

WIGMORE HALL 125

Tuesday 14 October 2025
7.30pm

Mitsuko Uchida piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Op. 109 (1820)

*I. Vivace ma non troppo – Adagio espressivo •
II. Prestissimo • III. Andante molto cantabile ed
espressivo: Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung*

Piano Sonata No. 31 in A flat Op. 110 (1821-2)

*I. Moderato cantabile molto espressivo •
II. Allegro molto • III. Adagio ma non troppo – Fuga.
Allegro ma non troppo*

Interval

Piano Sonata No. 32 in C minor Op. 111 (1821-2)

*I. Maestoso – Allegro con brio ed appassionato •
II. Arietta. Adagio molto semplice cantabile*



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Of the 35 sonatas that Ludwig van Beethoven wrote for the piano, the last three occupy a special place in the repertoire. Written between 1820 and 1822, they are products of the composer's late style, typified by an introspective character, experimental approaches to form and structure, unconventional harmonic progressions, and extended contrapuntal textures of great complexity.

From the outset of the **Sonata in E Op. 109**, such innovative features become apparent. Its opening theme utilises the same chord progression as the finale of the Op. 79 sonata (1809); however, this is soon interrupted by a sudden diminished seventh chord and tempo change, a contrast repeated throughout the movement. The second movement, a stormy *Prestissimo* scherzo, is similarly filled with drama, and in the development, the forceful bass line heard at the beginning becomes the theme of a polyphonic canon.

The heart of Op. 109 is its finale, a slow movement in theme and variations form. Its expressive character is indicated, as in many of the late works, by both Italian and German markings: *Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo* and *Gesang mit innigster Empfindung* ('Song with the most intimate feeling'). The theme takes the form of a dignified sarabande; in the first variation, it is heard an octave higher, with ornamentation and a left hand that transforms it into a waltz. In the second, the *teneramente* melody appears as a duet, whilst the third is a brilliant study in invertible counterpoint. The fourth variation, to be played a little slower than the theme, is filled with arabesques. After the fugal fifth variation, the sixth begins peacefully, but builds, through rhythmic intensification, into a shaking climax; here, the melody is passionately decorated in exultant demisemiquavers, supported by long trills, alternating between high and low registers. Finally, the theme returns in its original form, the last chord marked with pedal, as if to be held beyond the end of the music.

Beethoven favoured the key of A flat major for some of his most personal utterances, perhaps none more intimate than the **Op. 110 sonata**. The first movement is marked *Moderato cantabile molto espressivo* ('at a moderate speed, in a singing style, very expressively'), to which Beethoven added *con amabilità* ('amiably') and *sanft* ('gently'); this is music to be treated with great care and tenderness. Opening with a soaring melody, it transitions (via shimmering broken chords) to a passionate surge of emotion in E flat, before moving to the darker F minor at the start of the brief development. When the first melody returns, it is now accompanied by the shimmering arpeggios, and subsequently reaches poignantly towards D flat major, then to the remote E major, and finally back to A flat. Charles Rosen describes the following scherzo as 'humorous, folksy, sometimes brutal, and even sardonic'. It is certainly strange, with an ambiguous rhythmic pulse that unsettles the listener. Some light relief is provided by Beethoven's fragmentary use of two popular Viennese songs, *Unsa Kätz häd Katz'ln g'habt*, and *Ich bin lüderlich, du bist lüderlich*, along with a perilous trio section.

The last chord of the scherzo resolves into the first of the *Adagio ma non troppo*, in B flat minor, which begins with a mysterious operatic recitative that culminates in a series of expressive repeated notes. This gives way to a deeply painful *Arioso dolente* (*Klagender Gesang*), its sorrowful melody supported by repeated chords, out of which emerges a melody in the left hand that becomes the subject of a three-voice fugue. After climaxing, it drops a semitone to G minor to allow the return of the *Arioso dolente*, now broken and exhausted. But when all seems lost, a strengthening series of chords anticipates a 'revival bit by bit' (*poi a poi di nuovo vivente – wieder auflebend*) as the fugue returns, now with the original subject inverted. Beethoven employs all manner of contrapuntal techniques that together create an overwhelming sense of returning to life, as the thundering bass subject returns to A flat, leading to an exultant coda.

Beethoven's last piano sonata, **Op. 111 in C minor**, is an extraordinary, visionary work, consisting of two contrasting movements. The first, typically for Beethoven in this key, is stormy and angst-ridden, filled with diminished sevenths. The lack of a C minor chord throughout the introductory *Maestoso* section heightens this tense atmosphere; only at the beginning of the fugal *Allegro* is the home key really established. Its tumultuous subject is contrasted by a more hopeful second theme – again in the consolatory key of A flat major – but respite is short-lived.

The second and last movement, marked *Arietta: Adagio molto semplice e cantabile* ('Slow, very simple and songlike'), is deeply spiritual. The contour of the theme resembles the waltz that formed the basis of the *Diabelli Variations* Op. 120, but in a far more profound and exquisite form. Each of the five variations represents an increase in speed from what has come before, with a distinct character: the gentle first variation is based around the rhythm of the first two notes of the theme, whilst the second is rhythmically and contrapuntally more complex. The joyful syncopated rhythms of the third variation stand in contrast to variation 4, where the theme is fragmented over a murmuring bass and, subsequently, ethereal arabesques in a high register.

These, in turn, foreshadow the final variation, which comes after a radiant outpouring of the arietta in a long coda. At the top of the keyboard, Beethoven restates the theme once again, combining both slow and fast motion, and adding an accompaniment of trills, representing the limits of rhythmic acceleration. The listener becomes unaware of time and metre; it is as if Beethoven has finally transcended such earthly concerns to reach a higher plane. As the late Alfred Brendel (1931-2025) commented, 'perhaps nowhere else in piano literature does mystical experience feel so immediately close at hand'.

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