Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete Works for Cello and Piano

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GRAMOPHONE

Beethoven's solo cello music is enjoying a moment in the sun right now, with a series of excellent new recordings (including François-Frédéric Guy and Xavier Phillips's Gramophone Award-nominated set – Evidence Classics, 1/16) plus a comprehensive new study by Marc Moskovitz and Larry Todd (Boydell & Brewer). And rightly: the five sonatas respresent Beethoven in the laboratory – each one an inventive, radically individual experiment in texture and form – while the sets of variations are entertainment music at its most ingeniously playful. Marc Coppey and Peter Laul have set out to capture some of that sense of spontaneity and risk. They recorded this complete cycle in a single marathon live performance in the Small Hall of the St Petersburg Philharmonia – the venue where Beethoven's Missa solemnis received its first performance in 1824. And they never flag: from the first climax of Op 5 No 1 to the thunderous closing fugue of Op 102 No 2, these performances are brisk, alert and almost supernaturally energetic.

But while the recorded acoustic – which slightly favours the piano – is reasonably well balanced and clear, this still feels unmistakably like live performance. The tension can be exhilarating: sforzando chords explode off the page; there's an exuberant theatricality to the extraordinary cadenza-à-deux near the end of the first movement of Op 5 No 1; and the livelier variations – as well as the Haydnesque finales of Op 5 No 2 and Op 69 – go with a headlong swagger and a swing.

In short, there's a continual static-buzz of excitement throughout these two discs. These are performances of extremes, with a strong leaning to the extrovert, and you might prefer more of a sense of inwardness and space in the slower variations, say, or the Adagio of Op 102 No 2. Moments of reflection are rare here, and the questioning, fantastic mood that opens Op 102 No 1 doesn't really survive the first Allegro, just as the pair never find an entirely persuasive path between lyricism and display in Op 69. Marc Coppey's cello tone, mellow on the lower strings, can be slightly constrained at altitude, while Laul's bright, bravura pianism leaves little scope for mystery or indeed refinement.

If asked to choose, I'd say the G minor Sonata, Op 5 No 2, is perhaps the single most convincing performance here; it's a work that thrives on volatility and outsize gestures. This is not to belittle Coppey and Laul's achievement, or the verve and conviction of these performances. But a thrilling live occasion doesn't always make for a great recording, and this set is perhaps too headstrong and too relentless for endto-end listening. No one wants vanilla Beethoven but there is more subtlety to this music than you'll find here. And, at present, it's fairly easy to find it elsewhere.

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