

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 31 October 2024
7.30pm

Boris Giltburg piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 2 in A Op. 2 No. 2 (1794-5)
*I. Allegro vivace • II. Largo appassionato •
III. Scherzo. Allegretto • IV. Rondo. Grazioso*

Piano Sonata No. 17 in D minor Op. 31 No. 2 'Tempest'
(1801-2)

I. Largo - Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegretto

Interval

Piano Sonata No. 27 in E minor Op. 90 (1814)
*I. Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit
Empfindung und Ausdruck • II. Nicht zu
geschwind und sehr singbar vorgetragen*

Piano Sonata No. 15 in D Op. 28 'Pastoral' (1801)
*I. Allegro • II. Andante • III. Scherzo. Allegro
vivace • IV. Rondo. Allegro ma non troppo*



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By the time Ludwig van Beethoven wrote his first set of published piano sonatas (Op. 2, 1794-5) he had already acquired a considerable reputation in Vienna as a virtuoso pianist and improviser. He had moved there to study with Joseph Haydn, to whom the sonatas are dedicated, but quickly developed his own style that impressed the Viennese nobility. The Sonata in A Op. 2 No. 2, for example, is certainly Haydnesque in spirit, but its sound is uniquely Beethovenian. This is apparent from the very beginning of the first movement, with its bright unison octaves and brash figuration, and the dramatic dynamic contrasts, key changes and energetic virtuoso passages that follow. The beautiful *Largo*, meanwhile, features a delicate contrapuntal texture that imitates a string quartet, opening with lyrical chords over a *pizzicato* bass. After a sparkling *Scherzo* (incorporating a dramatic minor-key trio) comes a lyrical finale, full of Viennese grace and charm, along with the odd outburst (notably its stormy middle section).

In 1802, Beethoven retreated to the town of Heiligenstadt, on the outskirts of Vienna. It was there that he wrote his so-called *Heiligenstadt Testament*, a letter of utter desperation in which the composer, on the verge of suicide, explained the reasons for his increasingly erratic and misunderstood behaviour: 'I was compelled early to isolate myself, to live in loneliness...it was impossible for me to say to men: speak louder, shout, for I am deaf!...What a humiliation when one stood beside me and heard a flute in the distance and I heard nothing, or someone heard the shepherd singing and again I heard nothing...I would have ended my life – it was only my art that held me back. Ah, it seemed to me impossible to leave the world until I had brought forth all that I felt was within me'.

It is difficult not to hear the 'Tempest' Sonata Op. 31 No. 2, written at the same time, as a reflection of Beethoven's state of mind. It is his only piano sonata in the tragic key of D minor. The first movement begins slowly and mysteriously, with a rolled A major chord that is interrupted by a frantic two-note motif, before being suddenly cut off by an ornamented cadence. Another rolled chord – now in C major – is again cut off by the frantic motif, finally landing us in D minor. A forceful theme is then tossed between the hands, accompanied by nervous tremolos and punctuated by *sforzandi*. This is music of great angst and agitation: the melodies rise insistently, increasing the tension. In the middle of the development, just as we seem to have reached breaking point, an extraordinary recitative-like passage takes over, again drawing on the mysterious opening material, and the movement ends with a quiet, rumbling section that Czerny described as 'distant thunder'. The *Adagio* that follows is calm and dignified, but there are nonetheless hints of what has passed: once again, it begins with a rolled chord, and has a recurring rumbling figure. The haunting last movement is based almost entirely around a

flowing, but restless, *perpetuum mobile* motif. After journeying through some remote key areas (notably B flat minor), the theme returns to the tragic tonality of D minor, before disappearing, like a ghost, into thin air.

The Sonata in E minor Op. 90 was written in 1814, almost five years after its predecessor, Op. 81a. It stands on the brink of Beethoven's late style, and consists of only two movements that could not be more different from each other, as Beethoven's own tempo markings show. The first is marked *Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck* ('With liveliness and throughout with feeling and expression'). It is a passionate, restless movement, and seems almost to be a conversation between two very different characters, one strident and assertive, the other timid and entreating. In the second movement, Beethoven takes us into the major mode, and a much gentler place. Marked *Nicht zu geschwind und sehr singbar vorgetragen* ('Not too quick and in a very singing manner'), its recurring main theme is one of his most beautiful and consolatory, reminiscent of Schubert.

With the Sonata in D Op. 28, we return to Beethoven's 'early' period, and the year 1801. Although the sonata's nickname, 'Pastoral', is not Beethoven's own, it is nonetheless highly appropriate. A bucolic mood is conjured from the outset by a repeated low D in the bass, like a drone; above it sits an entrancing, wonderfully expressive theme. Contrasts begin to appear with the appearance of the exposition's second theme, more passionate but still tender. Idyllic lyricism takes a back seat in the development, though, where Beethoven leads us through many different keys via the circle of fifths, gradually compressing part of the initial theme until it is reduced to a single repeated chord. The slow movement, in D minor, strikes a more sorrowful tone in its outer sections, dominated by a staccato bass and a solemn chordal melody that is then elaborated. Although respite seems to come in the form of a skipping dance-like section in D major, it later returns in the minor mode. All gloomy thoughts are banished, however, with the rustic and humorous *Scherzo* that follows.

The finale, a *Rondo*, sees the return of the bass drone from the first movement, now lilting and dance-like, and answered by a beguiling melody in the right hand. This refrain returns again and again, with charming embellishments, interspersed with more virtuosic episodes (including a brief fugue). The sheer joy expressed in this movement, especially its exuberant bravura ending, stands in stark contrast to the bleakness of the 'Tempest' Sonata, written just a year later. For Beethoven, the natural world was a source of great delight and comfort, even in the darkest of times; this sonata, perhaps, is his song of thanksgiving.

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