



L. v. Beethoven: Piano Sonatas | Wilhelm Backhaus

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Recordings of new Beethoven Piano Sonata elicit conflicting emotions. If it's not a new complete cycle (announced or released), no one raises an eyebrow. "Oh, just some more Beethoven sonatas." But then the audacity of undertaking a complete cycle bores the jaded critic, unless it's from a pianist of the very rarest caliber (of which there are not many around). Even then the question remains: does X or Y really have something extraordinary to say, something to add in every one of those 32+ Beethoven Sonatas? Something that the greatest pianists of the last, recorded 70 years haven't already covered? Of course every generation needs and should get 'it's' Beethoven, but what makes you think you are the one to give it to us? Is it not just a case of ego turned hubris?

No complete Beethoven Sonata cycle is planned—to my knowledge—with Steven Osborne, but he has released a disc with four sonatas on hyperion. Three famous ones and the little, 'easy' op.79 Sonata. Osborne, even though I enjoy many of his discs greatly, is to my mind more a dependable pianist than a particular exciting one. An impression perhaps unfairly shaped by him being an all-rounder without a specific, pin-pointable strength and no obvious weaknesses. Whether it is virtuoso repertoire by Liszt and Rachmaninoff, fiendishly difficult obscurities like Alkan and Kapustin, Messiaen, Shostakovich, Tippett, Britten, romantic piano concertos, or now Beethoven, he seems to be Hyperion's answer to everything. "Just throw Osborne at it", goes the cry at Eltham HQ. Perhaps.

This disc does its part to answer why that strategy—if it is one—works so well. Plugging the Beethoven in the CD player and listening to it—the fourth time by now and without tedious A-B comparison—is pure joy. Beauty, delicacy, nuance, repose are all on his side; ditto speed—when he applies it—and flexibility. The wild Presto of the Moonlight Sonata, after a languorous, graceful first and second movement, is not so much a hurdling up (or down) a mountain than it is a quickly running, bubbly brook—with as much variance of tempo and dynamics as such a brook might have. The Pathétique is careful but not reluctant—without boldness and perhaps a little too much nicety. The lullaby center of the op.79 Andante is marvelously crafted, Osborne's deftness and grace of touch becoming particularly evident, and his playful side is out for the Waldstein where the first movement has so many wonderfully nimble, subtle changes of current that it never sounds like a sewing machine gone wild. It's the sonata that brings the biggest smile to my face from this recital that eschews bombast, looking at the finer side of Beethoven rather than the towering one. These are 'just some Beethoven sonatas' that I quite enjoy.

I could say the same about two important historical releases on audite. But some allowances have to be made—for once!—for Wilhelm Backhaus in his very last recorded recital (on a Bechstein) from 1969. It reminds us that Backhaus spanned

two worlds: he had heard Brahms conduct his own piano concertos as a boy... and just forty years ago he still recorded Beethoven sonatas. What you get on this live recording (Backhaus tries to ignore the applause between sonatas) is largely what you might expect from the regal pianist Backhaus. There is purpose behind every note; purpose at the service of the music, not his own ego. No unnecessary tone or emotion comes from this man with the impassive face; there's never any 'improving' of individual instances, he never strays from the sober line. By way of imperfect analogy: Looking closely at Velázquez's Rokeby Venus it might be tempting to touch up and smoothen the almost crude brush strokes, one at a time. After completing this work, square inch by square inch, the 'helpful' restaurateur would likely be shocked when he steps back and sees the grand effect of the original in ruins. Like less-than-refined brush strokes in great painting, the almost barren tone of Backhaus emerges as an essential part of the unadulterated whole. That said, this collection of op.31/3, op.28 ("Pastoral"), op.54 ("Waldstein"), and op.109 doesn't improve in the essence on what is available from Backhaus on his stereo Decca cycle of the complete Beethoven Sonatas. The famous technical facility of Backhaus shows (understandable, slight, but noticeable) imperfections at age 85, just three months before his death.

The other release features a pianist who was not blessed with a long professional life and in whose case new outings on disc are even more treasurable. Solomon, who went by just one name (dropping his last name "Cutner") long before Madonna did, was born 18 years after Backhaus but felled by a stroke in 1956, amid recording sessions for a complete Beethoven cycle with EMI-Columbia. He survived (and lived until 1988), but never regained the use of his right arm. A Wunderkind in his youth, he later went back to study piano with Lazare Lévy (who also taught Marcel Dupré, Clara Haskil, Yvonne Loriod, and Monique Haas) and restarted his career as a matured artist. Sober and stunningly even, he was in a way to pianism in England what Backhaus was to pianism in Germany: the performance-school analogue to what "New Objectivity" was in art and architecture. The cool elegance of Solomon can be heard in these 1956 RIAS tapes (just months before his stroke, at the height of his ability) that offer—given their age—excellent sound for two Beethoven Sonatas, op.2/3 and op.27/2 ("Moonlight"), as well as Schumann, Chopin, Brahms, and Bach. Solomon's Beethoven is never indulgent, always translucent, but this performance made at RIAS' Berlin broadcast studio makes that point even more vividly than his studio recording for EMI (available on Testament) by saving more than a minute of the first movement alone. Inclined collectors and the curious will definitely be interested in the Solomon release; possibly Backhaus' as well.