

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
(1770-1827)



Sonata No. 29 in B-flat Major, Op. 106 "Hammerklavier" (45:02)

- 1 I. Allegro (11:32)
- 2 II. Scherzo (Assai vivace) (2:36)
- 3 III. Adagio sostenuto (19:04)
- 4 IV. Allegro risoluto (11:51)

Sonata No. 16 in G Major, Op. 31, No. 1 (24:01)

- 5 I. Allegro vivace (6:43)
- 6 II. Andante grazioso (10:11)
- 7 III. Allegretto (7:07)

GARRICK ÖHLSSON, PIANO



The first three decades of the 19th century witnessed a musical phenomenon, the rise to veritable cult status of an often surly, usually unkempt, increasingly deaf composer – Beethoven – whose music made unprecedented demands upon performers, audiences, publishers and patrons. Beethoven fit that era supremely well, for it was one which accepted revolutionary ideas in philosophy and literature, in government and statehood, in the fine arts and applied sciences – even from difficult personalities. Vastness of concept and realization lay behind the works of Hegel and Goëthe as it did behind Napoleon's imperial campaigns, the rise of industrialism, the canvases of Friedrich and the unparalleled expressive forms of Beethoven himself.

Who before him had wrestled with forms the way Beethoven did? For him, expression was not the mere filling of a ready-made frame with the usual ingredients of melody, harmony, dynamics and rhythm the way one might follow the recipe to make a cake, but arm-to-arm combat between form and content – waged to the point of their fusion on a scale grander than almost ever before. The labor necessary for such achievement was unknown in music, with some works requiring *years* for their evolution from sketches through revisions to final form. Some have likened Beethoven's agony as a composer to Michelangelo's as a sculptor, endlessly chipping away the excess from great blocks of stone to reveal magnificent, seemingly inevitable forms trapped

within. Thus, when one encounters Beethoven's granitic monolith, the *Hammerklavier Sonata, Op. 106*, and seeks to comprehend the ideas behind its vastness, the task appears daunting and the composer all the more awesome.

Consider the length: the better part of three-quarters of an hour. For the first time in history, a piano sonata of proportions akin to the *Eroica!* Beethoven's expansion of sonata form here reaches its apogee among piano works. So symphonic is the sweep of its ideas that the great conductor Felix Weingartner was drawn to orchestrate the piece and to perform it as if it were a symphony. But that circumstance, as fascinating as it is, detracts from a major aspect of Beethoven's expressive scheme – the work's immense difficulty when performed as intended on the piano.

"Beethoven deliberately stages a fight between keyboard and music," writes Alan Walker in *An Anatomy of Musical Criticism*. "The technical difficulty has been specially composed, so to speak, to bring out musical meaning. It is a splendid illustration of the way in which a great master identifies a creative aim with a physical limitation....The chronic sense of friction that you get throughout the *Hammerklavier*... is, in my view, an essential part of the music."

Beethoven himself said that the piece was written for posterity. Calling it "my greatest," he even expressed the idea that it "would make pianists work creatively." Certainly, that is how he worked – and played. Schindler tells us that, "all music performed by his hands appeared to undergo a new creation." Czerny was awestruck by Beethoven's "titanic execution," while Ignaz von Seyfried described his playing as "a cataract, elemental, a force of nature." Sonatas as early as the *Pathétique* of 1799, *Moonlight* of 1802 and *Appassionata* of 1804 increasingly demand such performance, yet it is not until the *Hammerklavier*, which appeared in 1819 (Beethoven's forty-ninth year), that pianism of even greater magnitude was presupposed and, in fact, was made intrinsic to the expression of Beethoven's wholly new, panoramic union of content with form via the piano.

In four movements, the like of which the world had never seen, the genius from Bonn did bequeath to posterity what his publishers deemed so accurately the "richest and grandest fantasy" among all his sonatas. Its *Allegro* opens with a heroic fanfare that reveals – and revels in – the germ of each successive movement's opening idea (merely the interval of a third – a modest beginning from which whole universes of imagination are to grow), then proceeds to other ideas and a closing theme of empyrean tranquility. These primary materials acquire further meaning as they are developed and brought back anew, with the fanfare

retreating into the distance before the final, crashing cadence. The Scherzo (*Assai vivace*) plays with our perception by interrupting the flow of the central "trio" as it leads back home. This interruption, *Presto*, harkens back mysteriously to a pattern of alternating hands featured in the first movement. Then comes the *Adagio sostenuto*, a lament in sonata form quite beyond any ever penned as a slow movement. Its emotional content – so deep and immense – led Wilhelm von Lenz to call it perceptively "a mausoleum of the collective sorrow of the world." An elaborately composed passage of transition then prepares for the finale, *Allegro risoluto*. This musical whirlwind, which sweeps us away so forcefully, is a fugue – vast in design, with passages in multiple invertible counterpoint – a double fugue in fact, whose subjects ultimately climax together in a bravura, incandescent *tour de force*. It is an act of superlative inspiration in which intellect and imagination work together with colossal impact.

The aesthetic point of this masterpiece, so overwhelming to the casual listener in the contrasts of its many details, lies in its expression of unity as the ideal. The struggle towards that ideal is itself a triumph for the man in whose path life placed so many adversities. This prime intuition, so vital in the thought of Beethoven, Goethe, Hegel and even Napoleon, grew out of an era of profound reflection whose central inspiration, as Philip Barford writes in his *The Beethoven Reader*, was

always unity – unity as experience, unity as idea, unity as a system of interrelated parts, unity as contrast, unity as an invisible world-spirit manifesting itself in the transformation of organic forms and the transmutation of life-energies through perception, imagination, thought and intuition.

By his own admission, Beethoven first broke new ground as a composer seventeen years earlier, in 1802. He wrote of having a style that "*is completely new for me*" and of treating music in "*a wholly different manner*." Beethoven was right. Outstanding originality does mark the piano works of this period: Three Sonatas, Op. 31; Bagatelles, Op. 33; and, Variations, Opp. 34 and 35. Nothing like any of these had ever been seen or heard before. And they had been brought to fruition during perhaps the most troubled time of the composer's life, when ill health and despondency over his growing deafness caused him to admit the contemplation of suicide. A famous document, now known as the Heiligenstadt Testament, describes his perilous condition as well as his faith in the future of his art – the latter giving him the will to persevere.

However, not a bar of the **Sonata, Op. 31, No. 1** can be thought of as autobiographical in this context, for Beethoven, like Mozart,



has triumphed over his adversity and managed to produce a score of unbridled happiness and high spirits while setting new standards of creativity. The *Allegro vivace* behaves outrageously, its scampering first subject being built from an idea that suggests poor ensemble between the pianist's two hands while the second subject, something of a bumptious country dance, is deliberately in the "wrong" key! Beethoven makes a joke of his music's return to the original key through a kind of harmonic pun. After developing this material (and with tongue-in-cheek), he spins out preparation for the first subject's return over *thirty-two* bars devoted to a single harmony. Matters continue pumping along in this vein to the movement's end where, at last, the hands play quietly together two not-so-final-sounding chords. The elegant *Andante grazioso* is a spacious rondo-with-variations in the "glass chandelier" style usually associated with Carl Maria von Weber (whom Beethoven admired). The pianist's right hand is asked to keep the treble tinkling with one lovely ripple of notes after another. For his finale, *Allegretto*, Beethoven treats us to another rondo, both genial and well-behaved – until the end when, unexpectedly, he recalls the first movement's fun by changing tempo four times in a row and getting the hands apart yet again!

--Frank Cooper

Frank Cooper, an authority on music of the 19th century, teaches at the New World School of the Arts in Miami and at the University of Miami in Coral Gables, Florida.

Since his triumph as winner of the 1970 Chopin International Piano Competition, pianist **Garrick Ohlsson** has established himself worldwide as a musician of magisterial interpretive and technical prowess. Although he has long been regarded as one of the world's leading Chopin exponents, Mr. Ohlsson commands an enormous repertoire, which ranges over the entire piano literature. A student of the late Claudio Arrau, Mr. Ohlsson has come to be noted for his masterly performances of the works of Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert, as 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, Op. 79;

(BRIDGE 9207); Beethoven Sonatas, Vol. 4: Op. 26, Op. 28, Op. 90; (BRIDGE 9249); Beethoven Sonatas, Vol. 5: Op. 13, Op. 27, No. 2, Op. 53; (BRIDGE 9250); Charles Wuorinen: Music for Violin and Piano (with Benjamin Hudson) (BRIDGE 9008); Justin Dello Joio: Two Concert Etudes, Sonata (BRIDGE 9220).

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. Most recently, Mr. Ohlsson was nominated in the "Best Solo Performance" category of the 2008 Grammy Awards for his "Beethoven Sonatas, Vol. 3" (BRIDGE 9207). That, and the present disc, are part of his Complete Beethoven Sonata cycle, which is being issued by Bridge in 2008 and 2009.



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