

A close-up, high-angle photograph of a piano's internal mechanism, showing several hammers and their corresponding keys. The hammers are dark and appear to be made of wood or a similar material, with their felt-covered heads visible. The keys are light-colored and arranged in a standard piano keyboard layout. The background is dark and textured, possibly the piano's case or another part of the mechanism. The overall lighting is dramatic, highlighting the textures and shapes of the hammers and keys.

Denx-Elles

Beethoven

Hammerklavier

Beethoven Piano Sonatas Opp. 79, 90, and 106

Martin Roscoe

Beethoven Piano Sonatas *a conversation between performer and producer*

Mike George Wasn't it Schumann who described Beethoven's Fourth Symphony as "a slender Greek maiden between two Norse giants"? How did you decide on what to place alongside the 'Everest' of Beethoven's piano sonatas in this final disc of your cycle?

Martin Roscoe It wasn't easy! Planning nine discs of the 35 Beethoven sonatas required a lot of thought, first because of the playing time of the disc, and second because I felt it was essential to keep those sonatas with the same opus numbers together. And I also tried to make each CD comprise the sort of combination of works I might programme together in a recital situation, hopefully providing a satisfying listen from beginning-to-end and shedding light on each other.

So from the start, even with these few parameters, it was a complicated jigsaw, but I'm very pleased with the combination of the sonatas Opp 79 and 90 with the mighty

Hammerklavier on this final disc. It's well known that every work by Beethoven's quite unlike any other; here, in these three sonatas I wanted to juxtapose three middle to late period Sonatas from 1809-1819, each one with its own unique character.

MG And for most performers approaching this cycle at some point in their careers, there are few sonatas that are new to them. I know you've probably taught them all and know them well but I remember the *Hammerklavier* was one that you had to learn and so placed late in the recording sequence.

MR Yes, I had never played it in public when we began recording in 2007. Those new - to me - sonatas all needed carefully organised learning time, in the case of Op 106 lasting over four years, as well as trying to find as many concert performance opportunities for them as possible, which in my view is a

really important element in the preparation of any recording. The spontaneity of live performance often sheds new light in one's mind about how to structure and communicate a piece, which can then be fed into the recording process.

In August 2010, I was a juror in the ARD Piano Duo competition in Munich. As there were only nine duos competing in all, I found that I had a lot of free time. Munich is a wonderful city and there were galleries and museums to explore, but I was also able to spend quite a few hours each day on the Finale of Op 106. The competition was taking place in the Musik Hochschule with its many excellent practice rooms. It was only when I got back home that I learned that the Hochschule building had been the Nazi Party headquarters in the 1920s and 30s. It's the building where Chamberlain and Hitler signed the infamous Munich agreement. An internet search showed that, for several days I'd been learning the *Hammerklavier* fugue in the very room that had been Adolf Hitler's office!

MG We'll come back to the *Hammerklavier* in due course, but starting with the beginning of the disc, Op 79, Beethoven told one of his publishers to label it 'Sonata facile'. Perhaps it's not always as easy as he makes out!

MR I think he eventually had second thoughts about that, although I think the second and third movements are amongst the least challenging movements in any of the sonatas. However, the opening *Presto alla tedesca* is surprisingly tricky pianistically, and not just because of the awkward hand-crossing theme which appears several times. Beethoven also considered calling this work a Sonatina, which reflects perhaps the brevity and lightness of touch. Tovey is reported as having said that Op 79 was like Shakespeare writing something lighter between *Hamlet* and *Lear*.

MG That comment had passed me by! As had Beethoven's *tedesca* marking in the description of that first movement for many years. You might think of the opening of this Sonata

as a 'German' dance but in earlier times Italian composers looked down on Germans, imitating or mocking the language in their madrigals. This movement seems to me to have a humour unique in Beethoven's output, as if he was getting his own back, and at a point when he was starting to reject Italian descriptions of his music. As far as I know, Beethoven only used this term in one other work, coincidentally also in G major and, again, not without a sense of humour.

MR The movement you mean is the *alla tedesca* of the String Quartet Op 130. In the *Presto alla tedesca* in the Sonata Op 79, I agree, there's also plenty of humour, from the rather unusual seven-bar phrase of the opening and the stop-start development through to the cross-rhythmic game which leads to the recapitulation, the coda's ludicrous grace notes and the abrupt disappearance into the ether at the end.

It seems to me that the outer sections of the beautifully simple *Andante* have a Barcarolle-like quality, while the opening phrase of the

central section always makes me think of Mahler for some reason.

The opening theme's harmonic basis in the final *Allegro vivace* is very similar indeed to the opening theme of the *Vivace* first movement of the E major Sonata Op 109. However it's difficult to see any other similarities between those two movements. There's a lightness of touch and a graceful humour in Op 79 which doesn't pretend to reach any emotional or spiritual depths.

MG Op 79 was begun, like the two sonatas that surround it, in 1809, the year Napoleon's troops stormed Vienna. There had been a gap of four years since the *Appassionata* and again, another four years until the next sonata after that trilogy, the next sonata on your this disc. Cast in two movements, do you think Beethoven has already started to consider the balance he achieves in his final Sonata, Op 111 here?

MR I hadn't thought that, but there are certainly similarities as well as differences

between Op 90 and Op 111. Both have emotionally highly-strung minor key first movements followed by calmer major key second movements. But the character of each movement highlights the differences between the two. The first movement of Op 90 has passion and intensity but there is also intimacy and little of the titanic struggle that inhabits Op 111's first movement. The sublime *Arietta* of Op 111 has a spirituality and otherworldliness which is a far cry from the lyricism and tenderness of the rondo second movement in Op 90. I often wonder if this movement inspired Mendelssohn to write his Songs without Words.

MG I often think the contrast between the vacillations of mood swings in the first movement and the supreme calm of the second in Op 90 could only be Beethoven's doing! And the shape of the theme that begins the second movement, for me, certainly looks ahead to Mendelssohn. I find it quite a prophetic work. One final thing on this Sonata, do you think that the

more descriptive - if you like - titles help you as a performer to get closer to what Beethoven wants?

MR The particular political situation at this time meant that Beethoven was more inclined to give performance instructions in German as well as in the more universally accepted Italian. Op 90 is the only Sonata in which Beethoven's movement headings are in German only, and certainly there's more subtle nuance in *Empfindung*, *Ausdruck* and *vorgetragen* than are usually encountered in Italian musical terminology commonly used by composers of the early nineteenth century.

MG And so to another German word, *Hammerklavier*, used ubiquitously for this Sonata nowadays (though the Sonata Beethoven wrote before it and the two after it both call the piano by this name). I'm sure my first encounter hearing this piece over forty years ago was a common experience: I simply couldn't make head nor tale of it. What are the hurdles listeners find in its first movement,

which in many ways looks familiar on the printed page, rhythmically and harmonically?

MR I think that most people have a mystified first impression of the first movement of Op 106. It took me a long time to love this piece, whereas all the late string quartets quickly became lifelong friends. I felt that it required the work necessary to learn it for performance to understand what Beethoven was getting at. Rhythmically there is nothing remarkable about this opening *Allegro* (in contrast with, for example, the opening movement of the *Appassionata*), but harmonically, there's a very unsettling journey under way. Beethoven chooses to use a remote key for the entire second group of themes here, G major. The *Waldstein* and before that, the G major Sonata from Op 31 use similar relationships but here in Op 106, there's no real respite from the volatile tonality until well into the recapitulation. Beethoven was normally very keen to avoid B minor (referring to it as "the dark key"), but in the *Allegro* of the *Hammerklavier*

he finds his way there three times (once disguised as C flat minor).

Although one couldn't really say, for the most part, that the piano writing in this movement's unpianistic, it's certainly often very challenging. The unremitting energy and drive help create an overwhelmingly uncompromising and severe character, which should leave us feeling battered and exhausted, almost.

MG Perhaps it's due to that volatility - that you identify - and its density, that it feels a huge movement to me as a listener. It's quite remarkable how Beethoven then knocks it down and dismisses it, almost cocking-a-snook at it and saying "I can say the same thing in three minutes", isn't it?

MR Yes! It's one his craziest Scherzos, and while he doesn't cover such a wide range of keys, four times the music ends up petering out in C minor, before the nagging repeated Bs in the coda threaten to plunge us into another world. And then there's the crazy

dance that is the second half of the Trio section with its most remarkable raspberry blowing! This might be one of Beethoven's monumental masterpieces, but he still finds room for a joke.

MG Many commentators talk about the predominance of thirds in this Sonata, how the second subject in the first movement is a third away from the home key and the shape of the *fugato* producing a long chain of intervals of thirds, to give just two examples. But the third movement seems to show it most transparently. I'm sure Brahms must have known and loved this. You can detect herein a pre-echo of the Fourth Symphony and those late sets of piano pieces...

MR Your comments about Brahms reminded me that, a very long time ago and before I really got to know the *Hammerklavier*, a friend played me part of Weingartner's orchestration of this *Adagio*, specifically the development section and I was convinced that I was listening to a Brahms work I'd yet to discover!

There are many other remarkable features of this incredible movement, which I think is the only example of Beethoven writing in the key of F sharp minor (enharmonically a major third away from the sonata's home key). Its epic scale and tragic intimacy make it Beethoven's greatest minor key slow movement, in my view. And then there's the fact that Beethoven wrote the entire piece and, almost as an afterthought, added the first bar to introduce the main theme. Tovey thought that "these two notes constitute one of the profoundest thoughts in all music".

MG It's certainly very difficult to imagine the beginning minus those first two notes. It's all about transition, isn't it?

I clearly remember the amazing stillness you found at the end of this movement when you were recording it - as if the music were floating in time - and the seamless transition of mood into the start of the Finale. I forgot to breathe! The contrast between the serenity of the end of the *Adagio* and the



Martin Roscoe and Mike George

eruption of energy that announces the fugue is colossal. How does Beethoven achieve the transition here?

MR Certainly the transitions both into and out of this *Adagio* are breathtaking!

With the introduction to the fugue that ends Op 106, Beethoven gives us a glimpse of

what he must have been like as an improviser, and this reminds us that when he first arrived in Vienna in 1792 his reputation was made primarily as a pianist and improviser before his Op 1 was published. Here, over a quarter of a century later, he leads towards the frenzied final fugue of the *Hammerklavier* with three small fugal attempts, each increasing in tempo, which are linked together by halting and searching modulations, until a manic burst of rhythmical energy finally takes us into the series of trills which herald the plunge towards the main fugue subject.

MG It *is* an incredible fugue, hardly diminished in its challenges to listeners (and, I hope, needless to say, performers!) today, as it would have been in 1819 when Czerny is said to have first played it to some of Beethoven's friends and supporters. Beethoven rips up the rule book of devices to which the theme is subjected and the retrograde inversion - with Beethoven abruptly arresting the scale motif in the middle of the bar - still sounding provocative,

in spite of retaining logic and syntax. It's a fugue that seems limitless in the scope of the intricacies and density of its counterpoint; as such, it's music that doesn't easily find friends, and there's nothing seductive about it. For audiences' understanding and structural clarity in a complex and disorientating road map, it must be tempting to signpost this fugue. But it doesn't seem to me to be how you approach it...

MR It's most certainly an incredible *tour de force* and is most challenging for performers and listeners alike. While Beethoven unleashes every contrapuntal trick in the book, the main aim for the pianist, it seems to me, is still to show a coherent overall structure which provides a stunning conclusion to the whole sonata. I've never thought of needing to provide signposts to underline the structure of this movement. Beethoven's dynamic markings are a failsafe guide. One of my non-musical passions over the decades is walking in the hills and there might be a parallel there; it's useful to learn from a guidebook or

map, but sometimes when you are out in the mountains themselves, you notice something to explore that's rewarding and leads you in a different way to the same location.

MG Finally, you'd planned to record this Sonata last in your cycle, but in the end, and perhaps appropriately, the last notes you recorded were *Les Adieux*. Beethoven's always been central to your repertoire, but where does he figure for you now?

MR Still central, that's for sure! It's been a huge privilege to have the chance to record these amazing works and - maybe it's an obvious thing to say - working on them has always been an evolving process, continuing through the time I was prepared for the recordings, and since completing them. Even in the most well-known works, some of which I've played in concert over a hundred times, I still find so many new angles in terms of invention, colour and meaning. In the remaining years left to me, I hope - and indeed - expect the process to continue.



With an extraordinary career spanning over five decades, **Martin Roscoe** is arguably one of the UK's best loved pianists. Renowned for his versatility at the keyboard, Martin is equally at home in concerto, recital and chamber performances. Martin is Artistic Director of Ribble Valley International Piano Week and the Manchester Chamber Concerts Society, and Co-Artistic Director of the Beverley Chamber Music Festival.

With a repertoire of over 100 concertos, Martin continues to work regularly with many of the UK's leading orchestras, having especially close links with the BBC Philharmonic

Orchestra, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Hallé Orchestra, Manchester Camerata, Northern Chamber Orchestra and the Royal Liverpool Philharmonic Orchestra, where he has given over ninety performances. Martin also performs widely across Europe, Canada and Australia, sharing the concert platform with eminent conductors such as Sir Simon Rattle, Sir Mark Elder, Gianandrea Noseda, and Christoph von Dohnányi.

A prolific recitalist and chamber musician, Martin tours the UK extensively every season, including regular appearances at Wigmore Hall and Kings Place. He has a number of long-standing associations, including Peter Donohoe, Kathryn Stott, Tasmin Little and Jennifer Pike, as well as more recent collaborations with Jess Dandy, Liza Ferschtman, Marcus Farnsworth and the Brodsky and Carducci Quartets.

Martin has made many commercial recordings for labels such as Hyperion, Chandos and Naxos. For the Deux-Elles label, Martin has recorded the complete Beethoven piano sonatas, for which he received unanimous critical acclaim.

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Volume 9

Beethoven Piano Sonatas

Martin Roscoe

Piano Sonata in G Op. 79

- 1 Presto alla tedesca **4:53**
- 2 Andante **2:38**
- 3 Allegro vivace **2:03**

Piano Sonata in E minor Op. 90

- 4 Mit Lebhaftigkeit, und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck **5:37**
- 5 Nicht zu geschwind, und sehr singbar vorgetragen **7:54**

Piano Sonata in B flat Op. 106 *Hammerklavier*

- 6 Allegro **10:56**
- 7 Scherzo, Allegro vivace - Presto **2:45**
- 8 Adagio sostenuto. Appassionato e con molto sentimento **18:56**
- 9 Largo - Allegro - Prestissimo - Allegro risoluto **11:59**



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