

# WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 17 December 2024  
7.30pm

Boris Giltburg piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 6 in F Op. 10 No. 2

*I. Allegro • II. Allegretto •  
III. Presto*

Piano Sonata No. 11 in B flat Op. 22

*I. Allegro con brio • II. Adagio con molto  
espressione • III. Menuetto • IV. Rondo.  
Allegretto*

*Interval*

Piano Sonata No. 14 in C sharp minor

Op. 27 No. 2 'Moonlight' (1801)

*I. Adagio sostenuto • II. Allegretto •  
III. Presto agitato*

Piano Sonata No. 3 in C Op. 2 No. 3 (1794-5)

*I. Allegro con brio • II. Adagio •  
III. Scherzo. Allegro • IV. Allegro assai*



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Composed between 1795 and 1798, **Ludwig van Beethoven's** set of Opus 10 sonatas was probably begun soon after his Op. 2, at a time when his public profile as both a composer and virtuoso pianist continued to rise. The comedic character of the Sonata in F major Op. 10 No. 2 is established from the outset of the opening Allegro, with its witty chords and carefree turn motif. Throughout, Beethoven plays with convention, turning expectations of harmony and form into elaborate jokes. For example, the development ends—not unusually—in D minor, but instead of moving back into the home key (F major) for the recapitulation, Beethoven pauses, before staying in D and changing to the major mode, thus beginning the recapitulation in the ‘wrong’ key (a sneaky *pianissimo* transition eventually takes us back to the tonic). There is no slow movement in this sonata; instead, Beethoven goes straight into an Allegretto, a curiously subdued minuet and trio punctuated by *sforzando* accents and (in the reprise of the minuet) unsettling syncopations. The bustling finale is full of contrapuntal hijinks reminiscent of Haydn.

Beethoven was evidently proud of his ‘Grande Sonate’ in B flat major Op. 22, proclaiming to his publisher, Hoffmeister, ‘Die Sonate hat sich gewachsen’ (‘This sonata really is something’). Written in 1800, it is the last of his early sonatas in a conventional Viennese style (Charles Rosen calls it Beethoven’s ‘farewell to the eighteenth century’). Much like his other sonata in B-flat, Op. 106 (‘Hammerklavier’), the first movement of Op. 22 begins with a simple motto, a rising and falling third. Diverse musical material follows, but it is the unison octaves that end the exposition, along with the opening motif, that Beethoven uses as the primary material for the development. Here, they are transformed from a spectacular *fortissimo* passage into something mysterious, presented *pianissimo* in single low notes in the bass. In the following Adagio, Beethoven combines elements of concerto and operatic styles; a lyrical theme sings out above quiet repeated left-hand chords, before giving way to a darker, embellished middle section. The third movement is an elegant minuet and trio, although the trio itself (title ‘Minore’) takes an angst-ridden detour via swirling descending passages. A tender Viennese rondo (reminiscent of the finale of the ‘Spring’ Violin Sonata Op. 24) concludes the work.

The Sonata in C sharp minor Op. 27 No. 2, ‘Moonlight’, is so famous that we perhaps tend to forget just how original it is. Even in Beethoven’s day, the piece was wildly popular, leading the composer to remark to Czerny, ‘People are always talking about the C sharp minor sonata. Really, I have written better things’. The nickname is not Beethoven’s: like its companion Op. 27 No. 1, the work is headed *Sonata quasi una fantasia*, indicating Beethoven’s radical desire to synthesise the formal sonata with the free-flowing, improvisatory fantasy. Only later in the 19th Century did it acquire Romantic associations with ghostliness and night scenes.

Written in 1801, the sonata was dedicated to Beethoven’s piano student (and love interest) Countess Giulietta

Guicciardi. The Adagio sostenuto is marked to be played with the pedal held down, which on the instruments of Beethoven’s day would have produced a very special effect, one that cannot be achieved on a modern piano. Nonetheless, the vibrations of the piano strings produced by the pedal are intrinsic to the movement’s expressive power and mournful atmosphere, making it quite unlike anything else that had been written until that time.

Franz Liszt described the brief second movement as ‘a flower between two abysses’. Using the key of D flat major, the enharmonic major equivalent of C sharp minor, Beethoven slides smoothly into a more cheerful Allegretto (albeit one perhaps tinged with regret)—and out, just as quickly, into the stormy final movement. The Presto agitato is the longest, most complex and most technically demanding movement in the sonata (again, defying convention by being placed last), featuring wild broken chords and extreme dynamic contrasts. Much of it, in fact, is marked piano, making its sudden outbursts all the more powerful in their ferocity.

The Sonata in C major Op. 2 No. 3 is the last and longest of the three sonatas written in 1795, which were dedicated to Haydn. The brilliant opening movement, which borrows some of its thematic material from the 1785 Piano Quartet in C major (WoO. 36), begins quietly, with a humorous, teasing motif. Technical challenges, however, are already present, in the form of double third trills and part-playing; a sudden bravura explosion of broken chords and broken octaves follows. Unusually, the lyrical second theme appears in G minor, delaying the appearance of the conventional G major tonality until a tender subsidiary theme emerges. More unexpected ‘wrong turns’ appear in the development, alongside difficult trills and broken chords, before Beethoven finally lands back in C major. However, he has one more surprise up his sleeve, suddenly leading us into A-flat major and an extraordinary cadenza.

The mesmerising Adagio is also in a remote key, E major, but does not stay there for long: the beautiful opening melody is soon overtaken by another, darker theme in the minor mode, before making a welcome return. After an imitative contrapuntal Scherzo that ends with an enigmatic coda, the sonata concludes with a witty but fiendish Allegro assai, once again featuring a whole range of technical difficulties. Staccato chords, treacherous leaps, flashy double and triple thirds, tremolos, and fast intricate passages abound. The real test for the performer is to make all of this sound easy, without losing sight of the movement’s structure. Beethoven, after all, was a hugely gifted improviser, but he never sacrificed brilliance for musical substance: as he said, ‘A real virtuoso, when extemporising, plays pieces which hold together and possess a form... That is what I call playing the piano; everything else is a bad joke.’

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