

T H E
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KEYBOARD FESTIVAL

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IGOR LEVIT, 2018 Gilmore Artist

Tuesday, May 5, 2020 · 2:00 PM ET

L.v. BEETHOVEN Sonata in G Major, Op. 14, No. 2

- I. Allegro
- II. Andante
- III. Scherzo. Allegro assai

Sonata in A-flat Major, Op. 110

- I. Moderato cantabile molto espressivo
- II. Allegro molto
- III. Adagio ma non troppo - Fuga: Allegro ma non troppo

Sonata in C Minor, Op. 111

- I. Maestoso - Allegro con brio ed appassionato
- II. Arietta. Adagio molto semplice cantabile

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IGOR LEVIT
2018 Gilmore Artist

Hailed as “one of the essential artists of his generation” by *The New York Times*, 2018 Gilmore Artist Igor Levit has quickly distinguished himself as a pianist of immense technical prowess and intellectual depth.

Born in Russia, Mr. Levit relocated at a young age to Germany. As the youngest participant in the 2005 Arthur Rubinstein Competition in Tel Aviv, he won the Silver Prize, as well as the Prize for Best Performer of Chamber Music, the Audience Favorite Prize, and the Prize for Best Performer of Contemporary Music. From his early success in Europe, Mr. Levit has gone on to build an international following through concert performances around the world, acclaimed recordings, and social media channels, through which he speaks as both an artist and a global citizen.

An exclusive recording artist for Sony Classical, Mr. Levit’s debut disc of Beethoven’s last five piano sonatas won the BBC Music Magazine Newcomer of the Year 2014 Award, the Royal Philharmonic Society’s Young Artist Award 2014, and the ECHO Klassik 2014 Award for Solo Recording of the Year (19th-Century Music/Piano). In 2015, Sony Classical released his third solo album in cooperation with the Festival Heidelberger Frühling, which was awarded the Recording of the Year and Instrumental Award at the 2016 Gramophone Classical Music Awards.

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Sonata in G Major, Op. 14, No. 2 Composed 1798-1799

Rather than opening with typically Beethovenian energy, this sonata begins with a gentle gesture, a supple phrase starting on a weak beat. Its genial mood prevails: the music serenely moves from key to key, from major to minor; the theme is varied with gentle syncopation; high and low registers are contrasted by crossing hands. To amuse his listeners, Beethoven brings the main theme back in a “false reprise” in E-flat major, a half-step lower than where it should be; then, as if the music has forced him to reconsider, he takes us back home, and the theme comes in softly on the right notes. (He used this same device in the finale of the “Pathétique.”)

In the Andante, Beethoven salutes both of his great predecessors, Mozart and Haydn, in a theme and variations set in the most basic of keys, C major. Charles Rosen describes its ostentatiously simple opening as a “child-like march around the nursery,” a style reminiscent of Mozart. After a number of endearing variations, the movement ends with a joke à la Haydn, in Beethoven’s own version of that master composer’s “Surprise” Symphony: a sudden crash of very loud, then very soft chords, set off by rests. The last movement, a bucolic Scherzo, is in a deliberately rustic style, complete with a drone bass mimicking the bagpipe. Its skipping theme is full of what Thomas May calls comically eccentric accents and pauses. The movement spins out in joyous triplets to an ebullient end.

Sonata in A-flat Major, Op. 110 Sonata in C Minor, Op. 111 Composed 1821-1822

By 1822, when Op. 110 and 111 were completed, Beethoven had been deaf for 20 years. His days as a virtuoso starring at the keyboard were long gone. His perseverance in the face of this devastating affliction is one of the triumphs of the human spirit. But although his ears had failed him, Beethoven’s imagination was at full strength. Almost in response to his hearing loss, he created one great composition after another, immortal works that would come to make up the core of the repertory. These two sonatas keep company with such masterpieces as the Ninth Symphony, the *Missa Solemnis*, the late quartets, and the Diabelli Variations. They end his great legacy of piano sonatas, the last of his thirty-two. In these final statements we can hear what Beethoven himself was never able to: some of the most sublime music for piano ever written.

Both works are part of what Beethoven considered “an opus of three sonatas,” commissioned by Berlin music

publisher Adolph Martin Schlesinger in 1820. Musicologist Lewis Lockwood describes them as “resolutely original, independent, fully realized masterpieces,” each page bearing the stamp of Beethoven’s pianistic imagination. He composed at the keyboard and, Lockwood observes, used his fingers to unleash his imagination. The result is astonishing: rich piano sonorities, rushing octaves and delicate filigrees, all supported by Beethoven’s masterful architectural construction. They are the distillation of a lifetime’s experience in music, rich with profound meaning, human empathy, and deep affection for the piano.

Under the lyrical spell of A-flat major, Op. 110 exudes warmth and goodwill. The first movement, *Moderato cantabile molto espressivo*, is marked *con amabilità* (in a friendly way). Welcoming chords, a beautiful melody, and then a delicate tracery of arpeggios invite us into the work. Rather than fragmenting and “developing” his themes, Beethoven repeats them gently over changing harmonies and varied accompaniments. Although not labeled as such, the next movement (*Allegro molto*) functions as a scherzo, its irresistible rhythm dashing forward, then tumbling over itself. The trio section leaps over the widest range of the keyboard. The scherzo returns, and sustained chords, gradually diminishing, bring the movement to an end.

Beethoven leads us directly into the third movement, which begins *Adagio ma non troppo*, marked *Una corda* (one string), meaning, use the soft pedal, a feature now standard on his Broadwood pianos. Three musical ideas happen in close succession, beginning with a *Recitativo* marked *Parlando rubato* (in a speaking style, bending the tempo). The subsequent *Adagio* section is marked *Bebung* (tremor); Beethoven repeats the pitch A-natural multiple times, diminishing from *tutte le corde* (all the strings) back to only *una*. It is immediately followed by an extraordinarily sensitive *Klagender Gesang* (plaintive song), its beautiful melody marked *Arioso dolente*.

In Beethoven’s late works fugues abound. In this one, *Allegro ma non troppo*, the composer makes all three entrances of the straight-forward subject crystal clear: ascending by fourths, it first appears in the bass and then is chased by the alto and treble voices in their own entrances. The counter-subject in bouncing eighth-notes provides an effective backdrop. The fugue’s optimistic spirit stands in complete contrast to the pathos immediately preceding it. The *Arioso* returns, a soaring melody over low chords. Beethoven revels in the sound of the piano itself, exploring its range and timbre. In a joyous conclusion, the sonata ends on a note of triumph with a final flourish of the opening bars’ fleet arpeggios.

In Op. 111, Beethoven returns to his C-minor mood, using the key that had been so dramatically featured in his *Pathétique* Piano Sonata and Fifth Symphony. Like other

late works, it defies convention, presenting two movements rather than the expected four. When asked why he was taking so long to complete the “missing movements,” Beethoven shrugged off the question, claiming that he had been too busy. But what else could he possibly have added to this magnificent work? He knew it was complete. There is no indication that he ever planned to add a third movement, let alone a fourth.

The first movement begins with a slow introduction, more at home in the symphony than the sonata. Marked *Maestoso* (majestic), it features the regal long-short-long rhythms of the French overtures heard at Louis XIV’s court. Bass trills announce the *Allegro con brio ed appassionato* (fast with spirit and passion), used here not as decorations but as essential elements; they will take on an even more substantial role in the final movement. The first theme outlines the fundamental notes of C minor in jagged descending octaves, quickly interrupted by three exclamatory diminished-seventh chords, which, taken together, cover all twelve notes of the chromatic scale. Beethoven modeled this theme after the fugue subject of the “Kyrie” in Mozart’s *Requiem*, which he had copied out in a draft of the *Maestoso*. He had thought of casting the first movement entirely as a fugue but decided instead on sonata form. A lyrical second subject follows, and then both ideas are fully explored.

The Arietta is hardly a “little song,” but instead one of the most profound—and lengthy—of sonata finales. Marked *Adagio molto semplice e cantabile* (very slow, simple, and in a singing style), it explores the bright key of C major in all of its manifestations. A simple two-part theme serves as the basis for a greatly expanded set of variations. These are not character variations (one in major, the next in minor, another in triplets, and so on). Instead Beethoven meditatively develops the theme’s various musical elements. Taking an orchestral approach, he plays with piano sonorities in all their guises, exploring the very highest and lowest notes of the instrument. Sir Andrés Schiff notes that in this movement Beethoven is reaching from earth to heaven, as if asking where our own place lies between these two planes. As the music ascends, Beethoven bathes us in ethereal trills, creating a song of infinite comfort. The music teacher in Thomas Mann’s *Doctor Faustus* describes this final movement of his final sonata as “touching in its mildness and goodness... It is like having one’s hair or cheek stroked, lovingly, understandingly, like a deep and silent farewell look.” Beethoven has turned suffering into transcendence and taken us with him. Few composers before or since have given such a benediction. ||||