

Deux-Elles

Beethoven

Funeral March

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Beethoven Piano Sonatas Op. 14 Nos. 1 and 2, Op. 22, Op. 26

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Martin Roscoe

# Beethoven Piano Sonatas

*A conversation between performer and producer*

**Mike George** - These four Sonatas follow on chronologically from the four on the first volume of your cycle [DXL 1161] and were begun when Beethoven was approaching thirty. Sometimes I think the Op 14 pair represent a relaxation after the piano sonatas he'd composed before, to the extent that, if we didn't know the timeline, we might even think that they predated the earlier sonatas, Opp 2, 7, 10 and 13.

**Martin Roscoe** - I know what you mean: they are certainly more relaxed and don't attempt deep emotions or grand designs. It's difficult to see any development of language either, but these charming and beautiful pieces stand on their own as yet more different facets of Beethoven's limitless diversity. In particular, the G major is very sophisticated and witty, a miniature masterpiece; if the E major isn't quite on the same level, it is still perfectly proportioned.

**MG** - Czerny thought the first movement of the E major had a "serene and noble character." Is that how you see it?

**MR** - Not really, although the key itself might lead one to that conclusion; for me, there's an energy in the accompanying chords of the opening and in the *staccato* figures in some of the second subject material which leads me to think that the movement as a whole might have a more lively character.

**MG** - Unusually for Beethoven, most of the development is devoted almost entirely to a new and unrelated idea which doesn't reappear ...

**MR** - Beethoven was always trying new ideas and stretching the boundaries and this is a typical example

of that; less than a decade later, in the first movement of the *Eroica* Symphony, he goes a step further, introducing a brand new theme after the development climax, and then re-stating it in the coda.

**MG** - The central movement takes us back, perhaps, to the world of the same movement in Op 10 No 2: it seems to me to serve as a sort of intermezzo - neither quite scherzo or minuet - and the melancholy, almost claustrophobic atmosphere dissolves into a moment of sunny warmth in the coda.

**MR** - Beethoven was very canny *not* to refer to a scherzo or a minuet; it doesn't have the character of either. It is certainly a movement where uncertainty prevails, and I don't really feel that the *Maggiore* or coda provide us with much solace. Sandwiched between two very upbeat movements, it provides the perfect foil!

**MG** - The Finale presents a side of Beethoven we don't meet often; it's a journey out of melancholy into something conversational and almost genial. I wonder if, in these two Op 14 Sonatas, Beethoven's quite comfortable now with what he inherited from Haydn.

**MR** - It is genial and conversational, for sure. I think maybe, though, that Beethoven was always pretty comfortable with what he inherited from Haydn! They didn't really get along, did they? But I find that these two are among Beethoven's least emotionally challenging and most comforting piano sonatas.

**MG** - Certainly, if Haydn hadn't got there first with his so-called 'Surprise' Symphony, we might have had a 'Surprise' Sonata from Beethoven. Do you think Beethoven had achieved more sophistication in the middle movement of the G major Sonata of Op 14?

**MR** - This *Andante* is one of Beethoven's most delightful and witty inventions. And if the performer hasn't managed to provoke a response from the audience with the last chord, there must have been something wrong with the performance! But, you mention sophistication and, for me, here it comes in the first movement which is unusually elegant and heart-warming; the development's stormy and dramatic passage is especially effective in this context.

**MG** - And the last movement's a Scherzo that also serves as Finale, a scheme possibly adopted from Haydn who ends some of his early works with a Minuet. Someone's description of this movement as a "benign little comedy" sticks in my mind. Do we encounter this elsewhere in his music?

**MR** - I see this Scherzo (which is actually a rondo!) as a purely Beethovenian experiment. Although it's true that the wonderful humour in it may well be seen to have been derived from Haydn. Both composers had fabulous gifts when it came to expressing humour in music; later composers seemed to have more difficulty with this (perhaps Debussy's the most obvious exception). In this last movement, Beethoven uses a cross-rhythm in the first rising motif to create the playful humour which sets the movement off, and there are several pauses and long rests which help create a pleasurable uncertainty of progression. In the coda, Beethoven uses abrupt dynamic changes and 'Scotch snap' rhythms as well as a totally unexpected ending, all adding up to the "benign little comedy" you mention.

**MG** - Beethoven scholars seem to think that he worked on this Sonata around 1798. Quite an important year for him working in that genre, full of richness and variety, producing a series of Sonatas that

any composer would have proud of over a much longer span of time.

**MR** - And that's only in the piano sonatas! But when you think of the contrasts both between and within these works, it's an even more remarkable achievement: from the depths of tragedy in the slow movement of Op 10 No 3 through the passion, anger and intensity of the *Pathétique* to the cheeky energy in Op 10 No 2 and the grace, charm and wit of Op 14 No 2, Beethoven was already showing the huge range and depth of his emotional message. Also, every one of those works stretches structural boundaries in ways only hinted at by his predecessors.

**MG** - Op 22 seems a world away from these previous Sonatas, and it might appear backward-looking and conventional, lacking the blazing fire of contemporary pieces, like the First Symphony, for example. Does it perhaps end and seal off a period in Beethoven's creative life?

**MR** - It's certainly true that Op 22 is more akin to the Sonatas Opp 2 and 7 than the eight (including the Op 49 pair) which followed; if there is an unusual lack of adventure structurally in this piece (by Beethoven's standards) and the mostly genial mood is a world away from the *Pathétique*, it is worth noting, however, that Beethoven was particularly pleased with this Sonata and wanted a lot more money from his publisher for it than he did for the Second Piano Concerto, which he offered at the same time.

**MG** - There is, though, a new energy, a slow surge, if you like, in the first movement as well as a heightened preoccupation with pedal points, combining at times to give an effect akin to running on the spot.

MR - This movement does indeed have as much 'brio' as any other sonata first movement of Beethoven, including the *Waldstein*! The energy is unusually brilliant, as Beethoven's characteristic use of B flat (*Hammerklavier* excepted!) tends towards a more mellow and comfortable impression. At the same time, as you quite rightly point out, the harmonic movement is often slow and there are many extended pedal points ... another link to the first movement of the *Waldstein*.

MG - Interesting that you find more parallels with the *Waldstein*; many performers and commentators draw a comparison with the *Hammerklavier*, notably the late Charles Rosen in *The Classical Style*.

MR - I find the florid energy in this movement much more akin to the *Waldstein* than the *Hammerklavier*, where the energy seems to me to be much more of the volcanic and explosive type with its huge chords and dotted rhythms. However, Rosen rightly draws the parallel of the almost obsessive use of intervals of the third in the first movements of both B flat Sonatas.

MG - Florid is also an interesting description of the slow movement here; the melody's decoration seems to look forward to Chopin ...

MR - Yes it does, in the sense that the decoration is very operatic, and that Chopin's melodic style was hugely influenced by the Italian opera of his day. But it's well-known that Chopin was antipathetic to Beethoven's music, so he certainly wouldn't have been inspired by this movement. This is a gorgeous *Adagio*, and I often think of a clarinet solo supported by a string trio in the opening. The serene mood is almost uninterrupted, although there are hints of darkness in the striking modulations of the development section.

MG - Beethoven wrote the Sonata, it seems, over the Winter of 1800/01, and I wonder if the turn into a new century and its marking of time passing made him say a farewell to the minuet here. Although it was not the last he wrote, we are certainly aware of being forced into the nineteenth century with the *fortissimo* in bar 10, a contrast of such abruptness which would have been so out of place just a couple of years before.

MR - Although the opening phrase is beautifully elegant, certainly, this is an unusually assertive Minuet (the *Moonlight* Sonata's minuet doesn't have a title but that's clearly what it is). The Trio's also very turbulent, not what one expects at all ... but by now one should have learned never to expect anything in a Beethoven opus!

MG - Yes, expect the unexpected! The Trio certainly leaves its mark on the *da capo* of the Minuet with its assertiveness; I find the Minuet's reprise a different experience to the first time through. A watershed moment, maybe. Looking at Beethoven's sketchbooks, ideas which emerge in the Finale were the first he penned for this Sonata. You mentioned your idea of 'scoring' the start of the *Adagio*; is it a surprise to you that the initial idea for this final rondo might have been intended for the Quartet Op 18 No 6?

MR - Not at all! I often see string quartet textures in Beethoven's Piano Sonatas, especially the early ones. There are many examples. Even in the last three Sonatas one can see them, like the opening phrase of Op 110, or the second variation of the Arietta in Op 111. This Rondo is another of those gentle finales which show us that Beethoven could express all of human experience through his music ... those people who only identify him with assertive and angry music should hear this!

MG - Op 26 follows closely on the heels of its predecessor but, surely, it is a world apart.

MR - Yes, there are so many new ideas here. Mozart had already begun his A major Sonata (K 331) with variations and Haydn had also done the same less formally; and Haydn had already composed two A flat Sonatas, but both of these are new features for Beethoven in Op 26. Also, this is the only one of Beethoven's Sonatas not to have a movement in sonata form (although there are elements of it in the Finale). The lovely opening *Andante* (with variations!) has a stately calm not a million miles in mood from the first movement of his later A flat Sonata, Op 110.

MG - It is, for me, a great set of variations and of great variety, the sense of prolonged dissonance in the third variation and how Beethoven breaks its weightiness with the gentle *scherzando* nature of what follows. The relationship of the theme is always obvious even if the treatment of it is ground breaking.

MR - It's one of those sets where each variation has its own distinctive character (and so a bit like a forerunner of the final movement of Op 109), as opposed to the "organic growth" sets like the *Appassionata* or Op 111. The second variation positively bounces along in a lively fashion while the minor key variation you refer to has these extraordinary syncopated scrunches which are almost painful. The short coda after the fifth variation sums up the movement beautifully, but with an entirely new idea! After such elegance, the Scherzo which follows (only the third in the piano sonatas so far, discounting the last movement of Op 14 No 2 which, as discussed earlier, is actually a rondo) has a rumbustious energy often associated with Beethoven's Scherzos ... one could even say it is difficult to think of

a more typical example, while the Trio offers a richly scored yet relaxing interlude.

MG - Beethoven's initial design for the Sonata excluded that Scherzo, but the heart of this music, surely, has to be the funeral march. This epic vision seems to look forward in a number of ways to another work celebrating a one-time hero, and one we mentioned earlier, the *Eroica* Symphony. Beethoven returned to make an orchestral arrangement of this movement some fifteen years later, in his incidental music for *Leonore Prohaska*. Yet another truly revolutionary movement to discover in, of all places, a piano sonata!

MR - One has to wonder if Beethoven had an orchestra in mind from the start, such is the scoring of this movement, especially in the drum rolls and fanfares of the middle section. Perhaps another first here (and in Variation III of the *Andante*) is the use of seven flats in the key signature, something even Bach shirked in the "48!" Yes, this was clearly a prototype for the much more complex funeral march in the *Eroica*.

MG - Does that wonderfully warm hint of consolation in the coda provide the glimmer of hope that's needed to start the Finale?

MR - Well maybe it does. Talking of prototypes, maybe this Finale is one? I'm thinking of the *moto perpetuo* Finales in the *Tempest* and *Appassionata*. But, the character is closest to Op 54: in Op 26, Beethoven is more formal in structure, and while the movement indeed smiles for the most part, there's the more threatening central C minor episode, and an ambiguous coda with chromaticism suddenly in use for the first time. For me, this is a Sonata that ends, not with optimism, but with a question mark.



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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# Funeral March

Volume 4

Beethoven Piano Sonatas

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**Martin Roscoe****Piano Sonata in E major Op. 14 No. 1**

- 1** Allegro 6:27
- 2** Allegretto 3:28
- 3** Rondo, Allegro comodo 3:22

**Piano Sonata in G major Op. 14 No. 2**

- 4** Allegro 6:51
- 5** Andante 4:55
- 6** Scherzo, Allegro assai 3:27

**Piano Sonata in B flat major Op. 22**

- 7** Allegro con brio 7:19
- 8** Adagio con molta espressione 7:44
- 9** Minuetto 3:11
- 10** Rondo, Allegretto 6:33

**Piano Sonata in A flat major Op. 26**

- 11** Andante con Variazioni 7:27
- 12** Scherzo, Allegro molto 2:37
- 13** Marcia funebre sulla morte d'un Eroe 5:26
- 14** Allegro 2:50



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