

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 27 June 2022 1.00pm

Elisabeth Leonskaja piano

BBC
RADIO



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) Piano Sonata in C K330 (1781-3)
I. Allegro moderato • II. Andante cantabile • III. Allegretto

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Sonata No. 32 in C minor Op. 111 (1821-2)
*I. Maestoso - Allegro con brio ed appassionato •
II. Arietta. Adagio molto semplice cantabile*

Elisabeth would like to dedicate her recital to the memory of her late colleagues Radu Lupu and Nicholas Angelich.

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In 1783 **Mozart** took his wife and their little son, Raimund Leopold, to Salzburg to meet Grandfather Leopold (whose marriage blessing, by post, had been very grudging) for the first time. Unfortunately, Raimund died during the visit. While he was in Salzburg, Mozart prepared three new sonatas, perhaps as teaching material against his return to Vienna.

K330, like many of its predecessors, shows the symmetrical, clearly-etched themes Mozart had learned from Johann Christian Bach. The middle section of the first movement can scarcely be regarded as a 'development', since Mozart very typically invents new material for it. Haydn, too, had certain formal quirks that don't fit into the idea of sonata-form developed, from an analysis of Beethoven's habits, by Marx (not that one) in the 1840s. Haydn was fond of using the same theme for both his first and second subjects. (By 1822, Beethoven was no longer writing in Marx's form either, as we shall see!) The middle movement of K330 is in the restful subdominant, F major, with a central section in the minor key. The two sections are linked by their opening rhythm. The finale shares the first movement's disinclination to 'develop' its material, so we can enjoy Mozart's inventive powers instead, as new ideas shower about us. He saves up a little cadential surprise for the end.

After two years of ill-health, including six weeks in bed with rheumatic fever, **Beethoven** began to assemble Op. 111's sketches in January 1822. He soon became ill once again, suffering till the summer with 'gout in the chest'. To what a dizzying array of illnesses were the inhabitants of newly industrialising Vienna a prey! It's easy to forget that the tragically early age at which Schubert died, for instance – 31 – was the age at which most Viennese men died. Beethoven at least managed to hang on till he was 56. Despite his gout, he sent both Op. 110 & Op. 111 off to the publisher Schlesinger in Berlin early in 1822. Schlesinger published Op. 110 in July 1822, but waited until April 1823 for Op. 111 – by which time Clementi had already published it in London.

Beethoven's musical language in intimate works like sonatas and string quartets has become by this stage in his development extremely concentrated. The word '*cantabile*' – 'singing' – crops up everywhere, reminding us of Wagner's idea of late Beethoven as 'endless melody'. Unsurprisingly then, Beethoven uses compositional techniques appropriate to melody: fugue and variation. The impression of deep thought is attained by the insertion into allegros of improvisatory adagio passages. Beethoven had been a great improviser in the days when he could hear, and

the three late sonatas all show him harnessing some of his old habits of sudden surprise to the polished vehicle of long-considered composed forms. Who knows where that development may have taken him, had another Schlesinger requested another set of sonatas?

The C minor Sonata begins with all three possible versions of the chord of the diminished seventh, which was just beginning its long career as a sinister symbol – Entry of Villain, *Dah-da Dut Dut Daaaah!* – at precisely this period, in the operas of Weber. The main theme is Beethoven at his most C minorish, gruff, angry and obsessively tumultuous. The calm trumpet-call of the second theme comes, not in the usual key of E flat major – at 51, Beethoven no longer does much that seems 'usual' – but in A flat: the main theme having made a particular point of the note A flat. The variations of the finale flow on at a constant speed, which not only explains the fact that the sonata has only two movements, but also emphasises its effect. We stay pretty much in the home key of C major, until that significant A flat starts to push in again over a set of trills. This time it takes us to the key we avoided earlier – E flat major. Beethoven's plans run deep in these great works.

Beethoven's first significant piano work, back in 1791, was a set of variations on a theme by Righini. The tyro composer packed all the new ideas he could think of into his showcase work – dynamics lurching from loud to soft, teasing scales (as in the First Symphony and the Third Piano Concerto), 'wrong' keys reached by the jump of a semitone, and, especially, a variation with continuous trills. 30 years later, he was still exploring these devices. Continuous trills appear in both Op. 109 and Op. 111.

I once had a student who wrote the fatuous sentence 'Luckily Beethoven lived long enough to complete his set of 32 piano sonatas'. The last three are often viewed in that fallacious light, as a conscious valediction. And yet, there is something about the contemplation of endings, even endings of happenstance, that adds an extra layer of meaning, even though Beethoven had another 27 opuses still to come. The ending of the C minor Sonata, at any rate, could not be bettered as a farewell.

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