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Power, Richness and Logic: François-Frédéric Guy at Queen Elizabeth Hall

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By Frances Wilson, 22 March 2012

With his wild hair and frowning brow, French pianist François-Frédéric Guy bears more than a passing likeness to Ludwig van Beethoven, so it seemed entirely appropriate to be listening to a recital in which the Frenchman played three of the Old Radical's most well-loved and well-known piano sonatas, nicknamed the 'Pastoral', the 'Moonlight' and the 'Hammerklavier'. This was part of both the Southbank Centre's ongoing and highly varied International Piano Series, and Guy's personal voyage through the entire cycle of Beethoven's piano sonatas.

Reviewed at Queen Elizabeth
London on 20 March 2012

PROGRAMME

Beethoven, *Piano Sonata n° 11*
major, Op.101

Beethoven, *Piano Sonata n° 14*
sharp minor "Moonlight", Op.

Beethoven, *Piano Sonata n° 23*
major "Hammerklavier", Op.



François-Frédéric Guy,

© Guy Vivien

It is common knowledge that Beethoven did not nickname his sonatas himself. The soubriquet was a pet device of publishers, keen to increase the popularity and saleability of a work. 'Pastoral', given to the work by Beethoven's Hamburg publisher, is the most apt of the three, and refers to the rustic, rocking figure of the final movement.

The first movement had a romantic cast, gentle, lyrical, expressive, but lacking some of Beethoven's trademark wit and mood swings. At times there was a pleasing bucolic roughness, especially in the 'storm' in the development section. Guy's hands on the keyboard fascinated me from the outset: lifting his fingers high in the more rapid passages and sweeping across the keys in gestures redolent of the waving fronds of a sea anemone (my piano teacher would never allow me to play like that!). Some liberties with tempo in the Andante were not always successful, but the Trio was bright and crisp, with filigree semiquaver passages, a well-judged contrast to the outer sections. The Scherzo was playful and humorous with delicate articulation, the finale a romp through pleasant countryside.

This was very much the 'settling in' piece, for audience and performer, before the big guns of the 'Moonlight' and the 'Hammerklavier'.

Too often the subject of clichéd, lugubriously romantic renderings, Guy brought something very special to the twilight opening movement of the Op. 27 no. 2. It is hard to play 'famous' pieces well: as a performer you want to do your best by the music while also making the work your own. Guy achieved this by allowing the music to simply emerge from the piano, shimmering and shifting on a single breath, expertly pedalled with a sensitively enunciated melodic line. The serial coughers, who were, sadly, the bane of the evening, were given a fierce warning

PERFORMERS

François-Frédéric Guy, *Piar*

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Guy, François-Frédéric

Piano Sonata no. 14 in C sh "Moonlight", Op.27 no.2

glance from Guy at one point.

The middle movement lacked energy, and the transition from first to second movement (marked 'attacca' in the score, meaning 'without any break') was weak, so that the drama of the shift of mood was lost. The finale was energetic and precise: some of the semiquaver climaxes had an almost Lisztian sweep. In less capable hands, the tempo could have proved problematic, but Guy maintained a dramatic momentum throughout.

The 'Hammerklavier' (Op. 106) marks a significant point in Beethoven's compositional life, and is a musical manifesto, which reaffirms Beethoven's presence in the world, after the turbulent, difficult years of the Heiligenstadt Testament (a letter from October 1802 in which Beethoven expressed his despair over his increasing deafness). The sonata is a pianistic tour de force, from its infamous and perilously daring grand opening leap of an octave and a half (which, of course, should be played with one hand: Guy opted, for accuracy perhaps, to split it between the hands), to its finger-twisting final fugue. As Beethoven himself stated, 'it will give pianists something to do'. The cumulative effect of this work is overwhelming: an expression of huge power, richness and logic.

Guy has lived with this work for a long time, and has performed it more than 60 times – and it shows. The mighty opening was executed with flow and ease, the rest of the movement explosive and colourful, full of contrasts of light and shade, with treble fanfares (occasionally too strident) offset by misty *pianissimo* passages.

The Scherzo was enjoyably quirky, while the second motif seemed to come from nowhere, poised and intense, disappearing as quickly as it had appeared. For me, the Adagio sostenuto third movement was the high point of the evening. Opening with a prayer-like figure, Guy brought to it an otherworldly, Chopinesque melodic intensity, with a tender, almost painful, beauty, mystery and warmth.

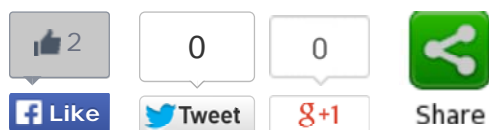
The finale was a 'perpetuum mobile' of almost unremitting restlessness and energy, yet always tethered by that most stable of musical devices, the fugue.

Guy played *Für Elise* for an encore, another much-loved piece, popular with piano students everywhere. Yet, coming after the towering, rhetorical 'Hammerklavier', it was soothing and consoling, the famous theme played with a caressing tenderness.

Piano Sonata no. 28 in A m:

Piano Sonata no. 29 in B flat
"Hammerklavier", Op.106

Beethoven, Ludwig van



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Bachtrack — Thank you for drawing this to attention. We've removed the reference to a HK première.

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