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Interesting Beethoven from François-Frédéric Guy Despite an Inconsiderate Audience

March 21, 2012

 United Kingdom **Beethoven**: François-Frédéric Guy (piano). Queen Elizabeth Hall, London, 20.3.2012 (MB)

Piano sonata no. 15 in D major, op.28, *Pastoral*

Piano sonata no. 14 in C-sharp minor, op.27, no.2, *Quasi una fantasia*

Piano sonata no. 29 in B-flat major, op.106, *Hammerklavier*

François-Frédéric Guy is apparently in the throes of performing all of the Beethoven piano sonatas and concertos. On the evidence of this recital, we in London are missing something potentially rather interesting, though on that same evidence, we in London certainly do not deserve to experience it, the bronchial terrorism of sections of the Queen Elizabeth Hall audience extreme even by current standards. The slow movement of the *Hammerklavier* sonata was at times well-nigh obliterated; if ever there were a time for lynchings...

Though interventions were frequent, op.28 emerged relatively unscathed. The first movement was often Romantically veiled, which is not to say subdued; when the music cast itself free, it did so organically, the impression all the stronger for it. Some slight spreading of right-hand chords might have bothered purists, but it was subtly, indeed rather magically accomplished. Phrasing was always meaningful; rhetoric was certainly not absent but it was never permitted to come remotely close to occluding Beethoven's form. Perhaps that was sometimes a problem in the *Andante*. I am all for fluctuation in tempo, but meaningfully so; here, coherence was not always achieved, the score sometimes feeling merely 'pulled around'. There was some beautiful playing, though, and at its best there was a sense of truly Beethovenian implacability. The scherzo was nicely insistent, though textures in the trio were a little muddy. Initially I thought the tempo for the finale on the fast side, but reconsidered: it was not an unreasonable reading of *Allegro, ma non troppo*. The pedal note proved not only insistent but properly generative. Episodes were well characterised within a greater whole.

The opening movement of op.27 no.2 emerged as if taken in one long, Romantic sigh. Guy's withering glance at an especially disruptive cougher ought to have given pause for consideration by his or her accomplices; alas not. Whether it were for that reason that the second movement proved curiously listless, its tempo never really established and its rhythm slack, can only be a matter for speculation. One certainly could not speak of slack rhythm in the finale, though articulation was not always ideally clear. Admittedly, that it is a difficulty given Beethoven's tempo marking, but squaring the circle is part of the pianist's task. Moreover, the performance was not entirely free of the impression of a formulaic series of arpeggios. As the movement progressed, its dramatic power and coherence increased, but this sonata, despite an impressive *Adagio sostenuto*, received the least compelling reading considered as a whole.

If a test of the *Hammerklavier* sonata, and there are surely many tests one might design, could be whether it retains the sense of a pianistic and musical Everest comparable to its would-be dialectical negation, the second sonata of Boulez, then Guy's performance more or less rose to the challenge. It certainly did so in a stunning finale, but the first movement sounded – at least to me – oddly disengaged. For what it is worth, he split the celebrated opening leap between hands; perhaps the increased technical strain would have engendered greater drama. It was not until the development section that I really felt involved, and even then it was only the extreme demands of some of the fugal writing that truly drew me in. Tone was sometimes on the glassy side, especially during the exposition. Alas, the recapitulation rather passed me by: there is surely something wrong when so little appears to be at stake. The scherzo, however, was a different matter entirely, making me realise part, at least, of what had been missing: not just intensity 'in itself' but an intensity born of tight-knit, indeed explosively concentrated, motivic argument. As for the slow movement, I am afraid it was impossible for me properly to judge. The opening was a matter not so much of counting the coughs per bar as per beat; frankly, I should have readily forgiven Guy if he had concluded that enough was enough and had walked out. When I could listen through – and, given the concentration of listening Beethoven requires, it is simply impossible to ignore the appalling behaviour all around – I admired crystalline purity of tone and intermittent command of line, though I felt the latter to be disrupted not only externally but also by the lack of a steady pulse. That purity, however, blossomed into genuinely Romantic warmth and intensity, whilst the whole somehow retained its air of forbidding mystery.

The finale opened with seraphic voicing of chords; trills too made their crucial importance felt. Eruptions were properly volcanic, though counterpoint remained admirably clear. If I had a cavil, it was that I felt the disintegrative tendencies of Beethoven's compositional dialectic perhaps unduly overshadowed the attempt, indeed the Hegelian necessity to reintegrate, to reconcile, even if, indeed particularly if, that attempt should ultimately prove to be vain. A splendid requisite sense of extreme difficulty was ever present, yet there were times when an opposing yet inextricably interlinked sense of the whole seemed distant rather than tantalising. That said, the drama of disintegration was mightily impressive. Intriguingly, I had at times a sense that the music had lost its tonal moorings entirely. It never does, of course, yet it is fascinating to hear it sound so close to Boulez's negating successor. As an encore, Guy offered *Für Elise*; some people unaccountably found the choice hilarious; I could only assume that they were trying to display their knowledge by aggressively voicing recognition. At any rate, one heard its combination of the melting and insistent quite differently in the wake of op.106.

Mark Berry

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