

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 25 March 2025
7.30pm

Boris Giltburg piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Sonata No. 24 in F sharp Op. 78 (1809)
*I. Adagio cantabile - Allegro ma non troppo •
II. Allegro vivace*

Piano Sonata No. 16 in G Op. 31 No. 1 (1802)
*I. Allegro vivace • II. Adagio grazioso •
III. Rondo. Allegretto*

Interval

Piano Sonata No. 12 in A flat Op. 26 'Funeral March' (1800-1)
*I. Andante con variazioni • II. Scherzo. Allegro molto •
III. Maestoso andante. Marcia funebre sulla morte d'un
eroe • IV. Allegro*

Piano Sonata No. 28 in A Op. 101 (1816)
*I. Etwas lebhaft und mit der innigsten Empfindung •
II. Lebhaft. Marschmässig • III. Langsam und
sehnsuchtsvoll • IV. Geschwind, doch nicht zu sehr, und
mit Entschlossenheit*



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In 1812, while visiting the spa town of Teplitz, **Ludwig van Beethoven** wrote a passionate, 10-page love letter. Discovered among the composer's possessions after his death, the letter was never sent, and the identity of the intended recipient – known only as the 'Immortal Beloved' – is not known. Today, it is thought to have most likely been his former piano student Countess Josephine von Brunsvik; many earlier scholars, however, suggested it was instead her older sister, Therese, who likewise took lessons from Beethoven. Therese was also the dedicatee of the Sonata in F sharp Op. 78, composed three years earlier in 1809. This work, the only piece Beethoven composed in this unusual key, is now often overshadowed by larger sonatas such as the 'Appassionata', but, according to Carl Czerny, Beethoven thought very highly of it.

The Sonata opens with an extraordinary four bars, marked *Adagio cantabile*, for which, as Charles Rosen notes, 'there are no models or precedents'. Beethoven then introduces his main theme, a sublime, lyrical melody that is then expanded upon and decorated using innovative motivic transformation techniques, foreshadowing his late style. In the development, he takes us into a darker realm, passing through several exotic minor keys before the main thematic material returns, with a twist. The brief second movement, a rondo, proclaims its eccentricity from the very first chord: an augmented sixth, around which the entire movement is structured. The angular, humorous theme quotes 'Rule, Britannia', on which Beethoven had earlier written a set of variations (WoO. 79).

The Sonata in G Op. 31 No. 1 was composed in 1802, shortly after Beethoven had penned the so-called 'Heiligenstadt Testament'. However, unlike its companion sonata, the 'Tempest', there is no trace here of the despair communicated in that letter. This sonata is humorous and cheerful, not least in its opening movement, which begins with scampering passages and stumbling chords, suggesting the hands are unable to play together. After a rustic second theme that alternates between B major and B minor, these motifs are taken to further extremes in the development. The slow movement, one of Beethoven's longest, evokes – and, according to some, parodies – the world of Italian opera, with its highly ornamented right hand line and increasingly elaborate variations. A light, breezy character returns in the concluding *Rondo*, and Beethoven adds a final humorous touch at the end courtesy of a whirlwind coda.

Strikingly, none of the movements of the Sonata in A flat Op. 26 ('Funeral March'), from 1801, are actually in sonata form. Once again, Beethoven sought to redefine the genre by instead presenting a set of four character pieces. A set of five variations on an aristocratic theme opens the work, with a swinging first variation reinforcing the noble mood. After the lively second variation, in which the notes of the theme are heard more often on the offbeats, the third foreshadows the darkness and drama of the funeral march by switching to the minor mode. The understated fourth variation is a complete contrast, leading into the final variation in

which the theme is surrounded by melodious figuration. Beethoven closes the movement with a touching coda.

Czerny described the second movement, a *scherzo*, as 'quick, gay, and smartly marked'. Whilst the outer sections are humorous and witty, the contrasting middle trio is more lyrical. The famous third movement, which may have inspired the funeral march in Chopin's second sonata, was subsequently arranged by Beethoven for orchestra (WoO. 96), and played during his own funeral procession. The sonata concludes with a *Rondo in perpetuum mobile*, which continues throughout – even in a dramatic C minor section – before suddenly, and quietly, evaporating.

The Sonata in A Op. 101 is generally regarded as the first of Beethoven's late period sonatas, marking a shift towards a more experimental, polyphonic style, and the form of this work bears a striking similarity to the Cello Sonata Op. 102 No. 1. Beethoven dedicated it to his pupil Dorothea von Ertmann, a highly talented pianist who was much admired in Vienna, including by Beethoven himself. Although his autograph marks the first movement *Allegretto ma non troppo*, in the first published edition he added a more precise German indication, *Etwas lebhaft und mit der innigsten Empfindung* ('somewhat lively and with the deepest feeling'). Tender and poetic, this gently swinging movement features long, expansive melodic lines and contrapuntal textures. What follows could not be more different: the second movement, marked *Vivace alla Marcia; Lebhaft, Marchmässig* ('Lively, like a march') is strange and quirky. Its outer sections are dominated by dotted rhythms, with sudden forte chords punctuating lines of cheeky chromaticisms that are occasionally transformed into passages of delicate beauty. These disappear in the middle section, however, which is a strict canon.

The slow movement, which is headed both *Adagio ma non troppo, con affecto* ('Slowly, but not too much, with affection') and *Langsam und sehnsuchtsvoll* ('Slowly and full of longing'), is deeply expressive. It begins in the minor, leading to a cadenza-like passage and a poignant recollection of the opening of the first movement, before moving directly into the finale, marked *Allegro; Geschwind, doch nicht zu sehr, und mit Entschlossenheit* ('Fast, but not too much, and with determination'). Highly contrapuntal, and at times bucolic, it builds – via a dense fugal section – toward a huge climax, in which Beethoven calls for what was then the newest note on the piano, a low 'contra E'.

There are many treacherous passages in the Op. 101 sonata, and when it was published Beethoven suggested that it should be entitled 'The difficult-to-play Sonata in A'. But to him, this was a positive advantage: as he wrote, 'what is difficult is also beautiful, good, great etc., so everyone will realise that this is the most lavish praise that can be given; since what is difficult makes one sweat'.

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