

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Mitsuko Uchida: Beethoven's Late Sonatas

Wednesday 5 April 2023, 7.30pm
Royal Festival Hall

Welcome to Classical Music: Spring/Summer 2023. With this programme, we continue to celebrate classical music in all its forms with leading artists and ensembles from the UK and around the world.

In close collaboration with our dynamic family of Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists, we are presenting the full spectrum of classical music, as well as embracing new approaches to how we do so. We are thrilled to welcome such an incredible range of global artists to our spaces – and beyond – to perform, and you to see them.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Ludwig van Beethoven

Piano Sonata No.30 in E, Op.109	20'
Piano Sonata No.31 in A flat, Op.110	20'
Piano Sonata No.32 in C minor, Op.111	27'

Performer

Mitsuko Uchida *piano*

There is no interval in this performance which ends at approximately 8.45pm

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

The Final Three Piano Sonatas

When in 1820 Ludwig van Beethoven offered Adolf Martin Schlesinger three piano sonatas at 40 ducats each, the publisher responded by bargaining him down to 30. The music, however, is priceless. These works, conceived as a trilogy, form the crowning glory of Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas.

They sprang from a mind, and a world, in turmoil. Beethoven's preceding decade had been stressful, to say the least. The Napoleonic Wars had been ravaging Europe, causing the breakdown of the Holy Roman Empire, plus runaway inflation; Beethoven's aristocratic patrons were ruined. In 1815 Napoleon's escape from Elba led to a renewed eruption of war; and that year, Mount Tambora, a volcano in Indonesia, also erupted, unleashing a soot cloud that blew halfway round the world and obliterated the European summer of 1816. Severe food shortages and a typhoid epidemic followed.

On the personal front, following his brother Kaspar Anton Karl's death in 1815, Beethoven had fought for custody of his nephew, Karl, against the boy's mother, whom he loathed. He finally won, but the process was hideous and Beethoven's parenting skills non-existent.

Beethoven's usual route to conquering a slough of despond was to write himself out of it, seeking, and often finding, radical new territory. In 1817 the result was the *Hammerklavier* Sonata, Op.106. This giant achievement launched him towards the path of the final three, which he completed – if much later than planned – in 1821.

Piano Sonata No.30 in E, Op.109

- i Vivace, adagio espressivo*
- ii Prestissimo*
- iii Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo*

The Sonata Op.109 is, like its siblings, profoundly original, while exploiting the capabilities of the piano Beethoven had received from John Broadwood in 1818, with its extended registers, dynamic range and power. The piece is dedicated to Maximiliane Brentano, daughter of Beethoven's Frankfurt-based patrons Franz and Antonie Brentano.

The sonata's opening theme is soft, lively and translucent, but its flow is interrupted by a probing, almost improvisatory episode; the first movement is based on the contrast of bright regularity and free-spirited exploration. The second movement is a ferocious scherzo. In Op.111, Beethoven places contrasting extremes side by side; in Op.109 two movements of angelic radiance sandwich their polar opposite.

Variation form was always a goldmine for Beethoven; the last movement is a set of six on a sarabande-like theme. Each builds in complexity until finally unfurling streams of trills and cascading passagework, the melody picked out in the stratospheres, before subsiding into a restatement of the theme. The spirit of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* – likewise based on a sarabande-like theme, employing shimmering trills in a late variation, and ending with a return to the beginning – is never far away.

Piano Sonata No.31 in A flat, Op.110

- i *Moderato cantabile molto espressivo*
- ii *Allegro molto*
- iii *Adagio, ma non troppo*

The opening of Op.110 presents a sarabande rhythm similar to the last movement of Op.109. Its melody will later morph into the theme of the sonata's climactic fugue, but for now, the music breaks into a filigree pattern across the keyboard, punctuated by low bass chords. The development injects a troubled undertone and when the main theme returns, it mingles with the filigree figures; a coda seems to leave an unanswered question behind.

The second movement is a scherzo that quotes from two folk songs: 'Unsa Kätz häd Katz'in g'hapt' (Our cat has had kittens) and 'Ich bin lüderlich' (I am down and out). The trio section emphasises offbeat humour with spiky accents.

There follows a journey into the darkest of moods. A recitative emerges, involving mysterious resonances and rebounding notes (an effect named *bebung*). This leads to the *klagende gesang* (lamenting song), its key, A flat minor, housing a sense of deep despair. Yet out of this a restorative fugue begins to rise, derived from the sonata's opening theme. Recovery gathers pace, but just as the music seems about to reach its apogee, it collapses: the lament returns, a semitone lower, broken and exhausted.

Then – transformation. Minor turns to major in a crescendo of chords, before the fugue subject returns upside-down. Beethoven marks the music 'gradually coming back to life'. Eventually the fugue theme breaks free and triumphs in a transcendent eruption of joy.

Piano Sonata No.32 in C minor, Op.111

- i *Maestoso – Allegro con brio ed appassionato*
- ii *Arietta: Adagio molto semplice e cantabile*

Beethoven's two-movement final sonata is a work of opposed polarities – perhaps hell and heaven, yin and yang, darkness and light – forming a whole in which the interdependence of these extremes is implicitly realised and accepted. Originally he had planned a three-movement work; but as it evolved, the main theme for the finale (and which

he had first sketched around 20 years earlier) was moved to the first movement and the idea of a third abandoned as the composer began to see just what was taking shape under his pen. Like the *Emperor* Concerto and the *Archduke* Trio, its dedication is to the Archduke Rudolf, Beethoven's patron, friend and pupil.

The introduction suggests a Baroque French overture, full of double-dotted rhythms and trills, but with a grave intensity that could almost carry us to the world of Dante's *Inferno*. A rumbling bass leads into the main allegro. This is music of turbulence and violence, in which accented motifs are reiterated and extended, cohering only to break again into apparent chaos. A second theme offers a moment of radiance, before plunging back into the prevailing drama. The development spins out a *fugato*; and through the recapitulation, Beethoven sends the music to the extreme ends of the keyboard. But finally the energy begins to dissipate, finding its way to peace.

The second movement's Arietta is a spacious melody in which time seems to stand still. Beethoven begins a series of variations in which the traditional increasing complications become a springboard into something altogether more mysterious, even mystical.

The first three variations travel towards an explosion of ecstasy (sometimes likened to Beethoven inventing boogie-woogie 100 years early). But then everything changes. As in Op.110, Beethoven fragments the melody as if exhausted; its deep sighs alternate with an otherworldly idea that now begins to travel out of the variations altogether.

Released from formal constraints, the music flies free until focusing into a trill that attracts the main motif to itself. A long-spun exploration gradually modulates towards the Arietta's rebirth as an extended song, perhaps of thanksgiving. Finally, over a chain of trills and tremolandi, the music travels to the celestial heights – and with one simple C major chord, Beethoven's last sonata comes to a close.

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