BEETHOVEN

piano sonatas
op.10

daniel tong

fortepiano

Ludwig Van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Piano Sonatas Op. 10

Daniel Tong *fortepiano*

Fortepiano by Paul McNulty, a copy of an 1805 instrument by Anton Walter.

About Daniel Tong:

'I genuinely found myself listening to the Beethoven with new ears... a delicate balance between depth and playfulness [in Op. 96] that's hard to beat amongst contemporary versions.'
BBC Music Magazine

'This is one of those rewarding recordings that makes you totally reassess music from the mainstream repertoire.'
The Observer

Piano Sonata in C minor, Op. 10, No. 1

1. Allgro molto e con brio	[6:07]
2. Adagio molto	[7:38]
3. Finale: Prestissimo	[4:54]

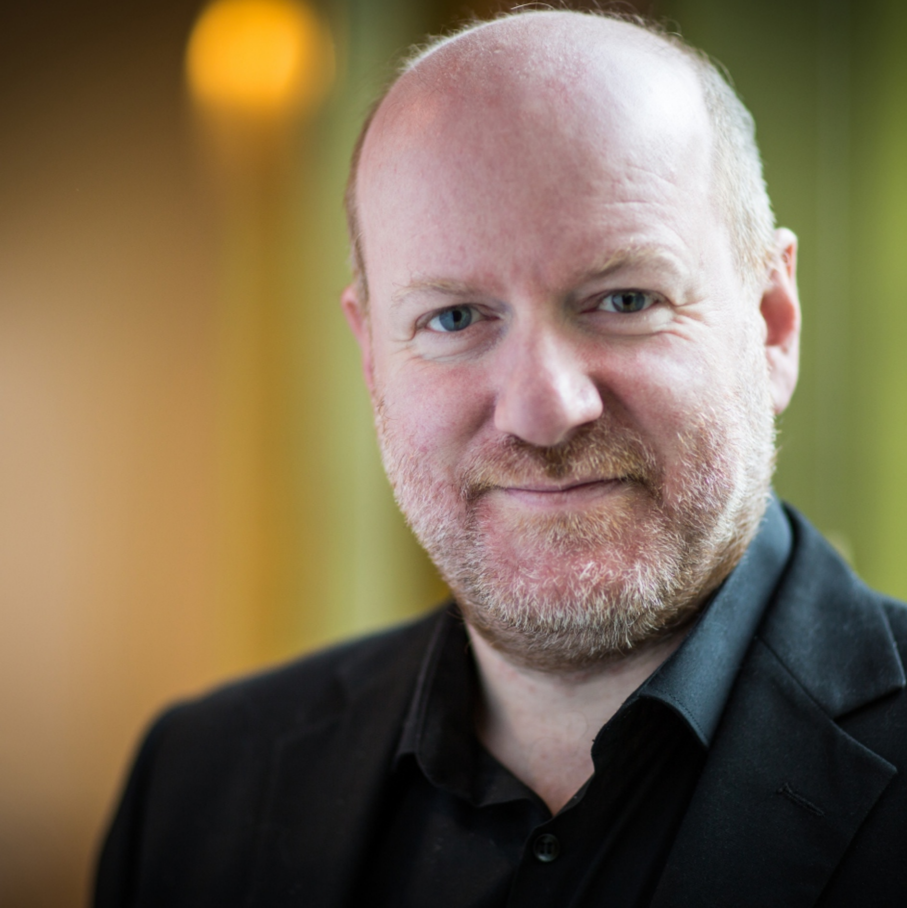
Piano Sonata in F major, Op. 10, No. 2

4. Allegro	[9:50]
5. Allegretto	[4:42]
6. Presto	[3:52]

Piano Sonata in D major, Op. 10, No. 3

7. Presto	[7:13]
8. Largo e mesto	[9:23]
9. Menuetto & Trio	[3:27]
10. Rondo: Allegro	[4:18]

Total playing time [61:31]



Beethoven Piano Sonatas Op. 10

Playing Beethoven on a fortepiano, especially one as beautiful as Paul McNulty's copy of an 1805 example by Anton Walter, is an exhilarating experience. There is no doubt that the instrument somehow brings the player and the listener closer to Beethoven's sound world, but there is more to it than that; it is clear that his music transcends the instrument on which it is played, and continues to be experienced in all its wonder on modern, iron-framed pianos. On the fortepiano, the pianist has a quite different visceral experience. On the one hand the expression is more intimate, on the other the attack can be more incisive, even percussive. The mechanism does not respond favourably to the kind of whole body technique that we employ on a nine-foot concert grand; it asks you to coax out the expression with your fingers, leaving your shoulders and back to a supporting role. However, to realise the range of effect that is inherent in Beethoven's scores, the pianist must push the instrument to its limits. The knee pedals (which Beethoven used frequently), *sostenuto* and *una corda*, produce different effects to their rather smoothed-out counterparts on the modern instrument, the former less resonant, the latter more muted and differentiated from the normal *tre corda* sound. So, counter-intuitively perhaps, these sonatas seem 'bigger' to me on this smaller instrument.

The three sonatas of Op. 10 were published in September 1798, dedicated to Countess Anna Margarete von Browne, wife of one of Beethoven's wealthy patrons (Count Johan Georg von Browne) in whose house several of his early works were performed. Somewhat to his bemusement, Beethoven had recently received a horse in return for another dedication to the Countess, but despite his lack of enthusiasm for equestrianism this clearly did not put him off continuing to seek the patronage of the Brownes. The Op. 10 set follows the pattern of almost all of Beethoven's sonata groups published in threes: pieces of diverse character, structure and tonality, with a single work in the minor key (as with Opp. 1, 2, 9 and later Opp. 30 and 31). Aside from the Op. 9 String Trios (also dedicated to Count von Browne), all of these sets were written with Beethoven the pianist as much to the forefront as Beethoven the composer. Indeed, it is almost impossible to separate these two roles during his first decade in Vienna, William Kinderman noting that 'the piano represented a springboard for Beethoven's achievements and a primary vehicle for the pathbreaking innovations of his evolving musical style'. The young

virtuoso was certainly as renowned as a pianist and improviser as he was a composer during this time, and these three sonatas contain the whole kaleidoscopic range of his youthful musical/emotional and pianistic language.

The minor key work in the Op. 10 set comes first and, as with four of the six opuses mentioned above, it is to C minor that Beethoven turns. Although his most iconic works in this key are still to come (very shortly the *Pathétique* Sonata, Op. 13 and later the Fifth Symphony, Op. 67 and final Piano Sonata, Op. 111) it is already clear that Beethoven reserves a special place for C minor, ever replete with taut drama and brooding passion. The opening movement of the **Sonata in C Minor, Op. 10, No. 1**, the first two movements of which were written as early as 1796, begins with a terse example of the *Mannheim rocket*, a swiftly-moving upward arpeggio figure that was a favourite technique of the much fêted court orchestra in Mannheim and is taken up by Beethoven in several of his early works. This bold opening gesture is answered by soft, sighing chords, introducing the extreme dynamic contrasts that will dominate the movement; indeed large sections of this opening *Allegro molto e con brio* are lyrical and expressive, allowing the drama to burst in again at strategic points to gripping effect. The main sections eventually fade away amongst more sighing figures, producing a feeling of distinct unease that cannot be entirely dispelled by the two muscular chords that end the movement.

The noble second movement is in the richly expressive key of A flat major, a favourite relationship of Beethoven's for works in C minor (the famous *Adagio cantabile* from the *Pathétique* Sonata is in the same key for instance). The opening gestures are almost disarmingly simple, before a rising dotted figure distantly recalls the *Mannheim rocket* that opens the sonata, here transformed into something deeply lyrical. As the movement develops, the music becomes increasingly ornamented and emotionally intense; as a player I imagine Beethoven (who was renowned for reducing his audience to tears with his improvisations) exalting in his own virtuosity, here at the service of an expressive, singing style rather than any pyrotechnics. A gentle coda brings this glorious movement to its close, almost like a lullaby. The *prestissimo* finale begins with a furtive, fragmentary theme; the classic Beethovenian narrative in C minor is from darkness to light, epitomised by the Fifth Symphony, but there is little light in this claustrophobic, breathless world. The music leaps, unprepared, into a more conciliatory second theme in the major, but this hope is short-lived before the whirlwind returns. The final coda slows the music to an eerie standstill before the final *decrescendo*, albeit now in C major, leaves the listener disconcerted and uncomfortable.

Beethoven almost always liked to set himself very different challenges within the works of a single opus; the **Sonata in F, Op. 10, No. 2** leaves the menacing world of the first sonata far behind and introduces a playful, witty character. The first movement, introduced with a teasing theme of spry rhythmic uncertainty, constantly surprises the listener with gleeful sudden modulations and dynamic extremes. The music makes as if to move to the A minor but, poised on the brink, sidesteps casually into C major as if nothing could be more natural. At the end of the central development section (which Beethoven, unusually, orders to be repeated so that we might once more delight in his games), the first theme 'recapitulation' is announced in the wrong key. Brief confusion reigns before Beethoven delivers us into the correct home key, half way through the theme as if nothing has happened. The cliché of Beethoven with his wilful nature and clenched fist could not be further away, in a movement that wears its supreme compositional prowess both lightly and delightfully.

The subversive nature of this sonata is underlined in the second movement, a dark, mysterious minuet in F minor. The character is perfect foil to the sunny outer movements, Beethoven's wit here lying in the transformation of the minuet from courtly dance to a sinewy, sometimes almost ghostly texture. The radiant central trio section pays homage to the equivalent moment in Mozart's deeply personal Sonata in E Minor for Violin and Piano, K304, which concludes with another haunting minuet. The movement then continues its innovation with a varied version of the opening section, rather than a simple *da capo* as would be expected. The dashing finale returns to the good humour of the first movement, but here with considerable virtuosity. The quasi-fugal nature of this *moto perpetuo* is reminiscent of Haydn and the fugal finales of his Op. 20 string quartets; Beethoven may have had a somewhat fractious relationship with the elder composer, with whom he took a few lessons upon arriving in Vienna, but his reverence for Haydn is plain in his music throughout his life, even if his words were

sometimes less generous (the young Beethoven once said that he 'never learned anything from Haydn', although years later he paid deep respects to the ageing master at the 1808 gala of Haydn's *The Creation*). This exuberant *presto* rushes the work to a joyful close which, after the previous sonata, is as final and affirmative as can be.

The best-known and most ambitious of the set, cast in four movements, is the **Sonata in D, Op. 10, No. 3**. It also requires the most of the pianist, from the considerable dexterity of the *Presto* first movement, through the soulful and far-reaching *Largo e mesto* to the mercurial finale. The sonata opens with a highly charged variant of the *Mannheim rocket*, sophisticated for its downward motion before the upward swoop, whilst scale and arpeggio are blended to ebullient effect. The movement that follows is wide-ranging, often contrapuntal and set against a rhythmic drive that never relents. Beethoven is generous with his themes here. There are the opening dynamic cascades in the home key of D major, a plunge into B minor for a new, more melodious theme, a sprightly second subject in A major before three more themes follow in this secondary key: one in the charming treble with bell-like offbeat *sforzandi*, a variation of the opening that goes down instead of up, and a *pianissimo* chorale to finish. There is even room for an extended *coda* at the end of the movement where Beethoven takes the music to distant, tender realms (including a hint at E-flat major) before the final, volcanic flourish.

The second movement is, for me, the most special of the whole opus, an impassioned *Largo* where Beethoven seems intent on wringing as much meaning and expression from his piano as is humanly possible. The bleak opening gives way to a doleful melody that asks the player to sustain the song-like right hand, often without recourse to ornamentation. The central section begins with a move to the major key in a moment of noble beauty, but the peace is short-lived, soon overcome by music of despair and great pathos. At the end of the movement, this heightened music returns, this time extended to a shattering climax before the final passages retreat to the shadows. It is the kind of music that seems so personal as to require biographical inspiration or, conversely, asks the performer to draw upon their own innermost experience. The minuet that follows, marked dolce comes as sunrise after a long, dark night. By the time the central trio section arrives, the mood is rustic and celebratory.

The finale is strikingly original, restoring the joyful nature of the first movement in a fusion of *rondo* (where the theme returns several times, interspersed with varying episodes), *sonata* and *scherzo*. The opening three-note half-gestures seem designed to keep the listener off their guard, and return in almost every way possible during this playful and continually evolving movement. Beethoven makes much use of silence, stopping the music either gently or suddenly before a variety of whimsical continuations. The ending is as light of foot as the rest of the movement, evaporating into the air whilst the ubiquitous three-note motif plays in the bass against gossamer arpeggios that cover the keyboard from top to bottom.

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Daniel Tong (fortepiano)

Daniel Tong was born in Cornwall and studied in London. His musical life is spent performing as soloist and chamber musician, writing and teaching. Outside the UK he has recently performed in France, Belgium and Portugal. After his first solo CD of works by Schubert, *Gramophone* magazine described him as 'an extraordinarily sympathetic Schubertian.' He has performed concertos at St Martin-in-the-Fields and Kings Place in London.

Praised by *The Guardian* for his 'masterly pianism', Daniel has collaborated with the Elias, Navarra, Heath, Sacconi, Dante, Carducci and Allegri quartets as well as singers Ivan Ludlow, James Gilchrist, Mary Bevan, Stephan Loges and Paul Agnew. Daniel's London Bridge Trio have been regular visitors to London's Wigmore Hall and BBC Radio 3 for twenty years, with a substantial discography that includes a shortlisting for the *Gramophone* Chamber Music Award (*Frank Bridge Chamber Works Vol. II* on Dutton). Each year Daniel plays with an array of wonderful individual artists, often at his own chamber festival: founded in 1999, the Wye Valley Chamber Music Festival attracts many renowned chamber musicians to spend ten days making music in an area of outstanding natural beauty.

Daniel's *Beethoven Plus* project has been a vibrant addition to his life over recent years. Alongside Krysia Osostowicz, he commissioned ten new works to partner the Beethoven Sonatas for Piano and Violin, premiering all during 2015. The duo went on to perform the cycle numerous times across the UK, culminating at Cedars Hall, Wells, where they recorded all twenty works for SOMM Recordings. The cycle became the subject of Daniel's PhD and he is currently writing a book on Beethoven's Violin Sonatas for publication in 2024.

Daniel is Head of Piano in Chamber Music at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire. For five years he has directed a summer course for talented young musicians as part of the Wye Valley Chamber Music Festival.

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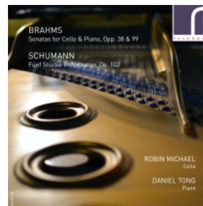

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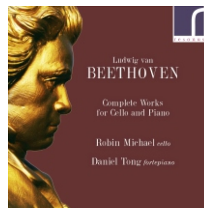

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