



Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete Works for Cello and Piano

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[Fanfare](#) (Huntley Dent - 2018.08.01)

The back story behind this new set of Beethoven's cello-and-piano music is detailed in a personal note from French cellist Marc Coppey. He and Russian pianist Peter Laul have collaborated for two decades and performed the five Beethoven cello sonatas many times. For this live recording—no applause included—they went to a special venue, the Small Hall of the St. Petersburg Philharmonic, which is wreathed in history—the only performance of the *Missa solemnis* in Beethoven's lifetime was presented in a previous incarnation of the hall. Coppey refers to the added risk-taking and electricity of an in-concert recording. My expectations ran high.

In the event, half of this partnership turned out to be exciting and charismatic, but curiously, it wasn't the cellist. Laul, a prizewinning pianist who studied at the St. Petersburg Conservatory and now teaches there, takes full advantage of the equality that Beethoven provides for the piano in the last three sonatas, the middle-period op. 69 and the two enigmatic late sonatas of op. 102. His passagework is brilliant and ebullient. He phrases beautifully in the slow movements and supports the rhythm of the scherzos with brio. It's ironic that Beethoven is acknowledged as the first important composer to take the cello seriously as a solo chamber instrument, liberating it once and for all from a drone-like existence playing continuo (although Haydn did sometimes provide more opportunities, briefly, to shine in his piano trios).

Seeming to avoid the limelight, Coppey is ill-matched to his sparkling piano partner. Much of the time he sounds recessive, which could be partially blamed on microphone placement. But engineers aren't responsible for such plainness and lack of enthusiasm. I went back to the outstanding Beethoven set from Ralph Kirshbaum and Shai Wosner (*Onyx*), whom I extolled in *Fanfare* 40:5. A world of differences sprang from the loudspeakers—Kirshbaum produces a vibrant tone that constantly varies in color. He's eager to shine in solo passages but also combines beautifully with Wosner's piano part. The stylistic range of the Beethoven cello sonatas encompasses his whole career, from early Classical formality to middle-period extroversion and late-period opacity (the first movement of op. 102/1 sounds positively ugly to me). Kirshbaum-Wosner welcome the challenge to explore each style on its own terms.

But not Coppey, who has only one tone—a fairly thin, whiny, and unattractive one to my ears. As an interpreter, he has his moments, as in the allegros of the two op. 5 Sonatas and their opposite, the slow music in the two op. 102 Sonatas. I discovered only one captivating reading, of the very personal *Adagio con molto* sentiment *d'affeto*, which is the second movement of op. 102/2. Like much of the basic materials in the last two sonatas, this movement begins with a spare, unpromising theme that barely departs from a scale, yet as it unfolds and deepens, Coppey and Laul begin to commune and communicate on a moving level. Touches of this rapport

appear here and there, but not enough.

I don't feel the need to diagram the disappointing readings that the Handel and Mozart variations receive; they seem run-of-the-mill. Humor and variety are not present. As for the risk-taking and electricity that Coppey speaks of in his note, well...

I joined Steven Kruger, Jerry Dubins, and Raymond Tuttle in warmly welcoming Coppey's arresting playing on a CD that paired the Dvořák Cello Concerto and Bloch's Schelomo (41:2 and 41:3), all of us praising the freshness of his approach to very familiar scores. Where that artist has gone mystifies me, and perhaps others will hear virtues in this new Beethoven set that elude me. As urgently as I can recommend Kirshbaum and Wosner, Coppey leaves me cold, but with a nod to Laul for his enlivening contribution.

