



Ludwig van Beethoven: Complete Works for Cello and Piano

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STRINGS

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

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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



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June 15, 2018

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sonatas have. We have both instruments with their own strengths, like the Melodiya Quartet and the Violin Concerto. We have both instruments with their own

freedom and it's total control—with an incredible balance between their expressive capacities and tonal qualities.

And the last two sonatas, Op. 102, must be the last period. The last two sonatas are made like a unique box. Of course they're smaller than the big sonatas, but only the quartets, the piano sonatas, and the cello sonatas have these three major planes. And in this last phase for the cello sonatas it's about anything you can imagine that can happen between two instruments.

Such as the absurd fugue between two manifestly unequal fugue patterns in the last movement of the second sonata? The last movement is a different story. The last movement is the last movement that defines the sonatas as cello sonatas. Beethoven still enhances within it the tender feelings associated with his dear friend and his dedicatee Countess Anna Marie Erdödy. The last sonata is also in the long tradition, from Bach to Schubert, of the opposition between D major and D minor representing death and transfiguration, and 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 gave me the sonatas in 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 to create something for a different person and for the listener, for the audience, that defines the audience as a musical instrument. Such as the last movement that defines the sonatas as cello sonatas.

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 sonatas, and the wonderful audience. You can really feel in the hall's powerful, generous acoustic—but it's not big either; it's very well balanced. There were a few cellos and musicians at the performances; 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 in a place in our lives where we felt more into the skin of the concert— and basically because playing Beethoven not on the edge is not being Beethoven.

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

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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.

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