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LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
SONATES VOL.1
FRANÇOIS-FRÉDÉRIC GUY
PIANO

Press review

Beethoven

'Piano Sonatas, Vol 1'

Piano Sonatas - No 4, Op 7; No 5, Op 10 No 1; No 6, Op 10 No 2; No 7, Op 10 No 3; No 8, 'Pathétique', Op 13; No 9, Op 14 No 1; No 10, Op 14 No 2; No 11, Op 22; No 12, Op 26; No 13, 'Quasi una fantasia', Op 27 No 1; No 14, 'Moonlight', Op 27 No 2

François-Frédéric Guy *pf*

Zig-Zag Territoires © ③ ZTT ZTT111101 (3h 36' • DDD)

Recorded live



Vol 1 of Guy's complete Beethoven sonata project

Strange it is that Beethoven's most lauded movement, the first of Op 27 No 2, marked *Adagio sostenuto* at two beats to a bar, is subject to a variety of tempi – from crotchet=c49 (Solomon) to c88 (Artur Schnabel, both on EMI). Perhaps a slow speed conjures the atmosphere of 'Moonlight', which wasn't the composer's sobriquet. He called the work *Sonata quasi una fantasia* and a faster gait not only gets closer to concept, it also gives the melody coherence. François-Frédéric Guy doesn't dawdle but hews closer to Solomon than Schnabel, and rather misses the point. Yet in the *Presto agitato* finale of this sonata, the first on the set, Guy offers a pointer to his breadth of thought and feeling in the 11 works on offer.

Technically, he is in total control. If the close recording captures some breathing, it also captures a pianist of fine mind-body coordination. Guy's whole being seems to expand into the music and he embodies an emotional involvement through rhythmic flexibility, mostly sonorous tone and a left hand the equal of his right in weight, articulation and dynamic nuance – qualities that help create an aura of authority in, for example, the first movement of Op 22. A gripping verve surges through this *Allegro con brio*, the rhetorically stated *fortissimo* sequences in G minor, C minor and F minor early in the development adding suspense to the whole section. Nor does he miss the wry humour inherent in the *Scherzo* of Op 14 No 2; or the melancholy of the *Largo e mesto* of Op 10 No 3. If the darkly rumbling coda begins closer to *piano* rather than *pianissimo* as directed, Guy's distinct bass-line, a graduated swell of sound with fluent mobility

across the bars, creates its own tension; and true softness may be heard elsewhere, like the *Adagio cantabile* of Op 13 and the introduction to Op 27 No 1.

It's in the slow movements that interpretative gauntlets are met with an individual musical voice; and no more magnificently than in the *Largo con gran espressione* of Op 7. Guy takes Beethoven's marking at face value and, at a hypnotically tenacious pulse of crotchet=c35, he builds this movement, immense in spiritual scope, into a profoundly stirring edifice. 'Not a note cold', to quote Pablo Casals. And whatever the odd reservation, not a note perfunctory anywhere either. **Nalen Anthoni**

Selected comparisons:

Kempff, 1951-56 (4/96) (DG) 447 966-2GD08

Lewis (A/05, 12/06, 11/07, 6/08) (HARM) HMX290 1902/11



EXHILARATING:
Rafał Blechacz picks
up the pace in Debussy



BEETHOVEN

Piano Sonatas from Opp 7, 10, 13, 14, 22, 26, 27

François-Frédéric Guy (piano)
Zig Zag ZZZ 111101 211:12 mins (3 discs)
BBC Music Direct £24.99

François-Frédéric Guy evidently believes in taking Beethoven by storm, something to which the composer could hardly object. Guy's first instalment of a complete Sonata cycle – he recorded an impulsive *Hammerklavier* a few years ago – consists of three concerts given in the Arsenal at Metz in 2009 and 2010. (The audience is only heard at the end of each disc.) Guy concentrates on works from Beethoven's so-called first period, but he plays them in a highly Romantic style, with an immense dynamic range, prolonged pauses, and a more or less continuous *rubato*. This approach is more successful in some of the 11 sonatas than others, but the effect is mainly enlivening, refreshing, and shocking in the right way. Guy plays on a sumptuous instrument (of which no details are given in the booklet) and it has an impressively rich bass; those long passages where Beethoven revels in both hands in the lower register produce sonorities of which Liszt would have been proud. Some of Beethoven's most hackneyed movements, such as the

first movement of the *Moonlight* and of the *Pathétique*, gave me pleasure for the first time in years. Guy is happy to see them as Romantic music rather than as emerging from the 18th century, which has been a recent general tendency. What struck me even more, though, was the inventiveness and manic energy, either manifest or latent, in all these works. Those who listened attentively when they were first performed would surely not have been surprised by anything that Beethoven went on to write. *Michael Tanner*

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★



BEETHOVEN

Piano Sonatas Opp 7, 14 Nos 1 & 2, 22, 27 Nos 1 & 2, 81a, 106

HJ Lim (piano)
EMI 7300092 150:50 mins (2 discs)
BBC Music Direct £13.99

Bypassing competitions and making her mark with a YouTube hit, this young Korean pianist has appeared on the scene like a whirlwind. She plays like a whirlwind, too. I have never heard the first movement of the *Hammerklavier* played so fast: Lim believes in honouring Beethoven's metronome direction, impossible though it may seem. And she has grouped the works on her first two CDs under the

rubric 'Heroic ideals' and 'Eternal feminine – youth', which casts them in an interesting new light. Her argument in the booklet notes that Sonata No. 11, Op. 22 is a dry run for the *Hammerklavier* makes sense. Furthermore, presenting the early Sonatas as a facet of Beethoven's passionate Romanticism is convincing, particularly with regard to the dialogues of Sonata No. 10, and the fantasia-like first movement of Sonata No. 13.

It's perhaps appropriate that the most successful recordings here should be of the fast movements: the finale of No. 10 goes like the wind, and that of Sonata No. 4, Op. 7 keeps a lovely balance between hell-for-leather speed and delicately sprung *rubato*, while its opening movement has a wonderfully fast-flowing urgency. Some of the quirkiest movements are joyfully characterised, and there are times when Lim's tone colour attains magnificence. But at other times youthful impetuosity blinds her to the music's poetry (as in the *Andante* of *Les adieux*), and even more to its profundity: the easy conversationality with which she despatches the *Hammerklavier*'s great *Adagio* shows how far she has yet to go. Meanwhile, her tendency to over-pedal isn't helped by the 'wet' acoustic. *Michael Church*

PERFORMANCE ★★★
RECORDING ★★★



DEBUSSY

Estampes; Pour le piano; L'isle joyeuse

SZYMANOWSKI

Prelude and Fugue in C sharp minor; Piano Sonata in C minor, Op. 8

Rafał Blechacz (piano)
DG 477 9548 62:19 mins
BBC Music Direct £12.99

This is breathtaking. Rafał Blechacz approaches Debussy in much the same way as he plays Chopin's Preludes. There is never any doubt that there is a personality shaping the music and he has no fear about following his interpretative instinct on the day the microphones happen to be capturing it for posterity. It's no surprise that Arturo Benedetti Michelangeli is among Blechacz's heroes.

Whether this appeals or appals can be judged from the opening moments

of the 'Prelude' from *Pour le piano*. Fasten seatbelts, for Blechacz tears into the first few bars, then screeches to a halt to place the first bass notes, before moving through the gears, still periodically tapping the brakes when another important chord comes into view. And yet, there is nothing erratic about this – Blechacz is firmly in control throughout this dazzling and absorbing pianistic discourse. 'Pagodes', the opening piece of *Estampes*, has atmospherically veiled colours, while Blechacz has no difficulty controlling the weather in an exhilarating 'Jardins sous la pluie'. All this is captured in sound that is excellent for CD.

The pairing with Szymanowski is effective, though it might be more telling if these pieces were interspersed with the Debussy. Blechacz is a compelling advocate, by turns introverted and impassioned, building the unresolved climaxes to searing effect. This is exceptional playing. Blechacz paints with the keyboard without sacrificing any clarity. If only he had allowed a little more air, some space to admire the music whizzing past.

Christopher Dingle

PERFORMANCE ★★★★★
RECORDING ★★★★★



GRANADOS

Goyescas; El pelele; Allegro de concierto

Garrick Ohlsson (piano)
Hyperion CDA 67846 64:11 mins
BBC Music Direct £12.99

Granados's *Goyescas* shares some of its greatest recordings – including those by Alicia de Larrocha and Artur Pizarro – with that other peak in Spanish music, Isaac Albeniz's *Iberia*. Each work makes different demands: Granados's response to the art and milieu of Goya is more introverted, and less preposterously optimistic about the limits of piano technique. But the set still needs a musician who can enliven a sense of its national and expressive character with top-level virtuosity.

Ohlsson is very much the performer for the heart of the work – a woman's forlorn dialogue with a nightingale – and its ensuing tragedy. His feeling for the constant fluctuations of pace and mood infuses the 'Maiden and the Nightingale', right through to its wondrously delicate birdsong