

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 29 October 2022
7.30pm

Supported by Sam and Alexandra Morgan

Richard Goode piano

- Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Bagatelle in G Op. 119 No. 6 (1820-2)
Bagatelle in C Op. 119 No. 7 (1820)
Bagatelle in C Op. 119 No. 8 (1820)
Bagatelle in A minor Op. 119 No. 9 (1820)
Bagatelle in A Op. 119 No. 10 (1820)
Bagatelle in B flat Op. 119 No. 11 (1820)
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*
- Interval
- 33 Variations in C on a waltz by Diabelli Op. 120 (1819-23)

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In the Romantic imagination **Beethoven** wrote his last piano works and string quartets in ivory-tower seclusion from the world. The more prosaic truth is that they were all composed at the behest of either a friend, publisher or patron. The initial impetus for both the Op. 109 Sonata and the Op. 119 Bagatelles was a request from Beethoven's friend Friedrich Starke in 1820 for music for a piano tutor. The first movement of Op. 109 was originally intended for the tutor, but then became part of something bigger. In compensation, Beethoven composed five bagatelles (Op. 119 Nos. 7–11), which duly appeared in 1821 in Starke's *Wiener Pianoforte-Schule*. A year later he expanded the collection with six more miniatures, of which Nos. 1–5 date back at least two decades.

In this evening's recital Richard Goode plays the last six bagatelles. No. 6 opens as a whimsical andante, then dissolves into a delicately skipping allegretto. In extreme contrast, No. 7 is quintessential late Beethoven in its explosiveness and zany use of trills. No. 9 has the faintly coquettish elegance of a Schumann waltz. The excitable No. 10 is over in a flash. No. 11 is an exquisite lyric gem (could Brahms have had it in mind when he composed the *Adagio* of his Violin Concerto?), while No. 12 has that profound simplicity that is a hallmark of late Beethoven.

In his final three sonatas, Opp. 109–111, Beethoven draws back from the gigantism of the 'Hammerklavier' Sonata to return to the more modest dimensions and speaking intimacy of the sonatas Opp. 90 and 101. In Opp. 109 and 110, especially, there is little room for strenuous rhetoric. Instead, Beethoven cultivates what the American musicologist Maynard Solomon called an 'etherealized, improvisatory tone'. Each of the sonatas charts an intense spiritual experience and creates its own form.

On the surface the opening movement of the Sonata in E major Op. 109 does indeed sound like an inspired improvisation. But its air of nonchalant playfulness coexists with a subtly condensed sonata-form structure. Rippling, faintly Bachian figuration alternates with a fantasia-like *Adagio espressivo* 'second subject', harmonically bolder and more disruptive than the fast music that enfolds it.

Following the nostalgic coda without a break is a truculent E minor march-cum-scherzo, again in a compressed sonata form. The descending bass accompanying the main theme is developed separately, while a subsequent 'running' theme is presented in double counterpoint that spectacularly exploits the extremes of the keyboard.

As in Op. 111, Beethoven crowns the sonata with a set of variations on a sublimely simple melody, somewhere between a sarabande and a hymn. The fourth variation weaves a shadowy outline of the theme in graceful arabesques, while the fifth develops a fragment of the theme in a rugged fugue. The sixth and final variation opens with the theme in the alto voice before building in an astonishing series of sustained tremolandos and trills. Then, after this visionary climax, Beethoven brings back

the theme in its original purity, with an effect of timeless, transcendent peace.

The seeds of Beethoven's *33 Variations on a Waltz by Diabelli*, the natural successor to Bach's 'Goldbergs', lie in a patriotic project initiated by the publisher and part-time composer Anton Diabelli. In spring 1819 Diabelli invited over 50 composers, Beethoven among them, to contribute one variation each on a waltz he had written, to celebrate 'the foremost tone-poets and virtuosi of Vienna and the Austrian states'. Never a fan of collaborative efforts, Beethoven peremptorily declined. Yet he quickly saw how Diabelli's banal waltz might serve as raw material for a whole series of 'grand variations'. By late summer 1819 Beethoven had completed 23 variations, before laying them aside to plunge into work on the *Missa solemnis*. Early in 1823, with Diabelli increasingly impatient, Beethoven ditched one of the original 23 variations and added 11 new ones. Diabelli published the 33 variations as Volume 1 of his project, with the collective work (50 variations by composers ranging from Beethoven's pupils Czerny and Archduke Rudolph to Schubert and Liszt) as Volume 2.

Variation technique - creating a whole world from a single source - was a prime preoccupation of Beethoven's in his last years. With the 'Diabellis' he seems to be relishing the challenge of excavating and deconstructing Diabelli's unsuspecting waltz in every possible way. In them he pays homage to JS Bach while creating a compendium of modern keyboard genres and techniques.

Beethoven's factotum Anton Schindler wrote that writing the Diabelli Variations 'amused Beethoven to a rare degree'. Comedy and grotesquerie are indeed rarely absent for long: say, in the march parody of Variation 9 ('*Alla pesante*') or the fragmentary No. 13, with its absurd contrasts of dynamics and register. In Variation 22 Beethoven has fun simultaneously sending up Diabelli's theme and the disgruntled Leporello's opening solo from *Don Giovanni*.

Scattered amid the toccata-like virtuosity and subversive laughter are variations that transfigure rather than mock the waltz theme. Rising slowly from the depths, No. 20 transforms the theme into a mystical hymn, while the ethereal fughetto, No. 24, recreates Bachian fugal textures at their most limpid.

Amid an ever-unpredictable variety of tempo, mood and texture, Beethoven gradually builds to a climax of mounting complexity. Forming the work's emotional core are the three slow C minor variations, Nos. 29–31. These become progressively more floridly expressive, culminating in No. 31, a poignant arioso that at once looks backwards to Bach and forwards to Chopin. Elegy yields to action in the volcanic E flat fugue, No. 32, a climax of virtuosity and contrapuntal intricacy. After a torrential climax the music subsides mysteriously back to the home key of C major. The celestial final variation then ascends into the empyrean, transmuting Diabelli's footling tune into a sublime, otherworldly minuet.

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