Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete Works for Cello and Piano

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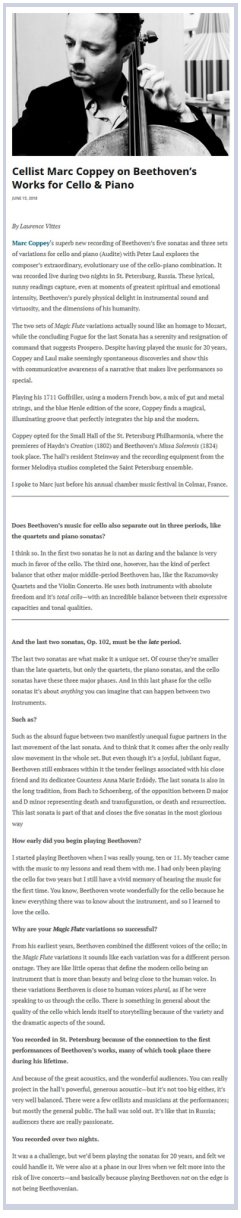

Cellist Marc Coppey on Beethoven's Works for Cello & Piano

By Laurence Vittes

Marc Coppey's superb new recording of Beethoven's five sonatas and three sets of variations for cello and piano (Audite) with Peter Laul explores the composer's extraordinary, evolutionary use of the cello-piano combination. It was recorded live during two nights in St. Petersburg, Russia. These lyrical, sunny readings capture, even at moments of greatest spiritual and emotional intensity, Beethoven's purely physical delight in instrumental sound and virtuosity, and the dimensions of his humanity.

The two sets of *Magic Flute* variations actually sound like an homage to Mozart, while the concluding Fugue for the last Sonata has a serenity and resignation of command that suggests Prospero. Despite having played the music for 20 years, Coppey and Laul make seemingly spontaneous discoveries and show this with communicative awareness of a narrative that makes live performances so special.

Playing his 1711 Goffriller, using a modern French bow, a mix of gut and metal strings, and the blue Henle edition of the score, Coppey finds a magical, illuminating groove that perfectly integrates the hip and the modern.

Coppey opted for the Small Hall of the St. Petersburg Philharmonia, where the premieres of Haydn's Creation (1802) and Beethoven's Missa Solemnis (1824) took place. The hall's resident Steinway and the recording equipment from the former Melodiya studios completed the Saint Petersburg ensemble.

I spoke to Marc just before his annual chamber music festival in Colmar, France.

Does Beethoven's music for cello also separate out in three periods, like the quartets and piano sonatas?

I think so. In the first two sonatas he is not as daring and the balance is very much in favor of the cello. The third one, however, has the kind of perfect balance that other

major middle-period Beethoven has, like the Razumovsky Quartets and the Violin Concerto. He uses both instruments with absolute freedom and it's total cello—with an incredible balance between their expressive capacities and tonal qualities.

And the last two sonatas, Op. 102, must be the late period.

The last two sonatas are what make it a unique set. Of course they're smaller than the late quartets, but only the quartets, the piano sonatas, and the cello sonatas have these three major phases. And in this last phase for the cello sonatas it's about anything you can imagine that can happen between two instruments.

Such as?

Such as the absurd fugue between two manifestly unequal fugue partners in the last movement of the last sonata. And to think that it comes after the only really slow movement in the whole set. But even though it's a joyful, jubilant fugue, Beethoven still embraces within it the tender feelings associated with his close friend and its dedicatee Countess Anna Marie Erdödy. The last sonata is also in the long tradition, from Bach to Schoenberg, of the opposition between D major and D minor representing death and transfiguration, or death and resurrection. This last sonata is part of that and closes the five sonatas in the most glorious way

How early did you begin playing Beethoven?

I started playing Beethoven when I was really young, ten or 11. My teacher came with the music to my lessons and read them with me. I had only been playing the cello for two years but I still have a vivid memory of hearing the music for the first time. You know, Beethoven wrote wonderfully for the cello because he knew everything there was to know about the instrument, and so I learned to love the cello.

Why are your Magic Flute variations so successful?

From his earliest years, Beethoven combined the different voices of the cello; in the Magic Flute variations it sounds like each variation was for a different person onstage. They are like little operas that define the modern cello being an instrument that is more than beauty and being close to the human voice. In these variations Beethoven is close to human voices plural, as if he were speaking to us through the cello. There is something in general about the quality of the cello which lends itself to storytelling because of the variety and the dramatic aspects of the sound.

You recorded in St. Petersburg because of the connection to the first performances of Beethoven's works, many of which took place there during his lifetime.

And because of the great acoustics, and the wonderful audiences. You can really project in the hall's powerful, generous acoustic—but it's not too big either, it's very well balanced. There were a few cellists and musicians at the performances; but mostly the general public. The hall was sold out. It's like that in Russia; audiences there are really passionate.

You recorded over two nights.

It was a challenge, but we'd been playing the sonatas for 20 years, and felt we could handle it. We were also at a phase in our lives when we felt more into the risk of live concerts—and basically because playing Beethoven not on the edge is not being Beethovenian.

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JUNE 15, 2018

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