

# Byron Janis

Beethoven - WALDSTEIN SONATA, Op. 53 • Sonata in E, Op. 109



Byron Janis (born 1928) became one of the most brilliant of his generation of American pianists before his career was cut short by illness. At the age of 7 he was taken to New York, becoming a pupil of Adele Marcus, then of Joseph and Rosina Lhévinne. In 1943 he made his professional debut playing Rachmaninov's Piano Concerto No. 2 with the NBC Symphony Orchestra in New York, with Frank Black conducting. In 1944 he repeated the same concerto in Pittsburgh with 13-year-old Lorin Maazel conducting the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. Vladimir Horowitz was in the audience, and subsequently invited Janis to study with him. Then Janis embarked on a successful career as a concert pianist, including a 1948 tour to South America, and a 1952 tour of Europe.

In 1960 Janis was chosen as the first American artist to be sent to the Soviet Union, opening a newly formed Cultural Exchange between the USSR and the United States. The result was a brilliant Mercury Living Presence LP that is an all-time classic, pairing the Rachmaninov First and Prokofiev Third concertos. Aided by exemplary sound recording, the Prokofiev in particular is still regarded by many connoisseurs as the work's finest recorded interpretation. In 1995 the CD version won the Cannes Award for Best Reissue. He interrupted his career in the late '60s at the onset of an illness, and temporarily resumed it in 1972. Soon however, his concert appearances became more rare.

Meanwhile, in 1967 he had discovered the manuscripts of two previously unknown Chopin waltzes in Paris, and in 1973, two variations of them, also in Chopin's hand, at the Yale Library. This led to a 1978 French television documentary, Frédéric Chopin: A Voyage with Byron Janis, in which he detailed the difficulties in determining the authentic versions of Chopin's music.

In 1985 he was invited to perform at the White House. On that occasion he publicly disclosed the nature of the illness that had hampered him for nearly 20 years: psoriatic arthritis affecting his wrists and hands. The ailment had not prevented him from continuing to play piano well, but it often made it impossible to play to his former high standard.

In the meantime, he devoted much of his energy to teaching, composing, and humanitarian concerns. He became Ambassador of the Arts for the Arthritis Foundation, often playing in fund-raising concerts. He is Chairman of the Global Forum Arts and Culture Committee. He composed the musical theme for the Global Forum on Human Survival in Oxford, England, held April, 1988. With lyrics by Sammy Cahn, it became the song The One World. Janis's music is primarily in the Pop style, and includes a musical version of The Hunchback of Notre Dame. In 1989 he composed the score for Turner Network Television's 1989 major documentary on Gary Cooper. He is on the faculty of Manhattan School of Music, and works on the Board and Music Advisory Committee for Pro Musicus, an international organization devoted to helping young artists.

Following the acquisition of an Erard fortepiano in 1803, Beethoven was inspired to write this sonata, one of the finest among his 32. The composer had known for about two years that he was losing his hearing, but he was far from complete deafness. The crisper tones of the new instrument were much more appealing to him than his old Walter piano. This sonata, dedicated to the composer's patron and friend Count Ferdinand von Waldstein, came on the scene as a great challenge for pianists. The first movement, marked *Allegro con brio*, begins with a rhythmic, driving, obsessive theme that creates an enormous sonic space and a veritable energy field between the hammering chords in the left hand and the right hand's completion of the phrase, several octaves higher. Reiterated, starting from a slightly lower register, the theme seems less energetic, but the effect is deceptive. While the energy level remains high, additional ideas are developed, and the second subject is introduced as each of these ideas strives to dominate the composition's discourse. This second subject, in E major, introduces a moment of tranquillity, but calm quickly dissipates, moving toward a brilliant, triumphant finish with the underlying rhythmic intensity of the main theme. The development section begins with a darker cast to the main theme, which then goes off into a new direction. The previous materials become interlaced and developed, and this process generates considerable tension. In the reprise that follows, Beethoven ingeniously avoids a mere restatement by expanding on the phrase at the end of the main theme's first reappearance. There are many other deft touches here, including the brilliant coda based on the main theme. The second movement, bearing the marking *Introduzione (Adagio molto)*, is short, serious, and introspective, drawing its immense dramatic power from the many figurative transformations of the initial three-note utterance spanning the interval of a sixth. Significantly, the mysterious, contemplative mood of the opening is enriched by the expressive lyricism of the melody appearing in the middle part. This counterpoint of pure lyricism and contemplation constitutes the essence of the movement. Originally, Beethoven wrote what is now known as the *Andante favori* as the second movement, but decided not to include a movement he considered too long. Without pause, the music emerges from the philosophical atmosphere of the *Adagio* and blossoms into the brilliant main theme of the finale, marked *Rondo (Allegretto moderato)*. This melody, appearing as seven notes then repeating all but the last, has a pastoral quality in its quieter moments at the beginning. However, Beethoven transforms this tranquil mood into one of ecstatic celebration, spelled out by colorful sprays of notes that establish a harmonic base. As the theme develops and new ideas are introduced, the dramatic intensity of the movement, reinforced by a repetitive octave-figuration in the left hand, yields to moments of fatigue. However, the main theme returns, imposing a triumphant and joyous sense of order, and a scintillating coda

completes the composition. With its mighty rhythmic drive, harmonic inventiveness, thematic incandescence, and wealth of ideas, this sonata is one of the great works of the piano repertoire.

By the time Beethoven composed this work, his output had declined substantially, perhaps owing to his deafness and disappointments in life. The only complete works to emerge from the period of 1820–1823 were the last three piano sonatas, the *Missa Solemnis* and the *Ninth Symphony*. Even when compared to these imposing works, the E major Piano Sonata retains its status of a masterpiece. It is a remarkable work in several respects. The first movement has a nearly unique structure: it opens with theme marked *Vivace ma non troppo* that almost immediately slows to an *Adagio espressivo*. Thereafter, the two contrasting tempos and utterances alternate. Scarlatti and Mozart had used such a scheme before, but never in such a bold and innovative fashion. On the surface, this short movement has a serene, almost angelic quality, but, like many other works written during this period, the composition's surface is merely one dimension among many. Indeed, nothing about this sonata is one-dimensional. Thus, for example, the subdued, brightly lit realm suggested by the beginning of the works eventually leads the listener to sections where the narrative slows down, conjuring up dark shadows that intimate feelings of longing and doubt. The second movement, given its sonata form structure would be typical of a Beethoven first movement if it were not for its terse development and extreme brevity. There are two subject groups in this *Prestissimo*, with the first led by an assertive theme that more than vaguely suggests Schumann's piano style. More subdued at the outset, the second subject generates tension and energy as it progresses. Following a brief development, an interesting reprise leads to a concise coda. The finale is twice as long as the previous two movements put together. It is a theme-and-variations scheme, whose main theme is marked *Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo*. The melody is beautiful, in style looking toward the Romantic movement that was then in its infancy. It is tranquil yet melancholy, pleased but valedictory. Some of the six variations generate further variations either through development (the third variation), or as a result of a two-tiered layout (the second variation). While the finale contains many lively moments, it is predominantly slow-to-moderate in tempo and generally subdued, gaining in confidence as the narrative proceeds. This movement concludes with the main theme played slowly and serenely. While the ending suggests a certain peaceful resolution of life's struggles and conflicts, it also reveals a feeling of resignation which is free of conflict and fear.

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## Sonata № 21, In C, Op. 53

1 Allegro Con Brio 8:00

2 Introduccion: Adagio Molto 3:18

3 Rondo: Allegretto Moderato 9:18

## Sonata № 30, In E, Op. 109

4 Vivace, Ma Non Troppo 3:38

5 Prestissimo 2:26

6 Andante Molto Cantabile

Ed Espressoivo; Variaciones 1 & 6 12:30

**Total Time: 39:10**

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