

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

(1770-1827)

SONATA NO. 1 IN F MINOR, OP. 2, NO. 1 (23:47)

- | | | | |
|---|------|-------------|--------|
| 1 | I. | ALLEGRO | (6:05) |
| 2 | II. | ADAGIO | (6:10) |
| 3 | III. | MENUETTO | (3:50) |
| 4 | IV. | PRESTISSIMO | (7:42) |

SONATA NO. 23 IN F MINOR, OP. 57, NO. 1 (APPASSIONATA) (25:08)

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|---|------|------------------------|---------|
| 5 | I. | ALLEGRO ASSAI | (10:12) |
| 6 | II. | ANDANTE CON MOTO | (6:57) |
| 7 | III. | ALLEGRO, MA NON TROPPO | (7:59) |

SONATA NO. 30 IN E MAJOR, OP. 109 (20:54)

- | | | | |
|----|------|---------------------------------------|---------|
| 8 | I. | VIVACE, MA NON TROPPO | (4:27) |
| 9 | II. | PRESTISSIMO | (2:50) |
| 10 | III. | ANDANTE MOLTO CANTABILE ED ESPRESSIVO | (13:37) |

GARRICK OHLSSON, PIANO



Three stages of greatness – exploratory, revolutionary, visionary – are represented here by piano sonatas which reached their market across the quarter-century of Ludwig van Beethoven's ascent to the summit of European music. Each, in its day, was the product of a musical mind more challenging and compelling than anyone else's.

Listeners now can hardly hear Beethoven's Sonata No. 1 with the same expectations as the guests at Prince Lichnowsky's palace in Vienna on a Friday morning in 1795. That audience, which included Joseph Haydn (Beethoven's former teacher), knew the 25-year-old Beethoven as a bold improviser at the keyboard and as the composer of a set of three trios, a piano concerto and a miscellany of variations. Mostly well-behaved, cheerful and neatly wrought, such works had charmed their hearers who probably were eager for more of the same. What he gave them instead was the musical equivalent of a stick of dynamite, something which, by its finale, threatened the instrument on which he played it.

The opening *Allegro*, first of four movements (rather than the three to which Haydn's Sonatas had accustomed everybody), begins innocently enough with a pattern of rising notes which seek a cadence. Again and again, the music cadences, but each time against the forward thrust of percussive chords in the left hand. There is a pause. The line rises, only to be up in a sequence which pulls it into a descending cadential figure. Three times it makes its point, then three times more against a halting E-flat pedal tone. A desperate, breathless little motif struggles into the uppermost notes of the

piano before two *forte* outbursts (against long, descending scales) release the accumulated tension. Immediately, a trio of snapping cadences over off-beat chords make their point insistently before the entire Exposition is repeated. Beethoven's classically correct formal process (first subject in the tonic key, transition to second subject in the related key, and a closing) can hardly be noticed in the constant forward motion of so many terse cadential figures – a process he carries on into his Development. It is a propulsive section which generates even more nervous energy, cadencing here and there against jarring syncopations. A crescendo hurls the music onto 20 bars of the dominant note, C, before the Recapitulation fairly explodes with anger. The movement concludes with a series of violent accents.

What rude, fierce stuff from such a naive beginning! And what a contrast with the ensuing Adagio, clothed in the warm tonality of F major, this simple ABA form is used to display limpid melodic ideas and elegant figurations like those of the style Beethoven so rigorously denied in the first movement. In fact, this movement's ideas were lifted from the composer's piano Quartet in C, written ten years earlier! The *Menuetto* returns to the anxious mood of the opening – with a dynamic range equally wide, a thinner texture, and an odd sense of metric ambiguity. Its *Trio* affords the relief of the major mode and a flowing two-voice counterpoint, before the *Menuetto* must be heard again. After only a moment's pause, the *Prestissimo* bursts upon its hearers with salvos of choppy chords over whirling triplets. Every gesture is cadence-oriented, yet never stops. The three-octave scale dashes from the highest note on Beethoven's piano to propel the music into a second subject of triplets

and duplets in cross rhythms. Frenzied triplets continue under the closing theme's descending lines while the brittle chords of the opening announce the Exposition's repeat. So turbulent is this section that the listener takes it in without realizing that the form follows the same sequence of keys as the first movement: First subject in F minor, second subject in A-flat major. The anticipated Development is replaced by a new section with a beautiful new theme (marked "soft and sweet") in A-flat major. Its serenity provides relief between the battlegrounds of the Exposition and Recapitulation. And who but Beethoven would have ended so remarkable Sonata with a bare arpeggio ripping, *fortissimo*, down the keyboard?

By 1805, Beethoven, then 35, brought to a total of 23 the number of piano sonatas he had composed. The exploratory or early period of his composition lay behind him. The transition to his revolutionary, or middle period had begun with two Fantasy-Sonatas in 1801. A year or so later, Beethoven said that he had entered a "new path." Now, form and content were no longer separate aspects of his work but unified expressions of a single underlying idea. The Sonata No. 23 (not called *Appassionata* until eleven years after Beethoven's death) sweeps its hearers into hitherto uncharted realms of musical dynamism. Work on the Sonata overlapped that of Beethoven's awesome Symphony No. 5, so it comes as no surprise to discover that each masterpiece shares the new principle of an underlying idea – and, in fact, the noticeable motive of three short notes followed by a longer one.

Beginning the *Allegro assai* with two sets of descending-ascending unisons

(which conclude quietly each time with a trill), the movement's forward motion slows over the tapping motive (Fate knocking at the door of the Sonata's form?). The unison theme descends again, is interrupted by a stormy outburst of chords, continues with its quiet ascent, is interrupted again by violence, tries to conclude with its trill, is violated once more; then the trill – now a fearful trembling – propels the listener into a nervous transition of tapping notes (Fate again, continuously?) punctuated by short pangs, sometimes with the beat, sometimes *against* it. From the depths of the piano arises a new theme, serene and balanced, uninterrupted in its placid sweetness. This respite lasts only a few seconds before Beethoven's quiet trills and a long scale take our ears on a journey into a furious closing (built on the Fate motive). Beethoven now ignores the Classical tradition of repeating the Exposition and heads – at first tentatively, then with seeming abandon – into a Development made from every element heard before. The Recapitulation occurs over ominous endless tappings in the bass. Only the second theme can alleviate this new tension – briefly – before Beethoven's top-to-bottom-of-the-keyboard passages prepare for another series of fateful taps and a Coda, *più Allegro*, fierce beyond anything heard before. As this ebbs away, the first theme is heard passing from the highest F on Beethoven's piano to its lowest, while a tremolo recalls the earlier tappings – and disappears.

Describing musical events as emotional states in flux may help a listener to experience the performance of the oft-heard music with new attention. Certainly, not a note of Sonata No. 23 could have been heard casually or passively in Beethoven's day. Writings of the time and thereafter, as

Romanticism swept across Europe, dealt with the impact of such music on the public rather than with abstract ideas. Yet, abstract ideas (such as the cadential formulae which dominate Sonata No. 1) are, in practice, the generators of affective response in listeners. Beethoven must have known that, at least subconsciously, for he limits himself in each work to a very few elemental principles and applies them throughout.

The first movement's themes in Sonata No. 23 (just as in Sonata No. 1) are nothing but the notes of triads, spread down and up – but with what effect and how memorable! The *Andante con moto*, a set of nearly motionless variations, has its 16-bar theme made largely of only four different notes (one above the first heard, the other below the third). Simple in the extreme if we can notice it – but so compelling in the context of the emotions it evokes that the listener is held in thrall. Emerging from a mysterious harmony at the movement's end, the *Allegro, ma non troppo*, has for a theme just a single, arpeggiated triad with some passing tones attached to it. Bare essentials. Like the wind of an approaching storm, swirls of 16th notes carry our train of thought across the almost unnoticeable features of a perfect sonata-form. This gusting is continuous. With such a constant motion (based on one figure), who notes the absence of a repeated Exposition? Beethoven is in his Development before we know it and, after a short lull, in his Recapitulation. *This* dual-purpose section is marked to be repeated, postponing the inevitable tornado of the Coda and, in the process, building nearly unbearable tension in the listener. Scholars marvel at another feature, the presence in and among the three movements themselves of a curious relationship called the

Neapolitan sixth. Who can say to what degree this peculiarity affects all who hear the piece and contributes to its revolutionary – and surely *appassionata* – nature?

In 1820, when he was in his 50th year, Beethoven, then almost totally deaf, composed his Sonata No. 30. Fifteen years separated this work from Sonata No. 23. In their passage, the composer had transformed his style once more and entered the final, visionary phase of his creativity. Again, he proved himself to be unpredictably great, placing the only fast sonata-form movement (in the tonic minor) *between* two other movements (in the tonic major) which are bound to each other as expressions of a commonly held underlying idea. His *Vivace, ma non troppo* baffled all who could not follow its compression of form: the second subject appears after only eight bars of the primary subject (expanded to ten bars in the Recapitulation and placed two octaves higher in the treble). The two themes differ in tempo and mood – the first fluid, calm and lyrical, the other halting and transitory – although both are shaped from intervals of thirds succeeded by fourths. Most people tend to experience in this merely something pleasantly rhapsodic and to wonder why so much of the writing is placed in the upper half of the keyboard (They forget that the piano's range had been expanded from five octaves to six by this time). The *Prestissimo* shatters Beethoven's first-movement calm by its dynamics, rhythmic thrust and terse, four-bar phrases. The sonata concludes with a set of intricately wrought variations, *Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo* (reinforced by an equivalent but more expressive phrase in German meaning "Songlike, with innermost feeling").

It is a type of ending without precedent in the preceding 29 sonatas, one which resolves the melodic conflict of the first movement, subliminally but definitely. The final pages attain nirvana-like serenity over chains of trills. This "cantillation of exquisite purity" (Barford) abates into the complete theme's reappearance. Its simple song is sung again – and disappears into the world of our innermost thoughts.

Beethoven's control of his listeners' feelings through the medium of the piano sonata has been represented here by three works in chronological order, each reflective of a corresponding phase in his development. As Beethoven's own experience deepened his perceptions about music's powers, he progressed from being a slightly unruly follower of procedures established by such Classical masters as Haydn and Mozart, through being a leader in music's conquest of society by the boldest of means, to being the next generation's godlike eminence – a symbol through his last works of what lies above and beyond the temporal.

– Frank Cooper


Frank Cooper, an authority on music of the 19th century, teaches 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); Beethoven Sonatas, Vol. 6: Op. 106, Op. 31, No. 1, (BRIDGE 9262); Beethoven Sonatas, Vol. 7: Op. 22, Op. 37, No. 1, Op. 110; (BRIDGE 9265); 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 won 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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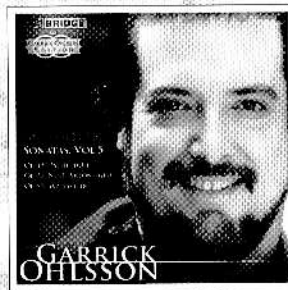
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