

Deux-Elles

Beethoven

In the beginning...

Beethoven Piano Sonatas WoO 47 No. 1, Op. 2 Nos. 1, 2 and 3

Martin Roscoe

Beethoven Piano Sonatas

A conversation between performer and producer

Mike George - This fifth volume in your survey of the complete piano sonatas by Beethoven is called 'In the beginning ...'. His *official* beginning was an ambitious one, but your beginning, so to speak, is before where most cycles start.

Martin Roscoe - Yes there are the three so-called 'Electoral Sonatas' which deserve to be heard as they are fascinating precursors of the thirty-two Sonatas. The E flat one on this disc is quite Haydnesque I think, interesting as Beethoven hadn't yet met the great man; the slow movement is particularly charming and the last movement is a rollicking rondo in the hunting style.

MG - They're quite remarkable for a twelve year old. Should we attribute any future in his formal experiments? For example, this one omits the recapitulation of the opening idea in the first movement.

MR - Well I can't think of another example of him doing this, at least in the Piano Sonatas, which is in itself a daring experiment, the first of many! Other interesting features include extremely precise articulation markings and already a very wide dynamic range: four times he asks for *fortissimo* and there are two *pianissimo* markings in the 75-bar first movement. Mozart hardly ever used these extremes in his entire output of piano music.

MG - We have to fast-forward ten years to the origins of the next group of sonatas. What's been happening to Beethoven meanwhile?

MR - Beethoven wanted to leave Bonn in order to go to study with Mozart in Vienna in 1787, but family circumstances prevented him going until 1792, by which time Mozart had died. By the time the Op 2 Sonatas were published in 1796 (they were composed 1793-5), Beethoven was firmly established in Vienna, where his talents as a pianist and an improviser were already held in the highest esteem. As a composer he studied briefly with Haydn (the dedicatee of these Sonatas) - although the two men didn't really get along - then with Albrechtsberger, and a little also with Salieri; he also took violin lessons with the most celebrated Viennese violinist, Schuppanzigh, who was to have such a profound influence on his string quartets. His Piano Trios Op 1 - Haydn had advised him not to publish, as the public were not ready for such adventurous works! - were immediately recognised as the works of a master. The Op 2 Sonatas followed very shortly afterwards.

MG - It's recently come to me how daring it must have been to open this triple opus with a minor key work.

MR - Yes, although Beethoven was always daring! By 1783, he'd already written an F minor Piano Sonata. F minor was also probably the favourite minor key of Haydn, who was the dedicatee of the Op 2 Sonatas. However I think it would be true to say that Haydn could never have written

Op 2 No 1 as it bears so many of Beethoven's characteristic hallmarks.

MG - There's a Beethovenian defiance and, dare I say, anger in the closing gesture of the first movement. Whatever reservations Haydn had about Beethoven's music at this time, he'd surely have admired the concision of this first movement, wouldn't he?

MR - Well, legend has it that Haydn was a little jealous of Beethoven's forthright and challenging spirit, hence his comment that the public was not ready for the C minor Piano Trio Op 1 No 3. Who knows? However, as Haydn himself was such an imaginative innovator, it seems probable to me that he would have admired Beethoven's direct and uncompromising approach in this movement.

MG - Yes, uncompromising certainly. But even bypassing the slow movement for now, was there ever before such a dark minuet? And again, what are we to make of the Sonata's final gesture?

MR - We'd have to search through many Haydn Symphony minuets to find something approaching the darkness of it for sure. At least the Trio is sunnier! And, yes, the *Prestissimo* Finale takes no prisoners, especially with the final hurtle into the abyss! The marking *Prestissimo* itself is a bit of a statement: there aren't too many of those in the eighteenth century repertoire!

MG - And now back to the *Adagio*, music that's still dark in its hue but one which turns its back

on the Classical era in a different way. And once again, we're back "in the beginning" since Beethoven used the opening idea in his C major Piano Quartet, written when he was fourteen. The music here is ornate in a way that's new too ...

MR - The decorations are quite operatic I think, and the first D minor episode is quite melancholy, with its wide melodic intervals crossing the left hand thirds. The repeated painful minor ninths, all marked *sforzando*, add to the dark character of an *Adagio* which begins in an amiable enough way.

MG - Is it fair to say that the next Sonata comes as a total contrast, its overall character being laid back, relaxed, and even gently capricious - fewer extremes than the Romantic composer we met in the F minor?

MR - Certainly the A major Sonata is very different and I agree that at least the last three movements are relaxed and laid back for the most part. Also it is on a much larger scale than the F minor especially in the outer movements, both of which have much more diverse material within them than the equivalent movements in the F minor. The first movement though crackles with an impish energy and requires considerable technical agility. One passage in particular has confounded pianists, especially those who attempt Beethoven's own fingering! Indeed Claudio Arrau, one of the greatest Beethoven exponents of the twentieth century, refused to play this Sonata until his final years simply because he couldn't play these bars with the composer's fingering; all I

can say is, I'd like to see ANYONE play them with this fingering! But there's more to this movement too: a contrasting second theme with a melancholy and plaintive character, and a dramatically robust development section.

MG - And this time we have a truly deep slow movement, one that shows the depth of feeling at a relatively early age and gives a glimpse to the music he would be composing almost twenty years later.

MR - The marking *appassionato* at the head of the *Largo* indicates the depth of feeling, yes. The scoring of the chorale-like theme is interesting, as it could have been written for a string quartet, with *pizzicato* cello under the sustained upper voices. I find it difficult to imagine it sounding quite so profound on string instruments however, and the minor-key outburst, more fully scored, even more so.

MG - And there's a truly *scherzando* feel to the last two movements, the third almost skittish around the cloudier Trio and the Finale seems to be graced by an elegance that we might not associate with Beethoven.

MR - The Scherzo is a delight, with that repeated little flourish which is so easy in the right hand and so difficult in the left! How typical of Beethoven to contrast this, the briefest of three Op 2 Trios, which is - as you suggest - intense and, I think, quite threatening. The Finale is the first of several such relaxed and charming movements in his piano sonatas, others being in Opp 7, 22 and

31 No 1. Here once again Beethoven shows his flair for the dramatic with a minor key outburst before the *grazioso* mood returns.

MG - There's also a new sense of scale heralded in this Sonata: as in the F minor before it, Beethoven makes the architecture and design grander, immediately establishing four movements rather than three. But that grandness becomes much more apparent in the last of the Op 2 set, doesn't it?

MR - Yes, perhaps he was working towards Op 7 which has the title 'Grand Sonata'! Op 2 No 3 is certainly the most extrovert of the set, a true precursor to the *Waldstein* which, in the same key, also has a first movement with a similarly brilliant character. In this earlier Sonata, Beethoven employs the technique called broken octaves for the first time in his piano writing, something he continued to use to such great effect right the way through to the *Emperor* Concerto and the *Hammerklavier* Sonata.

MG - There's something almost outdoors and sunlit about the brilliance at the start of this Sonata for me. And it's over-brimming with ideas! The lurch into A flat in the coda is one of those first times Beethoven seems to hint that he has more horizons yet to explore, new realms of harmony and mood. And he comes up with a bold solution to get out of it, doesn't he?

MR - There are lots of ideas, with *two* very contrasting second themes, the first very expressive and chromatic in the minor key, and a more

pastoral theme back in the major making use of imitation between the hands. The shock of the A flat interruption is most unexpected, for sure, and Beethoven resolves it with a free *cadenza* and a triumphant conclusion.

Another daring (and typically adventurous) feature of this Sonata is the choice of key for the *Adagio*. Why do you think Beethoven chooses the remote key of E major for this movement?

MG - It's certainly a masterstroke and something that Schubert picked up on: an early case of Beethoven finding a region of Elysian calm and taking us there. But, to answer your question, I don't know what lies behind his choice of E major here.

MR - I wonder if Beethoven knew Haydn's so-called *Rider* Quartet Op 74 No 3 which, although in G minor, also has a slow movement in E major? It appeared in print only two years before these Op 2 Piano Sonatas. But this bold stroke of Beethoven was just the first of many times he wrote a slow movement in a very remote key, the *Hammerklavier* Sonata being the last such example. And something quite poignant in the yearning hand-crossing second theme of this *Adagio*, the flow contrasting beautifully with the carefully spaced hymn of the opening.

The last two movements return to the boundless energy of the opening *Allegro* but as always there are brief dark clouds, especially in the Trio section of the impish Scherzo. Do you see a parallel with

the so-called *Menuetto* of Symphony No 1 - a scherzo in all but name - and in the same key?

MG - Exactly, I think there are parallels: it's interesting how in the Symphony, from just a few years later, that Beethoven makes the Trio even sunnier than the *Menuetto*! No dark clouds there, even when the harmonies touch on A minor!

In the Finale, I love the way he finds some relaxation in this energetic movement.

MR - Yes, there's that gorgeous episode in F major which provides the necessary contrast from all the high jinks of the opening. Incidentally, it is a good job for the pianist that the Sonata is in C major: the opening bars would be well-nigh impossible in any other key. Which is, of course, precisely why Beethoven chose this key!

The Op 2 Sonatas are astonishing works from a 25 year-old just embarking on a career as a composer. The diversity, originality and daring displayed in them leave us in no doubt of Beethoven's very special qualities, yet who would have been able to predict where the journey would take him from these already auspicious beginnings?



In an ever more distinguished career, Martin Roscoe's enduring popularity is built on a deeply thoughtful musicianship allied to an easy rapport with audiences and fellow musicians alike.

Martin has worked regularly with eminent conductors including Simon Rattle, Mark Elder and Christoph von Dohnányi and with leading orchestras including the BBC Philharmonic Orchestra, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra, Hallé, Manchester Camerata, Northern Chamber Orchestra and with the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra. As one of Britain's most prolific recitalists, Martin has also performed regularly across Europe, the Far East, Australasia and South Africa. His chamber music partnerships include long-standing associations with Peter Donohoe, Tasmin Little and the Endellion and Maggini Quartets as well as more recent work with Jennifer Pike, Ashley Wass, Matthew Trusler, the Vertavo Quartet and the Cropper Welsh Roscoe Trio.

Martin is one of the most regularly played pianists on BBC Radio 3, including seven BBC Prom appearances. He has made many commercial recordings as well as this Beethoven series for Deux-Elles including the complete piano music of Nielsen and Szymanowski, as well as four discs in the Hyperion Romantic Piano Concerto series.

“One of the truly great recordings of the Waldstein Sonata ... perfect musical judgement and a formidable technique from Martin Roscoe” - BBC Radio 3 (DXL1162).

Teaching has always been an important part of Martin's life and the development of young talent helps him constantly to re-examine and re-evaluate his own playing. He is currently a Professor of Piano at the Guildhall School of Music in London. Martin is also Artistic Director of Ribble Valley International Piano Week and Beverley Chamber Music Festival.

Martin lives with his family in the beautiful English Lake District, a wonderful place that provides inspiration and relaxation, and enables him to indulge his passions for the countryside and hill-walking.

The Complete Beethoven Piano Sonatas

Martin Roscoe

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Piano Sonata in E flat WoO 47 No. 1

- 1** Allegro cantabile 3:09
- 2** Andante 3:53
- 3** Rondo vivace 2:40

Piano Sonata in F minor Op. 2 No. 1

- 4** Allegro 5:23
- 5** Adagio 5:04
- 6** Menuetto. Allegretto 3:31
- 7** Prestissimo 4:32

Piano Sonata in A Op. 2 No. 2

- 8** Allegro vivace 7:04
- 9** Largo appassionato 6:24
- 10** Scherzo. Allegretto 3:30
- 11** Rondo. Grazioso 6:46

Piano Sonata in C Op. 2 No. 3

- 12** Allegro con brio 9:56
- 13** Adagio 7:22
- 14** Scherzo. Allegro 3:06
- 15** Allegro assai 5:32

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In the beginning ...

Volume 5

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