

Deux-Elles

Beethoven

The Final Trilogy

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Beethoven Piano Sonatas Op. 78, Op. 109, Op. 110, Op. 111

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Martin Roscoe

## Beethoven Piano Sonatas

*A conversation between performer and producer*

**Mike George** - Particularly late in life, Haydn sometimes condensed sonatas to two movements. Beethoven's Op 49 has a different aim, but he is clearly taking up Haydn's mantle in the *Waldstein* (where the Rondo second movement is preceded by that extraordinary introduction) and Op 54; Op 111 is still on a distant horizon. Where do think we are on this two-movement journey in Op 78?

**Martin Roscoe** - Here practicalities intruded into Beethoven's planning, as Clementi commissioned him to write "three Sonatas or two Sonatas and a Fantasia" specifically to be published first in England where, according to Clementi, large scale works were apparently unappreciated! Hence Beethoven's Opp 77-9. For the Sonata Op 78 he characteristically seized the opportunity for innovation and chose to write his only piece in the key of F sharp, and also to write an unusually sunny and undramatic work, one for which he himself had the highest regard. The only slow music is the four-bar introduction, never to be heard again, while the structurally simple second movement has a wonderful high-spirited exuberance.

**MG** - I've always liked the brand of humour in that last movement which seems to have a subtle side to it, perhaps not what we'd expect from Beethoven. Why do you think that was?

**MR** - Yes. Beethoven isn't always noted for subtlety but here he gives us one of his most

delightful offerings! Perhaps he particularly liked this Sonata because it gave him less grief to write it than some of the others ... or perhaps he was pleased with himself for taking the risk to write in F sharp!

**MG** - That last movement also has a directness and simplicity of expression that we encounter again in the opening bars of Opp 109 and 110, but there the simplicity runs much deeper ...

**MR** - As noted before, every work of Beethoven's is different and it is no surprise that the "simple" energy and wit of the Finale of Op 78 is miles away from the limpid first phrase of Op 109, so rudely shattered by the diminished chord in the ninth bar. The opening movement of Op 110, with its Arcadian vision of beauty and peace, might seem on first hearing (or in the wrong performance!) "simple", yet the subtlety and depth of expression are soon discovered with further acquaintance.

**MG** - Beethoven conceived the first movement of Op 109 as an independent piece, and might easily have ended up with the last five Bagatelles of Op 119. How do you think it would have sat in that context?

**MR** - I didn't know that! It's difficult to see how it would have worked with those strange morsels. Concise though it is, it is still much longer than any of the Bagatelles and sits perfectly at the top of Op 109, with its unusual sonata structure juxtaposing the gently ecstatic *Vivace* sections with the dramatic and quasi-improvisatory *Adagios*.

**MG** - Back to Opp 109 and 110 and the movements that follow those first movements: in each case, what follows is short, fast-paced (rightly, neither is marked 'scherzo' by Beethoven) and a violent contrast to their surroundings. What are the musical challenges for the performer here?

**MR** - Although the second movements of Opp 109 and 110 might seem superficially to have similarities of character, they are in fact very different: the *Prestissimo* of Op 109 is a taut sonata structure, uncompromising and, as you say, violent; even in the distant ending of the development the tension needs to be maintained. Op 110's second movement is at least a scherzo and trio in structure even if Beethoven declined to title it thus. I feel Beethoven gives us a down-to-earth character to contrast with the sublime mood of the *Moderato* which precedes it. Speaking of challenges, the central section is a notoriously treacherous page on a technical level, the difficulties equalling anything else in the final trilogy.

**MG** - Somehow, out of that tension and huge range of contrast within the first two movements, Beethoven takes us to new spiritual regions. The Finale of Op 110 is truly mould-breaking in this respect. How would you describe it?

**MR** - Yes, this movement is the most mind-blowingly original of all! Three introductory bars lead to an extraordinarily poignant recitative and a "song of suffering" (as he calls it) which takes us to the depths of despair. Here Beethoven seems to quote (not for the first time - also in the first move-

ment of his Op 69 Cello Sonata) the aria "Es ist vollbracht" from Bach's *St John Passion*, although it's unclear whether he actually knew this work, which lay in obscurity at this time. The only way forward seems to be via that most intellectual of forms, the fugue, which here lifts the spirits with its rising subject. At the very climax however the optimism collapses into a second statement of the *Arioso dolente*, which is this time broken and exhausted with its fragmentary, halting sighs. A series of off-beat chords brings us back to life once more and the fugue returns with its subject inverted. In the most amazing stroke of genius, Beethoven manages to create huge momentum from ethereal single notes to the breathtaking ecstasy of the final page in just two minutes of music. This Sonata is as much a work of philosophy as it is of music.

**MG** - Beethoven had been gravely ill before he wrote this Sonata and, in many ways, the second fugue seems to mark a return to a sense of well-being. That finding of a way forward - the gradual return to life as the subject discovers its inversion and increasing diminutions - must be difficult to control and convey in performance.

**MR** - Yes certainly the ending of Op 110 is overwhelmingly emotional to perform! I have learnt after forty years of performing it never to follow it with another piece, at least until after an interval. Emotionally there are parallels with the late quartets, the Cavatina of Op 130 has a passage reminiscent of Op 110's *Arioso dolente* and the idea of returning to life after serious illness is also conveyed in the *Heilige Dankgesang* in Op 132.

**MG** - On the other hand, the Finale of Op 109 leads us to a very different sort of ecstasy - inward rather than extrovert - in its variations. I've always found this movement rather wistful and on the edge of being elegiac.

**MR** - I agree with you. There's an amazing sense of regret and sadness (for me) in the resolution when the theme returns after the burning fire in the climax of that last variation. All the more surprising, perhaps, as each preceding variation has its own individual character, without the cumulative effect of Op 111's variations, for example.

**MG** - Yes, individual character without being "character" variations; perhaps something new for Beethoven. As you say, Op 111's Arietta works on us in a totally different way: whereas in the E major Sonata he numbers the variations, in Op 111 he doesn't! In the C minor, although there are clear rhythmic features that signpost the start of each new variation, somehow the edges get blurred. A pointer to variations becoming more organic, maybe?

**MR** - There are two other examples of organic sets of variations in Beethoven's Sonatas: the second movement of WoO 47 No 3, written when Beethoven was just twelve, and the *Andante con moto* of the *Appassionata* from over twenty years later. Op 111's Arietta is a transcendental experience, with the ecstatic climax of the third variation quite early on, leading to that extraordinary double variation which seems to emanate from another world. The link after that which

leads to the filled-out and fully harmonised return of the theme is an unbelievable leap in the dark for someone whose hearing was by now non-existent! The return itself magically seems to emerge inevitably yet paradoxically taking us by surprise, and the ethereal final page again brings to mind the "music of the spheres." As Hamlet says, "The rest is silence." At the end of some of my recent performances, the audience has been spellbound for as long as a minute before launching into applause.

**MG** - It's a great masterstroke that in the flurry of surface demi-semiquavers - and the rapid alternation of a pair of notes that forms a trill - that Beethoven produces stillness, isn't it? And after that, we are again looking forward to the *beklemmt* of Op 130's Cavatina following that harrowing, lonely call from the abyss when the music stumbles forwards again, choked and - at first - unable to articulate itself.

**MR** - Absolutely! But let us not forget that this "final statement" is preceded by a first movement which is a profound distillation of the human condition: a fateful warning of an introduction precedes an *Allegro* in which conflict, hope and aspiration are tinged with moments of tenderness, love and indeed stillness. Much of the material is presented in a *fugato* style which gives a nod to the intellect, yet the overwhelming impression is one of futile struggle. The resolution of the coda provides a perfect link to the visionary Arietta. After all the time I've known and played this work, it never fails to astonish me with its profound message.



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.

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Martin Roscoe

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# The Final Trilogy

Volume 3

Beethoven Piano Sonatas

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**Martin Roscoe****Piano Sonata in F sharp major Op. 78**

- 1** Adagio cantabile - Allegro ma non troppo 7:08
- 2** Allegro vivace 2:58

**Piano Sonata in E major Op. 109**

- 3** Vivace ma non troppo - Adagio espressivo 3:41
- 4** Prestissimo 2:17
- 5** Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo 13:01

**Piano Sonata in A flat major Op. 110**

- 6** Moderato cantabile molto espressivo 6:32
- 7** Allegro molto 1:59
- 8** Adagio ma non troppo - Fuga. Allegro ma non troppo 10:22

**Piano Sonata in C minor Op. 111**

- 9** Maestoso - Allegro con brio ed appassionato 8:33
- 10** Arietta. Adagio, molto semplice e cantabile 17:51



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