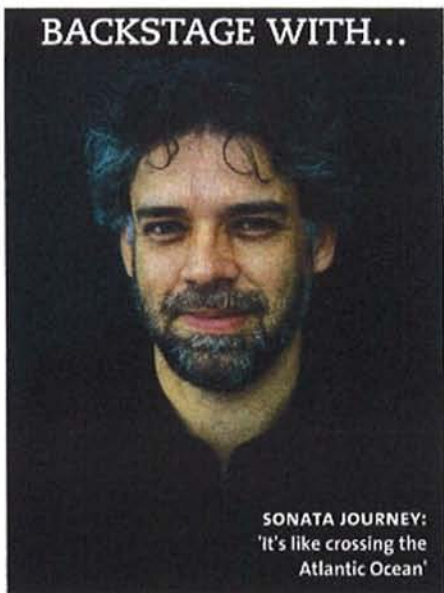


BACKSTAGE WITH...



SONATA JOURNEY:
'It's like crossing the
Atlantic Ocean'

François-Frédéric Guy

Over ten days you're playing all 32 Beethoven Sonatas. That must be quite a challenge?

I prefer the word challenge to marathon. The basic idea is to share with people a Beethoven festival – it's a wonderful experience both for the audience and the interpreter. You can read the Sonatas as an autobiography of his life, from Op. 2 to Op. 11. No one achieved such a continuity in the evolution of style as Beethoven.

Is that why you decided to play them in near chronological order?

Yes, that's exactly the idea. I made a few small exchanges to make the audience more comfortable. Op. 7, for example, is the longest Sonata after the 'Hammerklavier'. You never know where to put it. It's just after the first three Sonatas, and before the Op. 10 group, so it's kind of alone. I put it with the *Pathétique* and the two Op. 14 Sonatas to make a nice concert.

It's not the first time you've done a whole Beethoven cycle. Does it get any easier?

The first time was in Monte Carlo and I have to confess it was really frightening. It's like crossing the Atlantic Ocean. Then the next time you're more experienced but you're also aware of the problems you could have – like Cape Horn. This my fifth time now. Some things are easier, some are more difficult.

How do you go about preparing?

I normally go to a friend's house with a nice piano for 10-15 days to go through the whole thing alone. It's 620 pages, 101 movements. Usually I do it one month before and then go back home. I try not to take a lot of concerts then as I have to concentrate. So when I arrive on D-Day it's already started.

See Choice No. 5

LIVE CHOICE

20 UNMISSABLE EVENTS FOR MARCH 2011

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The essence of Beethoven with no room for dramatics

A major artistic event is taking place in Norwich until the end of this week, Norfolk & Norwich Chamber Music is mounting a series of no fewer than 10 recitals with all 32 of Beethoven's piano sonatas.

This is an opportunity to enjoy one of the greatest of musical experiences. Rising from the

REVIEW

Beethoven's Piano Sonatas

John Innes Centre, Norwich

formal excellence of Viennese classicism, the sonatas increasingly express Beethoven's romantic temperament.

The pianist performing the

evolving sequence of works is Francois-Frederic Guy. A Frenchman in his forties and an international star, he is slightly built, unassuming in manner and has no taste for dramatic body language.

He brings out the essence of the music. He can gently caress a phrase or else make it flow

smoothly over the keyboard from top to bottom. He puts shining steel into a chord, or dark bronze. When required, attack is instant, but quietest echoes will follow. This is fine playing.

There are still seven chances to hear it at the John Innes or the Assembly House.

Christopher Smith

REVIEW

Cheers pay tribute to mental and physical stamina

On Sunday afternoon Francois-Frederic Guy played the final notes of the last of Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas. The audience cheered in tribute to his mental and physical stamina and to his conscientious artistry in reflecting both the architecture and the detail of the great composer's creation.

In 10 recitals he showed how these piano sonatas developed

Beethoven Piano Sonatas

John Innes Centre, Colney, and Assembly House, Norwich

over a quarter of a century to express the temperament of a restless genius in an era of political turmoil.

Far from being fixed, the form altered over the years. Often wide ranges of moods were explored within individual movements, and

variations on themes were given prominence.

The pianist caught every emotion, from the heroism of a noble death march to high spirits on meeting up again with an old friend. While natural beauty was echoed, the power of abstract music grew ever more impressive.

He created excitement by racing on, then lingering to savour the

essence of tender feelings. Drama was underlined by marked changes in volume, even if the very loudest passages were not always the most beautiful, and countless nuances in phrasing were shaped and shaded.

Congratulations to Norfolk & Norwich Chamber Music on organising this triumph.

Christopher Smith

Places & Faces

MUSIC ALL THE WAY

The places and faces that make our towns great

The Norfolk and Norwich Music Club reaches a milestone this season celebrating its diamond jubilee, Tony Cooper looks back...

Founded in 1951, the Norfolk and Norwich Music Club has brought to the city and county a host of big names from the classical music world but the last decade, in particular, has seen a golden period for the club which the distinction of having as its first president, Benjamin Britten.

The London Harpsichord Ensemble gave the first concert at Norwich Assembly House on May 26. The following year (1952) Miriam Cannell who was later awarded the MBE for her services to music - took over the role of secretary and programme organiser from Margaret Evans, who had been a fellow student with her at the Royal College of Music in the 1930s. She continued in that role for 44 years.

Miriam (now in her nineties) gracefully retired in 1996 but is still a regular at concerts. After her departure, Roger Rowe - also a proud recipient of an MBE - stepped in to programme the concert series.

All concerts were held at the wonderful Georgian-designed Assembly House next to Norwich's Theatre Royal until 1997 when the club moved to larger and more spacious accommodation at the John Innes Centre at Colney on the outskirts of Norwich, a lecture theatre which proved a perfect concert hall.

Over the past glorious 60 years the club has presented well over 500 concerts and 2000 top international artists including the likes of Benjamin Britten, Peter Pears and the Amadeus Quartet.

In an introductory note to the club's 30th season, Miriam Cannell wrote: 'The one sure foundation of the club from the very start was an insistence on the very highest standards of performance on both a national and international level.'

Roger Rowe is most certainly in perfect harmony with his predecessor's philosophy and says: 'Whilst I have the greatest admiration and respect for the extensive amateur music-making to be found in Norwich and the county, I feel that it is the responsibility of the Music Club to promote the very finest of international professional musicians. I believe that by doing so we greatly enhance the musical life of this city and county of ours while putting it firmly on the cultural world map.'

The two highly-praised visits by the world-famous Moscow-based Borodin String Quartet most certainly bear this out. Their cycles of Beethoven (2004) and Shostakovich (2006) were truly great musical landmarks by anyone's standards.

The big highlight of the diamond jubilee season must surely be obtaining the services of the brilliant young French pianist, François-Frédéric Guy, to undertake the complete cycle of Beethoven sonatas over a ten-day period starting on Friday March 25. 'I've been after him for some time,' said a jubilant Roger. 'He's absolutely amazing and was spotted several years ago by the BBC as one of their Young Generation Artists. Since then he has made a big name for himself throughout the world's concert halls. Although he has performed the cycle to great acclaim in France, Germany and America, this will be his first cycle in the UK.'

Roger Rowe hopes the visit won't cause any seating problems. 'So many musicians have particular requirements and I'm quite used to it,' said, 'but recently I had an encounter with a well-known international pianist who demanded a 15-inch-high piano stool and, believe me, that's very low!

'Not long before the start of the concert he walked off from rehearsal saying that if the right stool couldn't be found then he would return to London. Fortunately, Cooke's in Norwich's St Benedict's Street was still open and I purchased the necessary stool. But even that was not enough.

'I then had to find a wood saw to cut through the legs to the right height. But even after that episode, the pianist demanded an adjustment be made minutes before he was about to go on. To the amazement and bewilderment of a packed house he insisted on carpet tiles being placed under the legs of the stool! Then the show went on! ■

Happy diamond jubilee! www.norwichchambermusic.co.uk
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