

STEREO

MCS 2161

Beethoven Piano Sonatas

No. 30 in E Major, Op. 109

No. 31 in A Flat Major, Op. 110

Ludwig
Olshansky,
pianist



Ludwig OLSHANSKY Plays BEETHOVEN

PIANO SONATAS: No. 30 in E Major, Op. 109, No. 31 in A Flat Major, Op. 110

The Sonata No. 30 in E major, Op. 109 was the first of three piano sonatas occupying Beethoven in 1820. Having just emerged from a long and bitter court battle to gain custody of his nephew, Karl, (a struggle which drained him both emotionally and physically) he was driven now to work, motivated not only by the inner need of the artist, but the imperative of being the sole support of his newly adopted 'son.' Meanwhile he had accumulated substantial debts to lawyers, doctors, and numerous publishers from whom he had taken advances for promised works. Consumed with the idea that he must now build up a legacy to leave Karl, he intensified demands upon himself both as a composer and as a business man, the latter being a role that filled him with loathing although he learned to play the 'game' shrewdly as the years went on. In April of 1820 he was writing to his Berlin publisher, Schlesinger, "I am . . . willing to sell you some new sonatas, but at no other price than 40 florins each." Schlesinger promptly made a counter offer of 90 florins for the three sonatas (Opp. 109, 110, and 111) which Beethoven, hard pressed for cash, reluctantly accepted. By September he was able to assure Schlesinger, "Things are going faster with the three sonatas, the first one is almost completely finished up to the correction, and I am now working without respite on the last two."

He did, indeed. In quick order Op. 109 was published in 1821, Op. 110 in 1822, and Op. 111 in 1823. These piano sonatas were part of the last great works of 'the new phase' of composition in which Beethoven consciously engaged following the Congress of Vienna (1814) up until his death in 1827. As early as 1803, however, he had already begun to look for something more from himself. "I am dissatisfied with the works I have written so far," he wrote, "from now on I want to strike out along a new road." It was with the Sonata in A major, Op. 101 that he entered into the last and most mature phase of writing for solo piano, although he had protested earlier that "I don't like to concern myself with solo piano sonatas."

It is a curious fact that Beethoven, who began his career as a virtuoso pianist, felt increasingly frustrated and dissatisfied with the limitations of the piano both for composing and performing. His own playing technique was too powerful for the instruments at his disposal (under his hands they lasted but a few years), and his compositions, designed almost orchestrally, apparently demanded more than the instruments and performers of his day could accomplish. Referring to his recently completed sonatas (Opp. 109, 110, 111) he declared them to be his *last* but also "the best I have written for piano. It is and remains an inadequate instrument. In the future I shall write in the manner of my grand-master, Handel, annually only an oratorio or a concerto for some string or wind instrument provided that I have completed my tenth symphony (C minor) and my Requiem."

Fortunately for the world the great piano works of Beethoven were completed before that vow. And while neither the Tenth Symphony (for which sketches remain) nor the Requiem were destined to be composed, (Beethoven, then age fifty-three, had only four years of life remaining) he composed in this last period not only the five great sonatas, but the *Missa Solemnis*, the Diabelli Variations, and the Ninth Symphony, leaving a legacy for posterity far greater than that he had dreamed of for his nephew, Karl.

Side One

SONATA No. 30 in E Major, Op. 109 (21:24)

1. Vivace, ma non troppo/Adagio espressivo
2. Prestissimo
3. Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo (Variations)

Side Two

SONATA No. 31 in A Flat Major, Op. 110 (21:46)

1. Moderato cantabile molto espressivo
2. Allegro molto
3. Adagio ma non troppo
4. Fuga (Allegro, ma non troppo)

Sonata sketches found in Beethoven's notebooks (1820-22) led one scholar to deduct that "something of the same other-worldliness" must have preoccupied Beethoven while writing the Sonata in E major, Op. 109 as had preoccupied him while composing the *Missa Solemnis*. Sketches for this sonata are, indeed, among notes on the 'Benedictus' and the 'Credo', but Beethoven, who admitted to being able to work on numerous compositions at once, insisted that he clearly kept each of them apart in his head. The first movement of Op. 109, while in extremely concentrated sonata form, has been called "the most romantic of romantic movements." It is innovative as well, full of surprises as it proceeds at the outset with startling variations of tempo (even within the movements) while working out two sharply contrasted ideas. The adagio consists of a theme and single variation; the coda, based on the first theme, sings out in a series of hymn-like cantabile chords which in themselves are something of a surprise but eventually necessary to the concept as a whole. The *Prestissimo* movement is representative of the kind of scherzo Beethoven was composing in his last years. After the freer structure of the first movement, it tightens without losing a sense of freedom. Its strongly thematic bass line creates rich materials out of which grows the two-part canon in the development section. The brilliance and restlessness of this scherzo is brought to a close with a short, almost terse coda after which follows the Theme and Variations (six of them) of the last movement. In the view of one analyst, Beethoven is here exploring territory "entirely new not only to the instrument but to the musical imagination."

Beethoven dedicated this rhapsodic, complicated work to the young daughter of Antonia Brentano who, according to latest speculation, may well have been the "Immortal Beloved" to whom the famous letters of 1812 were addressed. In his note accompanying the sonata, Beethoven wrote to nineteen year-old Maximiliana, "A dedication!!! well, this is not one of those dedications that are used and abused by thousands of people. It is the spirit which unites the noble and finer people of this earth and which time can never destroy."

A reviewer writing of Op. 109 in 1824 thought the first movement 'touching and soothing', the second 'defiant and compassionate', and the finale 'excellently varied.' But he ended by saying, "Playing the last variation is extremely tiring

for both hands, and we doubt whether even musicians who are able to perform this variation with equal ease and grace will obtain commensurate enjoyment from it." Both critics and performers had been complaining of the difficulties in Beethoven's later works. Even the Sonata in F minor, Op. 57 ("Appassionata") had earlier brought the edge of a sigh from one puzzled critic who wrote, "Everyone knows Beethoven's way when writing a large scale sonata. In the first movement he has once again let loose many evil spirits." Beethoven refused to be concerned by those who "vex one about the sonata which is difficult to perform. What is difficult is also beautiful, good, great, etc.," he said.

Of Op. 110, Sonata No. 31 in A-flat major, the same reviewer wrote that it was certainly a work "in every respect wholly excellent, extremely melodious throughout and rich in harmonic beauties." No complaints. Deceptively easier technically than any of the last five sonatas, and even today probably the most often performed, nevertheless, this sonata has such subtleties of originality in structure, such quicksilver, almost mysterious shifts of mood throughout, running the gamut from playfulness to deepest melancholy and grief, that both performer and listener are inevitably drawn beyond its apparent surface simplicity. A poetic, lyric line sustains the first movement despite the intricacies of numerous contrasting ideas that dominate the movement. The second movement, a kind of scherzo and trio, but in two-four time, rushes headlong with dramatically contrasting dynamics to contrast even more dramatically with the third movement, *Adagio ma non troppo* and its eloquent, heartrending theme, the *arioso dolente*, "a song from the depths of grief." The final fourth movement is a fugue, majestic, dominant, as if meant to overpower the subjectivity of the melancholy *arioso*. It is interrupted, however, by the return of the *arioso*, then once again the fugue takes over, sublimely and majestically rising to its own powerful climax as it brings the sonata to a close.

Opus 110 was dated "On Christmas Day of the year 1821." According to posthumous evidence, Beethoven had intended to dedicate it to Antonia Brentano, but of all Beethoven's important works this is the only one that was published without dedication.

Notes by ARTHUR WHITE

Olshansky on Monitor Records

SCHUMANN Kreisleriana, Op. 16/BRAHMS 3 Intermezzi, Op. 119 **MCS 2160**

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BRAHMS Piano Music: Fantasias, Op. 116 (Complete); Intermezzi, Op. 117 (Complete); Rhapsody in B Minor, Op. 79 No. 1. **MCS 2152**

SCHUMANN Fantasia in C Major, Op. 17/BRAHMS Sonata in F Sharp Minor, Op. 2. **MCS 2127**

Note: The Schumann Fantasia, Op. 17 and the Kreisleriana, Op. 16, are available on a cassette: **55011**

The present recording is also available on cassette: **55013**

Cover photo by Maarten Brinkgreve, Amsterdam.
Produced by Marc Aubort/Joanna Nickrenz
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