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BEETHOVEN

FORTEPIANO AND

CELLO SONATAS

OPUS FIVE NOS. 1 AND 2

MALCOLM BILSON

FORTEPIANO

ANNER BYLSMA



CELLO

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

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MALCOLM BILSON

F O R T E P I A N O

ANNE R BYLSMA

C E L L O

Sonata No. 1 in F major for Piano and Cello, Op. 5, No. 1 (23:40)

1 Adagio sostenuto; 2 Allegro

3 Rondo: Allegro vivace

Sonata No. 2 in G minor for Piano and Cello, Op. 5, No. 2 (23:14)

4 Adagio sostenuto e espressivo; 5 Allegro molto più tosto presto

6 Rondo: Allegro

Recorded July 1986 at the Old Catholic Church, Utrecht,
The Netherlands

Engineered by Clavigram, Leerdam, The Netherlands
Art direction and design: Carin Goldberg

The fortepiano used in this recording, built by Philip Belt (1977), is based on the Anton Walter instrument owned by Mozart; its pitch is A-430, its tuning well-tempered but not equal-tempered. The cello is by Mattio Gofriller (1690s, Venice), the bow by W. Bouman (1973, The Hague).

Beethoven arrived in Vienna in November 1792, a raw young Rhinelander planning to study with Haydn. Two and a half years later he was ready to publish his Opus 1, a set of piano trios, and a year later came Opus 2, three piano sonatas. After that, to keep up with growing demand, he published a couple of works he had brought with him from Bonn, but Opus 5, the two sonatas on this record, issued by Artaria in February 1797, was in every sense new, not least in being the first sonatas ever written for piano and cello. This or that detail in Opus 1 or 2 might remind us of Haydn or Clementi or some other late eighteenth-century composer, but no one entire page of Opus 5 could have been designed by anyone other than Beethoven. Here he takes his largest step in asserting himself as an altogether original presence on the scene.


Beethoven wrote these sonatas for an extended concert tour he took in 1796. In Berlin he played several times at the court of Frederick William II, an indifferent monarch but a good cellist and a keen patron of the arts. Haydn's Opus 50 quartets were dedicated to him, as were the last three quartets of Mozart, and now these sonatas were added to the list.¹ Beethoven's partner in performance was Jean-Pierre Duport (1741-1818), a virtuoso who revolutionized the technique and thus the expressive possibilities of cello-playing and who had been brought to Berlin in 1773 by Frederick the Great both to play and to teach the king's nephew, the future Frederick William II. For his Berlin concerts and for the dedication, Beethoven was rewarded with a gold snuffbox filled with Louis d'ors. Years later he still liked to recount with

pride that it was “not an ordinary snuffbox, but such a one as it might have been customary to present to an ambassador.”

The two sonatas are similarly and unusually designed, each starting with slow music that leads without break into a serious allegro, that in turn being followed by a rondo finale. In the F major Sonata, the opening music is more obviously and simply an introduction than its counterpart in the G minor. Still, because of the great range between the slowest notes and the fastest, even more because of the incursions of striking minor and Neapolitan harmonies, this Adagio comes across as music of considerable breadth. That impression is reinforced by the Allegro, whose exposition is enormous, whose development both begins and ends with astonishing harmonic adventures (respectively a leap into A major and a soft sinking onto D-flat), and whose coda, with its sudden freezing on six measures of adagio, provides still more evidence of the twenty-five-year-old composer’s bold originality. The finale, too, strides across the harmonic landscape with captivating zest and vitality, and is full of bright detail.

In the G minor Sonata, the opening music is something between an introduction and an independent movement. It is much larger than any introduction then extant, larger even than any later example by Beethoven (including the Seventh Symphony, which is singularly bold in this regard), but its gestures are those we associate with preparation rather than with a self-contained slow movement. This Adagio, whose qualifying “*sostenuto ed espressivo*” means broadspanned and expressive (but not in a condition of stasis), is a grandly powerful fantasia, now declamatory, now songful, and leading across suspenseful silences into

the impassioned Allegro. Here is music of tremendous urgency, full of contrast, fire, unexpected accent, and ingenious variation at every point. The cheery G major finale perhaps suggests at first a sharp drop in temperature; Beethoven, however, is of no such mind. This becomes clear during the unfolding of a movement of sturdy structure, piquant detail, and invitations to whipping virtuosity.

 Interesting, impressive musicians—Barenboim, Casals, DuPré, Horszowski, Ma, Piatigorsky, Richter, Rostropovich, Schnabel, Serkin among them—have recorded these sonatas, and beautifully. The sounds they have made, however, are not the sounds Frederick William heard when Beethoven and Dupont played for him; more important, they are not the sounds Beethoven imagined when he wrote the music down. There are some aspects of performance, especially tempo and articulation, where we cannot be sure of retrieving just what Beethoven had in mind, though we can confidently say that there is a fair gap between the way Beethoven and Dupont played in Berlin in 1796 and the way most of their successors interpret these pieces today. In one area, however, we can be sure: the actual sounds were different. The pitch was a bit lower, and so was the volume. Dupont’s cello had all gut strings, and no matter who built the “fortepiano”² Beethoven played—or any that he ever encountered anywhere—it was a very different instrument from a modern steel-framed, high-tension Steinway or Bechstein or Bösendorfer.

Some musicians, some listeners are skeptical about the value of trying to play music the way it was played when it was new, but in growing numbers they find it stimulating, valuable, beautiful. Furthermore, what may have been begun in a spirit of reverence for history is con-

tinued because it works so well. To be sure, if you are going to perform in Carnegie Hall or some other place equally huge, the sort of place Beethoven never imagined these sonatas would be heard in, then you have to resort to what one is tempted to call a transcription for modern piano and modernized cello. Small halls or, even better, the living room, allow the luxury of the softer, more delicately differentiated, rapid sounds of the instruments of 1796. Though subtle, theirs is a richer coloristic vocabulary.

And what performers on modern instruments regard as problems go away. “The piano is an imperialist instrument,” said a disgruntled violinist trying to make himself heard in some piece of chamber music. He would not have said that had the piano been something like the Belt that Malcolm Bilson plays on this record, an instrument that cannot drown a cello, one in which bunched bass textures do not turn into mud, not least, one on which at climaxes the player can use all the sound he has and so make the music sound really big. A small instrument at full throttle makes a grander effect than a big one which the pianist has to approach in gingerly fashion for fear of drowning his partner. This is also why the word “transcription” is something other than merely provocative: Beethoven would have voiced the music quite differently for a modern Steinway, and one would really want to rewrite the music to get the equivalent of the effects he calculated so well for the instrument he himself knew and played.

This, then, is what this recording is about. I have often and deeply enjoyed performances of this music that had nothing to do with authenticity (or “authenticity”), but when I heard

Malcolm Bilson and Anner Bylsma play it I heard things—just physically to begin with, but that after all is where deeper hearing must begin—that no performance on modern instruments could show me, no matter how wonderful it might be in every other way. If I may close with a suggestion: do not play this record at the volume of a Van Halen production. These are quiet instruments whose speech is scaled to a salon, not a stadium; set your level, therefore, so that the first sounds you hear command your attention by being almost startlingly quiet. Then the flavors will rise and fill your room. —Michael Steinberg

Part of these notes first appeared in somewhat different form in the program book of the San Francisco Symphony (1986) and are used by permission. Michael Steinberg is the San Francisco Symphony's Artistic Adviser and program annotator.

¹As Beethoven grew older and more famous, a whole repertoire of rumors accumulated about him. According to one of the most persistent of these he was the illegitimate son of Frederick William II. Had it been true he would have been in ample company: with two marriages, two morganatic marriages (both contracted during the lifetime of his second wife), one extended liaison, and fourteen known children, legitimate and illegitimate, his Majesty got around.

²Beethoven's piano would have had a compass of five octaves (as against the more than seven of a modern instrument), a simpler, more direct action, and a tone both quieter and more plangent. It would have been called “pianoforte” more often than “fortepiano”; today, however, the word “fortepiano” provides a convenient way of indicating that we mean an early instrument or the reproduction of one.

DIGITAL RECORDING

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

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MALCOLM BILSON

F O R T E P I A N O

A N N E R B Y L S M A

C E L L O

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6 Rondo: Allegro

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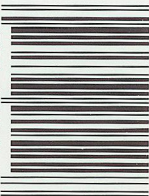
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