ensuring that the music would circulate among string players as well as pianists.

The first of the three movements opens with an elegant theme that rises through a series of ascending fourths in the right hand, with a balancing phrase whose spacing on the keyboard does, indeed, have a quartet-like texture. The contrasting second theme is also based on a rising motion, but this time proceeds by narrow intervals through the chromatic scale. The development becomes more virtuosic, with flurries of semiquaver scales and arpeggios, but the movement ends peacefully.

The second movement, in E minor, has the character and form of a minuet, although it is not so marked. The central trio is in C major, and its melody is alluded to again in the coda of the movement. The finale is a good-natured rondo, in which Beethoven makes witty play with sudden changes of dynamics. On its final recurrence the rondo theme is syncopated against a triplet accompaniment – one of the few passages in the work that are actually difficult to play. Despite its unassuming technical requirements, however, Sonata No. 9 paves the way for some of Beethoven's later innovations in its dramatic contrasts of highly lyrical passages with those of very active texture, the sudden irruption of *gruppetti* in contrasting dynamics, and unexpected alternations of major and minor modes. Though Classical in its outward form, it hints at the more freely-associating lyric style of early Romanticism.

Piano Sonata No. 23 in F minor, Op. 57, known as the *Appassionata*, dates from nearly ten years later and has little obviously in common with Op. 14 No. 1; on the contrary, it is one of the most remarkable and ambitious works that Beethoven had yet created for the piano. It is conceived on a larger scale than even the *Pathétique*, though the

forms of its movements (sonata; theme with variations; sonata) are firmly classical, and their succession of tempi (fast – slow – fast) orthodox. But Beethoven applies the forms in unusual ways that allow him to express a wide range of moods, some of extreme intensity. The work was written while he was staying at the village of Döbling, near Vienna, in 1807, and was published the same year, dedicated to an aristocratic friend and admirer, Count Franz von Brunsvik. Beethoven claimed in this case to dislike the title *Appassionata*, which was, again, bestowed by the publisher; though he considered the music as such to be among the best things he had written for piano. His pupil Carl Czerny declared it 'too magnificent' for the title, and also asserted that this work demanded twice the abilities that performers had so far been able to develop in playing Beethoven's previous piano sonatas.

Not the least interesting aspect of the work is the fact that it was written at a time that the piano was undergoing rapid technological change, of which Beethoven was well aware. In 1803 he had acquired an Erard grand piano, a state-of-the-art instrument, and the *Appassionata* was clearly written for the full range of sonority these new pianos had made available, especially an extended high register. By choosing F minor as the key of the sonata, Beethoven was also able to avail himself lavishly of the thunderous effect of the bottom F, the lowest note on the Erard's keyboard. For the first time, a solo piano could emulate the power of a full orchestra, and this is the most innately 'symphonic' sonata he had yet composed, in fullness of tone and largeness of gesture.

Most players and critics have concurred that the result is one of Beethoven's greatest piano works, but it is interesting to note – if only to demur from – the opinion of the late Glenn Gould, who for his own recording of the sonata supplied a programme-note in which he complained of its 'egoistic pomposity', 'belligerent attitude' and a style which was 'as determined, combative, and resistant to concession as early eighteenth-century music is placative, supportive, and amenable to conciliation'. Certainly the *Appassionata*, most of all in its first movement, is one of those works where we cannot escape an almost physical impression of Beethoven's mesmerizing personality, his pugnacity, his defiance of fate and convention, his commanding presence at the keyboard as pianist and improviser. But for all its striking musical images, its sound and fury, there is nothing in this work that is merely rhapsodic or attitudinizing. On the contrary, it is one of the most rigorously organized of all his middle-period compositions.

If we do not look at the printed page, we may think the sonata begins with a slow introduction. In fact the tempo throughout the first movement is *Allegro assai* (very fast), but it is only after 50 bars that we are really made aware of the rapidity of the underlying pulse. By restricting himself to

octave unisons, long note-values, a virtual absence of counterpoint, and very quiet dynamics, Beethoven creates the illusion that the opening is slow-moving and deliberate. It expounds several separate elements: a gaunt, hollow theme in dotted rhythm that falls and then climbs in octave unison; a pathetic cadence-figure with a bird-like trill, and a laconic four-note 'drumbeat' rather like the famous four-note motif of the Fifth Symphony (it is actually a kind of crystallization of the preceding cadence-figure). A sudden decorative flurry and an ascending sequence of crashing triads break in upon the expectant atmosphere, but these opening elements continue to be developed, the four-note figure becoming a steady pulse of repeated notes that reveals the 12/8 time. This pulse becomes a sonorous broken-chord accompaniment to a transitional theme – sometimes erroneously identified as the second subject – which is essentially an inversion of the opening octave theme. The trills return, climb higher, and a *pianissimo* downward swoop over the whole range of the keyboard lands us in A flat minor and a genuine, suddenly furious second subject of torrential semiquaver figuration (in Sir Donald Tovey's words, the theme is 'the whole boiling of twenty-four semiquavers per bar') and an emphatically thrusting bass figure.

Here the headlong *Allegro assai* character is finally revealed; but a swift *diminuendo* brings back the quiet opening theme, with its cadence-figure and trills, now used to lead into the development, which starts in the unexpected key of E minor. This tumultuous section of the movement uses all the material previously heard, carrying the dotted-rhythm theme from the lowest to the highest register of the piano over a span of five octaves, and alternating the quieter ideas with increasing stretches of passionate virtuosity. Dramatic repetitions of the four-note 'drumbeat' figure trigger the recapitulation, in which the first-subject material can no longer be heard as slow because it is underpinned by a rapid pulsing in the bass. This flows into what is in effect a second development, though it can be regarded as the beginning of the coda, in which the dotted-rhythm theme is again carried from the depths to the heights, and virtuosic passage-work exhausts itself into pathetic repetitions of the four-note figure. The music slows to *Adagio*, and then a *fortissimo* enunciation of the four-note figure in full chords cadences back into F minor and sets off the final stage of the coda, *Più Allegro*, based on the first theme and rising to a choleric fusillade of syncopated chords, only to subside to a very quiet, almost whispered close over deep, tolling Fs.

The slow movement, in D flat, is a set of variations on a fascinating theme which combines two characters – that of a calm, still chorale in the tenor register, with the dotted rhythms of a march in the bass. It falls into two eight-bar units, both of which are repeated. The first of the four variations is essentially a syncopated version of the theme, with the left hand

playing on the off-beats. The second variation embellishes the theme, now in the left hand, in constant quaver arpeggios; while the third diminishes the accompaniment to running demisemiquavers, with the effect of doubling the speed. The theme is developed and alternated between the hands, without repetitions. This third variation drives to a florid climax and a downward cascade to arrive at the fourth variation, which is a coda-like reprise of the theme (Charles Rosen has noted that it feels like a recapitulation in a sonata movement) in slightly richer harmony, including a reference to the second variation. It appears that the movement is to end quietly, but before it finds its ultimate resolution a sudden *fortissimo* diminished-seventh chord (spread in the left hand, unbroken in the right – Tovey described this as 'the equivalent of a human shriek') jerks us straight into the finale.

The same diminished seventh now becomes a kind of trumpet fanfare, introducing a movement that is in effect a *perpetuum mobile* in sonata form. A coursing stream of semiquaver figures alternately drenches and buoys up a determined but grim first subject in octaves and plangent thirds. The thirds expand to triads in a smoothly descending second theme, and emphatically repeated six-note *gruppetti* steer the exposition to its end, the semiquaver flow never pausing as we move into the development.

Here the impression of an unstoppable toccata is all the stronger, as Beethoven elaborates the prevailing figuration into new shapes and infiltrates a new, rhythmic *staccato* theme also. Then a furious outburst of boiling broken chords unexpectedly recedes into quietness and slows, becoming a delicate climb up to the top of the keyboard and then down, still slowing, into its lowest depths, where a sustained C, quietly embellished with chords, becomes the dominant pedal that triggers the recapitulation. This is regular, with the second subject briefly appearing in D flat major before turning to the minor to confirm the harried, haunted character of the movement as a whole, and the stamping six-note *gruppetti* balefully return.

It was entirely conventional for a composer to direct, in a sonata movement, that the exposition section should be repeated before the development begins. But it was almost unheard of for him to require, as Beethoven does explicitly on his autograph manuscript, that the entire development and recapitulation should now be repeated instead. Quite apart from making the movement much more of a challenge to the performer's stamina, his intention must have been to intensify the sense of a relentless pursuit – to which the slow, quiet end of the development provides once again only a momentary breathing space. The recapitulation, on this second appearance, is provided with a different continuation, the *gruppetti* becoming thunderous drumbeats in the bass that eventually collide with two loud chords of F minor that initiate a

kind of manic country dance in *Presto* tempo, mockingly satirical in tone. This entirely new idea – a tiny self-contained structure with its own internal repeats – begins the coda, where the furious toccata figurations drive on torrentially to a brilliant, but brutally brusque conclusion, with no hint of deliverance from the iron grip of the minor mode.

Beethoven often conceived his piano sonatas in sets of three: the trilogies of Opp. 2, 10 and 31; the three sonatas of Op. 26 and Op. 27 (Nos. 1 and 2); Op. 53, Op. 54 and Op. 57: and Opp. 78 and 81a. Different from each other though they are, the sonatas in each of these collections can easily share a programme with each other. But there are indications that he may have viewed his last three piano sonatas, Opp. 109-111, composed from 1820 to 1822 at the instigation of the Parisian publisher Moritz Schlesinger, as not just a set but an actual triptych. Not only do they share adjacent opus numbers, but they echo aspects of each others' forms, in moods often so wayward and fantastic that they entirely overstep the bounds of classical decorum. Taken together, they form a continuous musical experience that suggests a journey toward enlightenment and serenity. It is also a journey *away* from the turbulence and massive proportions of the fearsome preceding sonata Op. 106, the *Hammerklavier*, a 'stand-alone' work if there ever was one.

Each of the last three sonatas seems to turn traditional processes (such as sonata form, variations, fugue) to highly individual ends. In all of them the traditional sonata-form first movement is drastically compressed, and one result of this is to throw the expressive centre of gravity onto the finale. (Only in the *Hammerklavier* does the final movement carry such emotional weight in relation to the structure as a whole, and that is as part of a much larger design.) Opp.109-111 also possess a seamless quality that is unprecedented in Beethoven's music. It is almost possible to imagine all the movements in each sonata performed *attacca*, making each piece sound as if it were only one movement.

This quality gives credence to the report of Beethoven's amanuensis and biographer Anton Schindler, that Beethoven told him these sonatas were composed 'in a single breath'. Some commentators have suggested that Beethoven was currently influenced by the ideas of the philosopher Immanuel Kant: Kant, who believed that all art (and especially music) should serve as a bridge between the natural world and the world of the spirit. In Beethoven's Conversation Book of February 1820, about the time that he was working on Op. 109, we find the comment 'The moral law in us and the starry sky above us – Kant!' This is an echo of the conclusion to the philosopher's *Critique of Pure Reason* ('Two things fill the soul with ever new and increasing wonder and reverence the oftener the minds dwells upon them – the starry sky above me and the moral law within me'). The expressive

range of these last three sonatas, and their bold metamorphosis of previous structural norms, seem in some sense a correlative of those words. 'Wonder and reverence', as well as contemplation of the infinity of the cosmos, certainly seem to be their goal in the extraordinary final movement of Op.111.

Beethoven's last piano sonata, **No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111**, was completed in January 1822, and he seems to have intended it should be dedicated to Antonie Brentano (the mother of Maximiliane Brentano, whom the Beethoven biographer Maynard Solomon has identified as the enigmatic 'Immortal Beloved'). But by the end of August he informed Schlesinger that he had decided to inscribe the work to his great friend Archduke Rudolph. Later he changed his mind, and asked that Antonie Brentano's name should be substituted: but he was too late, and her name only appeared on in the first English edition, issued by Clementi shortly after the work had already been published in Paris and Vienna. (Antonie eventually got the dedication of the *Diabelli Variations*, perhaps an adequate recompense for missing out on Beethoven's most 'spiritual' sonata.)

If anything, Op. 111 is more unorthodox in form than its two predecessors: it has only two movements, a powerfully compressed sonata-allegro and an immensely slow set of variations. So unusual was this that Schlesinger actually felt moved to enquire if the finale had been omitted by the copyist; and it became a long-discussed musical question. Readers of Thomas Mann's novel *Doktor Faustus* will never forget the account of the public lecture given (supposedly in the late 1890s) by the music-teacher Wendell Kretschmar, on the subject 'Why did Beethoven not write a third movement to the Sonata Op. 111?' The answer arrived at by Kretschmar, and by all lucid critics before and since, is that the two movements are so complete an experience in themselves that any further movement would be redundant. With the second movement the Sonata – not just this sonata, but the sonata species in its entirety – seems to have 'fulfilled its destiny, beyond which there was no going'.

Op. 111's first movement has a *Maestoso* introduction, of the highest drama. Yet the stern chords hammered out in its very first bars are no mere theatrical gesture: a sequence of dominant sevenths and their resolutions, they adumbrate the principal subject of the following *Allegro*, and the prominent trill that appears in the first full bar is an initial reference to a device that will take on enormous significance as the work proceeds. Moreover the transition to the main body of the movement is achieved with another, thunderous, trill deep in the bass; it continues into the start of the *Allegro*, in notes of twice the previous value, showing that the tempo must be doubled at this point. The *Allegro* is marked *con brio ed appassionato*, and its pugnacious main theme, with its

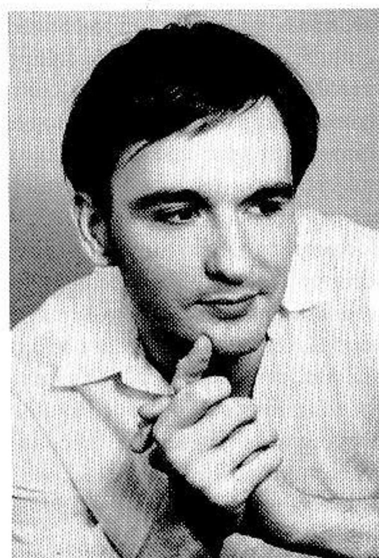
gruff beginning and irresistible following momentum, is an idea Beethoven had actually sketched many years earlier, apparently as a subject for a fugue. He begins to explore its contrapuntal possibilities at the transition towards the second subject – a consolatory idea that is brutally curtailed after only a few bars by a dramatic cascade that leads back to the main subject, now in C major. The development section is in fact a double fugue whose two themes derive from the main subject itself, the second being a free augmentation of the subject's first three barking notes. After the fugue concludes, the turbulence continues through the recapitulation, but the air finally clears in a coda, which sinks to an exhausted close in C major, finishing on a *pianissimo* chord whose outer notes are separated by all of five octaves. (In fact, the bottom C in this last bar is the deepest note Beethoven ever wrote for piano.)

This unexpectedly calm conclusion forms a natural transition to the finale, *Adagio molto semplice e cantabile* – which Beethoven called an Arietta. In this he was having a joke, or indulging in fierce irony: for 'arietta', the diminutive of aria, signifies a short air or song, usually of a frivolous nature, whereas this deeply serious and spiritual inspiration is almost the longest and most serious movement for piano he ever wrote. In fact the finale is a serene set of variations. The theme enunciated at the outset of the movement is one of the composer's most sublime melodic inspirations, at once intensely intimate and grandly monumental. Its initial, unforgettable three-note phrase, from which in a sense the entire movement springs, possesses a majestic dotted rhythm which prompted Kretschmar, in his lecture, to name it, among other things, 'meadow-land' ('*wiesengrund*'). (We can leave on one side the fact that this was a covert tribute, on Thomas Mann's part, to his musical advisor in the writing of the novel, Theodor Wiesengrund-Adorno.)

The variations unfold at one and the same basic, immensely slow pulse. Over that pulse, however, the note-values are progressively diminished, creating the impression that the music is gradually accelerating. At the same time, Beethoven slows down the rate of harmonic change, so that the music feels ever more static, or rather, free-floating within an infinite space. This amounts to the composer suspending our sense of time. Formally speaking there are only four variations, but within the space created for them the classical form seems dissolved into a process of continuous, ecstatic transfiguration of the basic ideas. Thus after the first variation, which is a kind of disembodied slow dance, and the second, with its flood of dotted rhythms, the third variation – the most agitated of them – is followed by a 'double' variation whose alternating quasi-repeats unfold in a wholly different sonority, restating the theme in low register and then elevating the music to the highest register of the keyboard. Here, the theme's outline appears in an

ethereal tracery, sublimely serene. Yet the expected ending seems to be indefinitely postponed in a huge 81-bar coda, brimming and tremulous with accelerating chains of trills that seem to promise cadence, harmonic movement, but instead embody a conception of endless motion within infinite stillness. Eventually the music dissolves in a last, long-sustained trill, and the work closes with a reminiscence of the theme's original 'meadow-land' rhythm. Though the theme itself does not return, these closing bars seem to round the melody out, resolving its 'open-ended' character into a gentle but definite conclusion which is also a gesture of parting and a suggestion that the variation-process continues, endlessly, on some other plane.

Notes by Malcolm MacDonald



The young Moscow-born pianist **Vassily Primakov** has enriched the current concert scene with blazing and deeply personal playing, excelling in repertoire that often lies far afield of the traditional Russian norm. At his 2004 concerto debut with the Westchester Philharmonic in Alice Tully Hall Jeremy Eichler of the *New York Times* reported that Primakov "gave a fiery performance of Rachmaninoff's *Second Piano Concerto*, with bold, expressive phrasing and dramatic commitment that brought the audience to its feet." Indeed, cheering audiences have become a hallmark of Primakov's platform appearances. In 1999 as a prizewinner of the Cleveland International Piano Competition, Primakov was cited by Donald Rosenberg of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* for his idiomatic mastery of the Chopin style: "Primakov once again played Chopin's *Sonata No.3*, showing why the jury awarded him the Chopin Prize. How many pianists can make a line sing as the 19-year-old Moscow native did on this occasion? The slow movement overflowed with dreamy lyricism shaped with a patient and colorful hand. Every poignant phrase took ethereal wing. Elsewhere the music soared with all of the turbulence and poetic vibrancy it possesses. We will be hearing much from this remarkable musician."

Vassily Primakov was born in Moscow in 1979. After early studies with his mother, he entered Moscow's legendary Central Special Music School at the age of eleven as a pupil of the brilliantly unorthodox pedagogue Vera Gornostaeva. At seventeen, after a summer at the Music Academy of the West in Santa Barbara, he came to New York to pursue studies at the Juilliard School with

another pedagogue who emphasizes a personal approach to the keyboard, the noted pianist Jerome Lowenthal, himself a student of Alfred Cortot and Willam Kapell. At Juilliard Mr. Primakov won the prestigious William Petschek Piano Recital Award, which presented his debut recital at Alice Tully Hall.

Vassily Primakov began his American career after winning First Prize in the 2002 Young Concert Artists (YCA) International Auditions. A brilliant recitalist and orchestral guest soloist, Mr. Primakov has performed throughout the U.S., and has made guest soloist appearances with the San Diego Symphony, Maryland Symphony, Utah Symphony, Westchester Philharmonic, Toledo Symphony, and Yakima Symphony, among others.

Prior to coming to the United States, Mr. Primakov won First Prize in the Rachmaninoff International Young Pianist Competition and First Prize in the Tchaikovsky Young Artist Competition. While a student at Juilliard, aided by a Susan W. Rose Career Grant, he placed among the top two laureates of the Cleveland International Piano Competition (1999) and won both the silver medal and the Audience prize in the 2002 Gina Bachauer International Artists Piano Competition.

I would like to express my gratitude and thank Adam Abeshouse and the Classical Recording Foundation for their support and generosity; Jerome Lowenthal - my guiding light and source of inspiration; Susan Rose for being such an angel; Konstantin Soukhovetski -for being a dear friend and for taking the wonderful photographs; Jamie Titus - for your vision and dedication; and Carlos Dos Santos-for your love and being there for me!

This recording is dedicated to Marina Primakova.

– Vassily Primakov, January 2008

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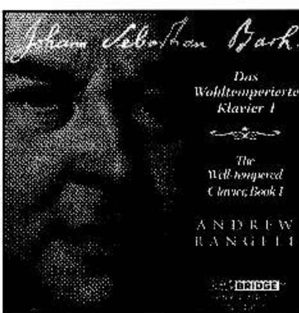

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