

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 30 April 2022

Leonard Elschenbroich cello

Alexei Grynyuk piano

1.00pm

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Cello Sonata in G minor Op. 5 No. 2 (1796)

*I. Adagio sostenuto ed espressivo • II. Allegro molto più tosto presto • III. Rondo. Allegro*

Cello Sonata in A Op. 69 (1807-8)

*I. Allegro, ma non tanto • II. Scherzo. Allegro molto • III. Adagio cantabile - Allegro vivace*

7.30pm

Ludwig van Beethoven

Cello Sonata in F Op. 5 No. 1 (1796)

*I. Adagio sostenuto - Allegro • II. Allegro vivace*

Cello Sonata in C Op. 102 No. 1 (1815)

*I. Andante - Allegro vivace • II. Adagio - Tempo d'andante - Allegro vivace*

*Interval*

Cello Sonata in F Op. 17 (1800)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Poco adagio, quasi andante • III. Rondo. Allegro moderato*

Cello Sonata in D Op. 102 No. 2 (1815)

*I. Allegro con brio • II. Adagio con molto sentimento d'affetto • III. Allegro fugato*

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If we could imagine **Beethoven** speaking – or singing – perhaps it would be in a strong, warm baritone: a cello voice. He left a substantial body of music for cello and piano, including works from all three traditional periods of his creative life. Also, the cello sonata seems to have been the one genre he invented – the cello sonata conceived, that is, not with an elementary and indiscriminate bass but with a fully written out piano part. Perhaps a feeling of owning the cello sonata, or at least of its being exceptional, could have encouraged him to be more audacious formally in these works. Where the violin and piano sonatas of his late 20s are all in conventional three- or four-movement form, with a slow movement somewhere in the middle, the two cello sonatas of that time start with their most sustained slow music.

This is where the story begins, in 1796, when Beethoven visited the Prussian court at Potsdam as part of a five-month tour, the longest he ever took. The king of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm II, was an amateur of the cello, and had drawn to his musical household two French brothers who were virtuosos of the instrument: Jean-Pierre and Jean-Louis Duport. Haydn and Mozart had both written quartets for this destination, with prominent cello parts; Beethoven offered two sonatas, which he played for the king with one of the Duports, probably Jean-Louis, and was rewarded with a gold snuffbox stuffed with Louis d'or coins – a gift, he recorded the monarch as saying, that would not have disgraced an ambassador. Friedrich Wilhelm was the inevitable dedicatee when the sonatas were published the following year as Beethoven's Op. 5.

Right from this beginning, Beethoven's cello sonatas engage the instruments thoroughly in dialogue – sometimes to humorous effect, then with increasing richness. The problems of balance – how the cello risks getting mired in the piano's left-hand harmony or outshone by the right – are also solved with ever greater ingenuity. Dialogue, in all these sonatas, becomes a key aspect of how the music works: we wait to hear how the cello will adapt or respond to the piano, or vice versa, vocality in one instrument or the other being almost continuous. Similarly, the differences between low-register string instrument and keyboard become opportunities. One obvious example comes from how the cello can sustain notes at a steady or even an increasing volume. Again, this contrast of sound is in active use from the start.

It is certainly there in the opening bars of the second sonata of the Op. 5 pair. A solid G minor chord sets the stakes high, and the subjects to be considered are assembled: a falling scale in dotted rhythm, introduced by the piano, and a twist of cello melody. Each of the Op. 5 sonatas is a little ambiguous as to whether its slow opening is to be taken as an introduction to the main allegro or as a self-standing slow movement. In both cases the slow music comes to an end on the most expectant of chords, the dominant seventh, but the length and shape of this G minor sonata's beginning will probably incline us to take it as a full movement.

The next, whose marking means 'Allegro molto, or rather presto', moves into triple time, with a songlike main theme. This comes to a cadence – poignant? wistful? – that recurs and seems to impregnate the music and impel agitation. A second subject, rising

in the relative major, B flat, is similarly songlike while offering appropriate contrast and opening a broad field within which this long movement can extend itself, through a development sporting a new melody, the expected recapitulation and a coda that finally swivels into G major. This is the key also of the *Rondo* finale, whose principal theme belongs to the piano. The cello's many efforts to get on board are part of the fun.

Beethoven wrote his next cello sonata, Op. 69 in A, in a new century and, for him, a new world; dating from 1807–8, the work was finished alongside the Fifth Symphony. Something else was different. Where Beethoven had composed his first cello sonatas for a king and for virtuoso brothers, all of them a full generation older than him, Op. 69 he dedicated it to a younger nobleman friend who was an amateur cellist, Ignaz von Gleichenstein.

Doffing his cap to this friend, Beethoven has the cello launch the work alone, but then immediately the interweaving begins, to continue in a varied replay with roles reversed. Then, as if all this had been introductory, comes a switch to the minor and hectic triplet rhythm. At the turn into E major, for the second subject, the two instruments present different themes simultaneously, then exchange them. A march, a luminous dissolve and a reminiscence of the opening complete the exposition. The development soon discovers a new theme, alternately pathos-laden and stormy. By way of the first theme, and magically, the music almost empties of activity before arriving at the recapitulation, where that first theme is now complete in the cello and needs no repeat. This same theme, at its re-arrival, becomes the subject of a coda, where the piano extracts from it an expressive turn to repeat over and over before the close.

The *Scherzo*, in A minor, has emphatic offbeat accents that the pianist's left hand keeps going from time to time through the contrasting trio in the major. This trio, motivically recalling the main theme of the first movement, is played twice, to make an ABABA form. At the end the syncopations go on, a faded ghost.

There is then again the question of whether an *Adagio* – in E major, consolatory – is to be considered a distinct movement or an introduction: in this case, to a bounding rondo.

Back to the beginning. The first of the Op. 5 sonatas, like its companion, opens with an *Adagio*, but this time one having the sense of something preparatory: a slow introduction. (Beethoven will confirm this diagnosis near the end of the movement.) The instruments are at first in unison, but then the cello beautifully finds its own voice.

Even without counting this introduction, the *Allegro* into which it leads is long – a good deal longer than that of the second sonata, long enough to accommodate an abundance of material once the turn to the second subject has been made: twinges of the minor, and dynamic excursions more typical of a development section. The development itself issues in a new idea when, to a prompt from the cello, the piano moves into a hymnlike passage in D flat. This is then beautifully accelerated towards the recapitulation, which, duly reaching the exposition's conclusive gesture of three chords, proceeds from there into a coda. This is where the *Adagio* introduction is recalled, but only briefly before the coda is granted its own coda: a quick burst into a cheekily altered reprise of the main *Allegro* theme.

The sonata now needs only a rondo finale, with a Gypsy-style diversion, modulatory arpeggios recalling D flat and, once more, a pause for reflection before the dash to the exit.

Fast forward through almost two decades to August 1815. Beethoven's creative activity had conspicuously slowed down, but, spending a summer holiday with aristocratic friends, Péter and Anna Maria von Erdödy, and finding Joseph Linke also part of the company (the cellist who had sat alongside him at the premières of the Op. 70 piano trios and more recently the 'Archduke'), he perhaps began remembering his longer history with the instrument. The mood of the resulting sonatas in C and D, published as his Op. 102, is certainly retrospective – and also, because the future was to turn out to be all about retrospection, forward-looking. Forms are more compact here, ploys more abrupt, because the conventions are at once observed and outgrown. This is late Beethoven.

The cello enters alone to start the C major sonata, as it did the A major, but now as if bringing to the table an old story. Both instruments muse on this in the manner of a prelude, until the cello plumbs its bottom note. Up from this springs an *Allegro* in vigorous dotted rhythm, turning briefly more melodious for its second subject, but continuing mostly turbulent. A brief development of the main theme leads into the altered recapitulation, followed by a coda that finds the dotted rhythm drained of energy, until the emphatic close.

After this comes an *Adagio* that works round to beautiful cello melody and then, perhaps even more beautiful, a brief reprise of the work's opening: a memory of a memory. Picking up energy again, the instruments consider and decide on a tag that will give them a rondo finale.

Before we go on to the second work of Op. 102, there is one more sonata to be heard, one Beethoven composed in the first place for horn, for a performance he gave at the court theatre in Vienna during Easter week 1800 with the Bohemian virtuoso Jan Václav Stich, who went by the Italian version of his name as Giovanni Punto. The sonata starts, perhaps a touch ironically, with a figure any horn player could manage: an arpeggio in the instrument's natural key of F. Responding, the piano shows off chromatic notes, but then, lo and behold, the horn proves itself equally capable of these – and, indeed, as the piece goes on, of virtually anything the piano tosses its way. The result is a wonderful showpiece, but at the time, before the introduction of the valved horn, probably nobody but Punto could have pulled it off. When, therefore, the work was published the following year, as Beethoven's Op. 17, he approved the cello as alternative instrument, giving us a cello sonata of immediate appeal and straightforward design. The first movement ends as it began, with tonic arpeggios now affirmative. After this comes what is more a slow interlude than a full movement, but affecting, in F minor, and then a *Rondo* finale.

And so to Op. 102 No. 2. The first *Allegro* of this D major sonata, having no preface, is elliptical and harmonically complex (two late-Beethoven traits), yet urgently persuasive (another), sparked off by an assertive question, as this time the lead is taken by the piano – which immediately shrugs off its question, only to have it answered by a thread of melody from the cello. These elements – especially the little question – are tumbled this way and that, until the cello dares a new melodic thread as second subject. Another theme follows, but soon the question is back, to lead into the exposition repeat and later the development. The recapitulation goes into a brief, beautiful coda.

If this *Allegro* is rather short by Beethoven's cello-sonata standards, what comes next is the big slow movement we might well have been waiting for. In D minor, it begins with a chorale in separated phrases that is turned into a funeral march. The remarkable middle section is in the major but remains unsettled. Its melody is not so much stated as intimated, from different directions, and the counterpoint is unstable, in danger of coming adrift.

A fugue for a finale is another late-Beethoven marker, but here it was new, and may have given one reason, along with the first movement, why the composer in letters referred to the piece as a 'free sonata'. With its rising-scale motif, the fugue has a dynamism that makes it a fitting conclusion not just for this work (which it scans back through before it is over) but for Beethoven's whole lifetime of music for cello and piano.

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