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LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
SONATES VOL.3
FRANÇOIS-FRÉDÉRIC GUY
PIANO

Press review



Journey's end: François-Frédéric Guy completes his live Beethoven sonata cycle

Beethoven

'Piano Sonatas, Vol 3'

Piano Sonatas – No 1, Op 2 No 1; No 2, Op 2 No 2; No 3, Op 2 No 3; No 26, 'Les adieux', Op 81a; No 27, Op 90; No 29, 'Hammerklavier', Op 106; No 30, Op 109; No 31, Op 110; No 32, Op 111

François-Frédéric Guy *pf*

Zig-Zag Territoires [®] [©] ZZT318 (3h 30' • DDD)

Recorded live



Guy's live Beethoven sonata cycle concludes

The many virtues and occasional drawbacks characterising the first two instalments of François-Frédéric Guy's Beethoven cycle spill over into this final three-disc volume. Compared to the hurling momentum and biting accents with which others imbue the first two sonatas' opening movements (Pollini and Kovacevich), Guy is relatively sedate, although he always finds subtle shifts in emphasis and nuance during repeats. He does not entirely avoid the arch *tenutos* that most pianists deem necessary in the Rondo of Op 2 No 2, yet he makes up for it with a beautiful *Largo appassionato* highlighted by impressive textural differentiation. In Op 2 No 3's *Allegro con brio*,

Guy's minute tempo modifications and inflections add appropriate suspense, setting the stage for a heartfelt, warm-toned *Adagio*. However, the *Scherzo* and Rondo fall slightly short of Pollini's lightness, animation and wit.

The *Les adieux* Sonata's first-movement *Adagio* introduction is dark, brooding and well sustained but the *Allegro* doesn't quite take wing. Happily the finale comes alive with swaggering bravura. Guy's proportioned flexibility in the lovely and sometimes underrated two-movement Op 90 Sonata underlines the music's lyrical proximity to Schubert. He also brings out the sense of surprise in the last movement's concluding melodic arabesques. His latest thoughts on the *Hammerklavier* Sonata invite comparisons between his two earlier recordings of this formidable work. While his technical and musical command of all challenges cannot be denied, certain expressive features have morphed into mannerism. Take, for example, the exaggerated slowing down just before the alternating upward broken fifths and sixths that lead into the first movement's recapitulation. The gesture is less pronounced on his second recording (*Naïve*) and non-existent on his first (*Harmonia Mundi*). While the *Scherzo* is a tad earthbound next to its predecessors, Guy's smoother dispatch of the F major scales in both hands adds a touch of irony to this defiant gesture. Elsewhere, the final fugue strikes a balance between Guy 1's insouciant sweep and Guy 2's sharper detailing, while the *Adagio sostenuto* has gained fluidity and intensity.

The pianist's live Op 109 surpasses his *Harmonia Mundi* version with a more shapely and pointed first movement, a *Prestissimo* that no longer rushes in places, and far more specificity, colour and unity governing the third-movement variations. Op 110 proves similarly inspired and features uncommon clarity in the first movement's left-hand figurations, marvellous contouring of the *Allegro molto*'s cross-rhythmic phrases and a carefully built-up and exultant fugue. Guy makes the most of the left-hand descending suspensions in the first-movement introduction to Op 111 and also unfolds the tempo relationships between the *Arietta*'s variations on faith. However, by doing so, he tends to push the quickest dotted rhythms to the point where the syncopations flatten out. The recording captures both the venue and Guy's instrument accurately, while applause is saved for the end of each disc. **Jed Distler**



BEETHOVEN

Piano Sonatas, Vol. 3: Nos 1-2, Op. 2; No. 3 in C, Op. 3; No. 26 in E flat, Op. 81a (*Les adieux*); No. 27 in E minor, Op. 90; No. 29 in B flat, Op. 106 (*Hammerklavier*); Nos 30-32, Opp. 109-111

François-Frédéric Guy (piano)
Zig Zag ZZT 318 209.42 mins (3 discs)

BBC Music Direct £32.99

The *Hammerklavier*, Beethoven's Sonata No. 29, Op. 106, has been something of a lifetime preoccupation for François-Frédéric Guy. He has previously recorded this most imposing of all Beethoven's sonatas twice, and on the last occasion, some eight years ago, he described it as 'the guiding thread of my artistic endeavours and the centre of gravity around which my repertoire is structured'. This new 'live' version is an altogether enthralling experience. The *Hammerklavier* is Beethoven's only sonata to carry authentic metronome markings, and if Guy's account of the opening doesn't quite match the almost impossibly fast indicated speed, it conveys all the energy and momentum the music requires. The great slow movement is slightly more flowing than it was in Guy's previous recording, but it captures the music's profound melancholy no less movingly; while the concluding fugue is an appropriately hair-raising *tour de force*.

Scarcely less impressive are Beethoven's last Sonatas, Opp. 109-111, with Guy's account of the *Arioso dolente* from the middle work of the triptych particularly affecting, and the slow variations that conclude Op. 111 played in an atmosphere of deep serenity. Only one or two moments of the variation finale from the E major Sonata Op. 109 find Guy a little hasty, in particular the fugal fifth variation.

Curiously, Guy is less at home in Beethoven's more straightforward first group of Sonatas, Op. 2. This is angry young man's music, and Guy sometimes underplays the dynamic contrasts, with their characteristic stabbing accents. In the spasmodic opening of the A major Sonata, Op. 2 No. 2, he is insufficiently quiet; while, conversely, the central portion of the movement sounds too refined, with the dynamic level far below the unremitting *fortissimo* Beethoven asks for. But the set as a whole is an impressive achievement, more than



ENTHRALLING:
François-Frédéric Guy
plays Beethoven live