

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 1 February 2025
7.30pm

Boris Giltburg piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 9 in E Op. 14 No. 1
I. Allegro • II. Allegretto • III. Rondo. Allegro comodo

Piano Sonata No. 4 in E flat Op. 7
I. Allegro molto e con brio • II. Largo con gran espressione • III. Allegro • IV. Rondo. Poco Allegretto e grazioso

Interval

Piano Sonata No. 20 in G Op. 49 No. 2
I. Allegro, ma non troppo • II. Tempo di Menuetto

Piano Sonata No. 8 in C minor Op. 13 'Pathétique' (1797-8)
I. Grave - Allegro di molto e con brio • II. Adagio cantabile • III. Rondo. Allegro

Piano Sonata No. 26 in E flat Op. 81a 'Les Adieux'
I. Das Lebewohl. Adagio • II. Abwesenheit. Andante espressivo • III. Das Wiedersehen. Vivacissimamente



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The piano sonata was by no means the only genre of instrumental music to which **Ludwig van Beethoven** made a landmark contribution: another was the string quartet. Beethoven began writing his first set of quartets (Op. 18) in 1798, the same year in which he composed the Sonata in E major Op. 14 No. 1. It is surely no coincidence that this sonata contains writing that is very quartet-like; indeed, Beethoven subsequently arranged it for string quartet, transposed into F major and with some revisions. Such textures are evident from the beginning of the genial first movement: after a series of ascending fourths, the answering phrase is echoed in different octaves. The second contrasting theme is tender and serene, but sharp dynamic contrasts hint at tensions to come. In the development, swirling arpeggios create an unsettled mood, one that is then triumphantly banished by rapid rising scales that accompany the return of the main theme.

There is no slow movement in this sonata; what follows instead is a melancholic, minuet-like Allegretto. A more optimistic mood seems to arise in the C major ('Maggiore') trio, which reappears briefly in the coda before sliding back into the minor. The sonata ends with a brilliant but stormy Rondo, constantly alternating between dynamic extremes, dramatic pauses, major and minor sections, and lively and lyrical passages. At the end, the Rondo theme is presented in syncopation, before being heard once more, *pianissimo*—making the final chords all the more dramatic.

A year before Op. 14 No. 1 was written, in 1797, Beethoven had published his 'Grande Sonate' in E flat major Op. 7. It is extraordinary to think that such an early sonata is his longest until the 'Hammerklavier' (Op. 106), 20 years later. The first movement is a wild, almost jazzy, romp, featuring a range of technical challenges. In the Largo con gran espressione, Beethoven combines a hymn-like theme with operatic, quasi-recitative textures in a movement of deep expressivity, notable especially for its beautiful central section, in which the melody is accompanied by a staccato bass. The initial charm of both the third and fourth movements, meanwhile, is broken by their contrasting middle sections: in the former, rumbling E flat minor, and in the latter, C minor. But these are only temporary interjections, and in the case of the last movement, its *cantabile* Rondo theme returns once again to quietly close the work. The Sonata in G major Op. 49 No. 2 was actually composed around the same time, although it was not published until 1805. Marketed as an 'easy sonata' (*sonata facile*), it is also one of the shortest, in just two movements: the first, a cheerful study in elegant triplet playing; the second, a wonderfully beguiling Minuet (the theme of which Beethoven reused in his Septet, Op. 20).

The key of C minor seems to have held particular significance for Beethoven. Mozart rarely used it, reserving it for music of special intensity and emotional turbulence. Beethoven, however, employed it regularly, including in some of his most iconic works, such as the Fifth Symphony, the Third Piano Concerto, and the Sonata in C minor Op. 13

('Pathétique'). Most often, he used it to represent drama, pathos (hence 'Pathétique'), and heroic struggle.

Dedicated to Prince Karl von Lichnowsky, the Op. 13 sonata is a strikingly original work that represented a new kind of expressive writing for the piano. It opens with a Grave introduction of extraordinary rhetorical intensity, marked by thick chords and sudden dynamic shifts. This gives way to the main Allegro di molto e con brio, in which a tense right hand rockets aggressively up the keyboard, accompanied by powerful *tremolo* octaves in the left; a second theme follows, presented (unusually) in E flat minor and featuring treacherous hand-crossing. Each time the Allegro reaches a climactic pause, the Grave material returns, heightening the musical drama. The famous slow movement, with its beautiful *cantabile* melody, again seems to evoke a string quartet in its part-writing, whilst the concluding Rondo largely avoids the theatrics of the first movement. Its haunting, slightly humorous theme spends much of its time in the major mode, but defiantly returns to C minor at the end.

The Sonata in E flat major Op. 81a, 'Les Adieux', is a moving testament to the deep friendship between Beethoven and his pupil and patron, the Archduke Rudolph, the sonata's dedicatee. In April 1809, Napoleon's army was approaching Vienna, and the Archduke, like so many of the nobility, fled the city. The sadness Beethoven felt over his friend's departure is expressed at the beginning of the first movement, 'Das Lebewohl' ('The Farewell'). It opens with three slow, horn-like chords, above which Beethoven wrote the syllables 'Le-be-wohl'. It is this motif - repeated and transformed throughout in many different ways - that unifies the movement. From the Adagio introduction, Beethoven rushes headlong into the main Allegro section. The increasing dissonances and agitated rhythmic material may represent the angst of the departure, a depiction that reaches its zenith in the unusually lengthy coda, once again dominated by the horn call motif.

An intense feeling of loss permeates the slow movement, titled 'Abwesenheit' ('Absence'). It is filled with expressive, sighing gestures that are reinforced by Beethoven's extensive use of diminished chords and ornaments; meanwhile, a gentle solo right-hand passage in the major perhaps evokes a recollection of happier times. But suddenly, without a break, the finale - 'Das Wiedersehen' ('The Reunion') - joyfully explodes into life. The animated reunion of the two friends is marked by the appearance of the theme in both hands, along with virtuosic *arpeggio* and scalic passages. However, as Donald Tovey has commented, it is perhaps unwise to look for too many specific pictorial details here. As Beethoven wrote of the Pastoral Symphony, this sonata is 'mehr Ausdruck der Empfindung als Malerei': 'not painting, but more an expression of feeling'.

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