

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 30 April 2025
7.30pm

This concert is supported by Aubrey Adams

Boris Giltburg piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 10 in G Op. 14 No. 2 (pub. 1799)

I. Allegro • II. Andante • III. Scherzo. Allegro assai

Piano Sonata No. 7 in D Op. 10 No. 3 (1797-8)

*I. Presto • II. Largo e mesto • III. Menuetto. Allegro •
IV. Rondo. Allegro*

Interval

Piano Sonata No. 19 in G minor Op. 49 No. 1 (?1797)

I. Andante • II. Rondo. Allegro

Piano Sonata No. 25 in G Op. 79 (1809)

I. Presto alla tedesca • II. Andante • III. Vivace

Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Op. 109 (1820)

*I. Vivace ma non troppo – Adagio espressivo •
II. Prestissimo • III. Andante molto cantabile ed
espressivo: Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung*



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Comedy, perhaps, is not a word we typically associate with **Ludwig van Beethoven**. In fact, however, Beethoven had a great sense of humour: many of his friends noted his love of practical joking, and his letters are full of puns and satire – as, indeed, is his music. Written in 1799, the Sonata in G Op. 14 No. 2 might seem like a modest work, especially compared to its predecessor, Op. 13 ('Pathétique'), but it abounds with musical wit, not to mention unexpected technical challenges. The melodious opening movement is a case in point: Beethoven begins by fooling his listeners about where the downbeat actually is. This genial theme is followed by a cheeky second motif in thirds, which then becomes more lyrical, and leads to an expressive concluding passage. In the unusually lengthy development, the mood becomes darker, with excursions into exotic keys and even a false reprise of the theme in E flat major; however, the real recapitulation soon appears, and the movement ends quietly.

Instead of the expected slow movement, Beethoven writes a set of variations in C major. Continuing the humour, the apparently simple, rather ponderous march-like theme is transformed, being heard firstly in the left hand (in counterpoint with the bass and a syncopated right hand), then as offbeat chords accompanied by leaps. It then appears in the left hand again, before being restated in its original form, and a surprise fortissimo chord brings the movement to a crashing conclusion. Nothing could be more fitting to follow this than a *Scherzo* — literally, 'a joke' — in rondo form, stylistically resembling some of Beethoven's piano bagatelles. Once again, Beethoven subverts our expectations through rhythmic ambiguity in the scampering theme, unexpected key changes, and the use of sudden pauses. The movement's rustic character adds to its charm, as does the witty ending, which casually slips away.

Described by Czerny as a 'grand and significant piece', the Sonata in D Op. 10 No. 3 is the longest of the three Op. 10 sonatas written in 1797-8. It begins with a thrilling *Presto*, featuring an opening theme in staccato octaves and many bravura passages. The slow movement that follows, marked *Largo e mesto*, is deeply tragic; out of this despair, however, emerges a genial, consolatory *Menuetto*, partnered by a humorous Trio in which the melody is tossed between the hands. The finale, a *Rondo*, begins with a slight, unassuming motif of just three notes, from which Beethoven constructs an entire movement full of extraordinary invention — and a capricious ending.

Although not published until 1805, the Sonata in G minor Op. 49 No. 1 dates from around the same time as Op. 10. Despite its brevity, it is an affecting, sensitive work, especially the beautiful opening *Andante*. The rollicking second movement is a *Rondo* that calls to mind the finale of the second Piano Concerto. After a cheerful beginning, the middle section moves to G minor and its relative major, B flat, setting up an

ingenious structure built around nested layers of binary form.

The Sonata in G major Op. 79 (1809) is one of Beethoven's shortest. Given the title 'Sonatine', it is also known as 'The Cuckoo', principally due to its high-spirited first movement, marked *Presto alla tedesca*. A lively, triple-time dance, the 'tedesca', also known as the 'German Dance' or 'Teutsche', was an early form of the waltz. Beethoven opens with a forceful three-note motif that recurs throughout the movement, contrasted with a second theme based around fast scalar and arpeggio passages. The following *Andante* is a barcarolle, a Venetian gondola song, that prefigures those by Mendelssohn and Chopin; evoking Italian opera, its outer sections are presented as a duet, and the central section, in E flat major, as a solo. Meanwhile, the breezy finale features a theme that is subtly varied across the movement, and its two final chords — marked *piano subito* — are a parting joke.

Despite being written 11 years later, the Sonata in E Op. 109 opens with a theme that utilises the same chord progression as the last movement of Op. 79. But this is soon interrupted by a sudden diminished seventh chord and a tempo change, a contrast repeated throughout the movement: like Beethoven's other late sonatas, this work is notable for its experimental form and unusual harmonies. The second movement, a stormy *Prestissimo scherzo*, is similarly filled with dramatic contrasts, and in the development, the forceful bass line heard at the beginning becomes the theme of a canon.

The heart of Op. 109 is its finale, a slow movement in theme and variations form. Its deeply expressive character is indicated by both Italian and German markings: *Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo* and *Gesang mit innigster Empfindung* ('Song with the most intimate feeling'). The moving theme takes the form of a dignified sarabande; in the first variation, it is heard an octave higher, with ornamentation and a left hand that transforms it into a waltz. In the second, the melody, marked *teneramente* ('tenderly'), appears as a duet, whilst the third is a brilliant study in invertible counterpoint. The fourth variation, to be played a little slower than the theme, is filled with expressive arabesques.

After the fugal fifth, Beethoven segues into the final, sixth variation. Beginning peacefully, it builds, through rhythmic intensification, into an extraordinary, shaking climax, in which the melody is passionately decorated in exultant demisemiquavers, supported by long trills, alternating between high and low registers. Finally, the theme returns poignantly in its original form, the last chord marked with pedal, as if to be held beyond the end of the music. As Charles Rosen writes, 'Perhaps the most unusual aspect of the sonata is how unassuming on the surface are the opening of the first movement and the end of the last...and yet how much they demand and reward meditation'. Indeed so.

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