

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 16 January 2025  
7.30pm

Imogen Cooper 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. Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung.  
Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo*

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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By the time he embarked on his last three piano sonatas – in response to a suggestion from his publisher Adolph Schlesinger in 1820 – the 50 year-old **Beethoven** was very deaf and only anything like good company among his inner circle of friends. Remarkably, however, he had lived the past 18 years true to the resolution he declared in his desperate 'Heiligenstadt' testament of 1802 – in which he confronted the reality of the increasing deafness that had been gathering force since 1796 – with his spiritual and artistic integrity intact.

His career as one of the most famous young pianist-composers of his time would wane, and along with it income and reputation. Now in the early 1820s, he communicated through his conversation notebooks. On the plus side, the protracted legal wranglings over the guardianship of his nephew had been resolved, at least temporarily, and the new Broadwood piano presented to Beethoven in 1818 by the London manufacturer had stimulated his keyboard ambitions, starting with the mighty *Hammerklavier* Sonata. It was the first in a group of astonishing works – the *Missa Solemnis*, the three last sonatas, the *Symphony No. 9*, the *Diabelli Variations*, and the late string quartets – in which he moved away from the heroic idealism of works such as the *Symphonies 3 and 5* towards a visionary realism that is as vital now as it was some two hundred years ago.

There has been much speculation about whether Beethoven's last three piano sonatas constitute a triptych. There are connecting patterns and forms especially between Opp. 109 and 111; all three have sonata-style first movements, and the finales are by far the longest movement. Two of them end with a set of variations and two have brief and fiery second movements. Beethoven himself caused the confusion when he initially proposed one work made up of three sonatas, then later published them each under its own opus numbers, largely down to his fitting them round his work on the *Missa Solemnis* over a period of two years

Op. 109's first movement leaves the impression of an improvisation lightly attached to traditional form, with a sweet, self-effacing theme backing into the limelight, then swiftly snatched away by a baroque-sounding Adagio passage. In the variations finale, Beethoven subtly asserts the debt the 'Gesangvoll' theme owes to the previous movements. The fifth variation is earnestly contrapuntal, breaking down into a compressed version of the theme for the start of the sixth variation. This gathers in momentum not through tempo but through adding more and more notes into each bar until these are released into an extended trill with the theme emerging high above the halo of sound emerging from the piano, subsiding into a repeat – like Bach in the *Goldberg Variations* – of the original theme.

Beethoven dedicated Op. 109 to Maximiliane Brentano, the daughter of Antonie Brentano (believed to be the

'Immortal Beloved'), who would have been the dedicatee of Op. 110 had Beethoven let the publisher know in time. To the explicit marking of the first movement, he added the words *con amabilità* ('with affection'), and instructions are even more precise in the finale. The Sonata opens with an almost-conventional sonata movement, except that, as in Op. 109, the music shape-shifts like an improvisation, but gives the listener just enough subliminally to process its form. The dynamic Scherzo and Trio would have broken the spell for contemporary audiences, who would have got the point of the German street-songs Beethoven pressed into service. Starting like a scene from a Baroque Passion, the closing Adagio combines recitative and aria – here an *arioso dolente* – that leads into a fully worked-out fugue. This slumps back to an anguished variation of the *arioso dolente*, now marked *ermattet* ('exhausted'). Then Beethoven does something remarkable. The *arioso* winds down to 10 slow repeated chords on G major that assimilate, settle and change tack to deliver – again – the fugue, but this time the fugue subject is inverted (that is, what aspired upwards now relaxes downwards). There is a powerful sense of renewal and reassurance that soon abandons strenuous counterpoint for an incandescent close.

The two-movement Sonata Op. 111 is also, by about 10 minutes, the longest of the three, with its dynamic first movement and a set of increasingly time-bending variations in the second, undistracted by a Scherzo. The first is a classical sonata structure, complete with the conventional repeat of the first section. The key of C minor was significant for Beethoven, and the slow introduction has a familiar ferocity. The stern main theme of the Allegro sounds as though it is about to go fugal, but holds off until the mid-section. Yet, there are several moments when the momentum falters, as though the music cannot take its energy for granted, and the closing bars dissolve into a sense of retreat.

The air changes with the theme of the 'very simple and song-like' slow movement, and the first three variations, all in the same tempo, quickly become more rhythmic, foot-tappingly so in the third, and then in the fourth Beethoven expands, suspending a shorthand version of the theme over a series of repeated pedal notes in the bass, then moving everything skywards to the starry night at the top of the keyboard, attaining a sense of stasis in a long trill relaxing back into the last variation. This gathers in rapture to a repeat of the time-suspending trills flooding the theme, and then the breathtaking addition of a C sharp to the theme, quietly repeated a bar later down an octave. It is a moment of understatement, tenderness and release, both a destination and a sublime letting go.

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