



Press review



François-Frédéric Guy: BEETHOVEN Piano Sonatas on ZIG ZAG

Classical Reviews - Composers & Works

Wednesday, 31 October 2012

BEETHOVEN Piano Sonatas: Nos. 15–25, 28 • François-Frédéric Guy (pn) • ZIG-ZAG TERRITOIRES 304 (3 CDs: 208:37)

François-Frédéric Guy is not letting any moss grow under his Steinway Model D. It was only in *Fanfare* 35:5 that I reviewed what I correctly assumed to be the first volume in a new cycle of Beethoven piano sonatas, and here, less than six months later, is a second three-disc set. Since these live recordings emanate from the same Arsenal de Metz venue as the previous volume, I'm guessing that the entire cycle was captured in concert performances in the winter of 2010 and the spring of 2011 and the rest simply awaits release by Zig-Zag Territoires. At a rate of three CDs per volume and 11 or 12 sonatas each—we're now up to a count of 23—one more volume should do it, since there are only nine more sonatas to go.

Guy really impressed me in 35:5 with his spontaneity and sense of whimsy, and his seeming ability to make each sonata sound like a living, breathing organism that was in a state of becoming whole as it unfolded. I even went so far as to say that when Guy's cycle is complete, it will be the one to have.

This second installment has, if anything only reinforced those feelings. This volume contains three of Beethoven's most popular sonatas, the "Tempest," "Waldstein," and "Appassionata," to all three of which Guy brings his own special insights. For me, one of Beethoven's loftier moments comes in the first few measures of the "Waldstein's" last movement, as that exalted theme, vacillating between major and minor, steals in quietly and tentatively. Guy's playing of it takes on an ethereal quality that words simply cannot communicate.

If I had to describe Guy's overall approach, I'd say he's a lyricist in the best sense of the word. By this, I mean that he goes for the long line, taking phrases in breaths that correspond to a singer's cantilena. To the extent possible, Guy overcomes the piano's inherent inability to produce a true legato the way the human voice or a string or wind instrument can—connecting one note to the next without a space in between, or without the blurring effect of the sustaining pedal, and with no change in amplitude.

Some may find Guy's way with the "Tempest" and "Appassionata" sonatas a bit on the tame side compared to the driven, suicide-mission playing of Fazil Say, but an inner glow radiates from Guy's readings that I find ultimately more compelling and expositive of an ecstatic quality in these works that's often overshadowed by their *Sturm und Drang* elements.

As with the last volume, by the way, applause is included, not after every sonata, thankfully, but at the end of each disc, which strikes me as very strange, unless Guy played the sonatas included on each CD without any pauses in between, as if they were one work. I wish the recording engineers had eliminated the applause altogether. That's my only complaint, and it goes to the recording, not to Guy's performances.

I conclude by repeating what I said in my prior review. If you're shopping for a new cycle of Beethoven's piano sonatas, Guy's is it, and, as far as I'm concerned, it will be for some time to come. **Jerry Dubins**



Piano Sonatas 2
Audio CD; Box set
Zig Zag Records
Buy now from Amazon

Instrumental



Bryce Morrison reviews Prokofiev sonatas from Boris Giltburg:

'When you hear Giltburg in the final pages, you can only discard pen and paper and listen in awe and disbelief' ► REVIEW ON PAGE 89



Jeremy Nicholas reviews French repertoire from Stephen Hough:

'Hough's heart-catching melancholy put me in mind of Cherkassy. I can offer no higher praise' ► REVIEW ON PAGE 93

JS Bach

'Open Goldberg Variations'

Goldberg Variations, BWV988

Kimiko Ishizaka *pf*

Available for free download from
opengoldbergvariations.org



Ishizaka's Goldberg Variations offered as a free download

In 2011 Robert Douglass launched a kick-starter campaign to fund a studio recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* featuring his pianist wife, Kimiko Ishizaka, along with a new engraving of the score, both available as a free download under the Creative Commons 'no rights reserved' public domain law.

Ishizaka's interpretation is characterised by straightforward musicianship, immaculate technical aplomb and a warm, beautifully modulated sonority. In contrast to the rigorous tempo relationships Glenn Gould applied to his iconic 1981 version, Ishizaka is more inclined to treat the variations as distinct entities, and she usually inserts a brief pause between each. Although she is conservative with regard to ornaments and embellishments, she achieves sufficient expressive variety through varied articulations and subtle scaling of dynamics to keep the music afloat without drawing attention to herself. Notice, for instance, how her understated *legato* phrasing at the outset of Var 24 (the canon at the octave) gradually opens up, or the sense of air between the notes distinguishing Var 11's imitative writing. Counterpoint passes back and forth between the hands in a conversational and judiciously balanced manner, while a strong lyrical impulse informs the cross-handed variations' rapid, bravura passages (Vars 5 and 19, for example). Ishizaka's restrained and concentrated way with slow minor-key variations (Vars 15, 21 and 25) lets the music's agonising harmonic tension speak softly for itself. A few quibbles: Var 28's trills grow increasingly loud and heavy (although Ishizaka's basic tempo remains constant), while Var 29's toccata-like patterns are too held back and blandly executed when they ought to let rip with unfettered joy and bravura, à la Angela Hewitt or Rosalyn Tureck. All told, this

recording (with all repeats intact save for the *Aria da capo*) merits hard-disk space on your computer or digital music player. It sounds equally fine in MP3 format or 24bit/44kbps WAV files and better still when you expand the surround-sound 24bit/96kbps FLAC files for multichannel playback. However you choose to download Ishizaka's *Goldberg Variations*, the price is right. **Jed Distler**

Beethoven

'Piano Sonatas, Vol 2'

Piano Sonatas – No 15, 'Pastoral', Op 28; No 16, Op 30 No 1; No 17, 'Tempest', Op 30 No 2; No 18, Op 31 No 3; No 19, Op 49 No 1; No 20, Op 49 No 2; No 21,

'Waldstein', Op 53; No 22, Op 54; No 23, 'Appassionata', Op 57; No 24, Op 78; No 25, Op 79; No 28, Op 101

François-Frédéric Guy *pf*

Zig-Zag Territoires ® © ZT304 (3h 33' • DDD)



Second box-set in Guy's Beethoven sonata traversal

Here is an antidote to the identikit Beethoven, to sonatas (and even cycles) recorded merely because an artist will sell. There's nothing mass-market about François-Frédéric Guy, a pianist who has made Beethoven something of a speciality from the outset of his career and who has never been one to toe the line, as anyone who has heard him live will attest.

Unlike Bavouzet's recently commenced cycle – superb, though temperamentally quite different from this one – Guy has made a point of mixing things up, of emphasising contrast rather than chronological progression. It's Beethoven the master dramatist that comes across most clearly, to particularly compelling effect in the mighty coda of the *Appassionata*, in the *Adagio* of the *Tempest*, which he imbues with unblinking intensity, and in the opening movement of the *Waldstein*.

The acoustic takes a bit of getting used to: it can be somewhat unanalytical and there were times (in the first movement of Op 31 No 1, for instance) when I wasn't certain whether Guy was being quite free with the pedal or it was an acoustic trick of the ear. I'm still not sure. The *Andante* of Op 79 is another high point, Guy unafraid to be quite free in his approach but sounding utterly convincing. I was less sure

about the sonata's opening movement: there's tensile strength in spades but he lacks the contrasting delicacy that Goode, Kovacevich and Lewis reveal.

Frequently, in his search for the rhetoric of the music, Guy allows himself a certain amount of rhythmic freedom. In the opening movement of Op 101 he perhaps overdoes it: Gilels and Solomon are closer to the letter of the score and simultaneously sound more natural and authoritative. The same is true of the *Langsam* third movement: Solomon is relatively swift, Gilels produces a rapturously honeyed sound. Guy, on the other hand, is at his most convincing in the finale.

There are moments in the earlier sonatas, too, where Guy's search for the extremes in Beethoven can lead to overly slow tempi. The *Adagio grazioso* of Op 31 No 1 is a case in point: his tempo is so spacious that he struggles to make the line sing, something Annie Fischer does with finesse and sureness, shaving nearly three minutes off Guy's timing. It's not the only approach, though, Brendel instead pointing up the movement's Haydnesque qualities. In the opening *Andante* of Op 49 No 1 Guy is faster than in his earlier recording and all the better for it.

A mixed bag, then, but thoroughly thought-provoking. Guy's approach is refreshing in its directness and honesty and – at his best – he is a highly persuasive Beethovenian. **Harriet Smith**

Pf Sonis – selected comparisons:

Goode (3/94) (NONE) 7559 79328-2

Kovacevich (2/04) (EMI) 562700-2

Lewis (9/05, 12/06, 11/07, 6/08*) (HARM) HMX290 1902/11

Brendel (1990s cycle) (PHIL) 446 909-2PH10

Opp 31 No 1 & 78 – selected comparison:

A Fischer (HUNG) HCD31632

Op 49 No 1 – selected comparison:

Guy (11/06) (NAIV) V5023

Op 101 – selected comparisons:

Solomon (7/93) (EMI) 764708-2

Gilels (DG) 463 639-2GOR

Beethoven

'Piano Sonatas, Vol 3 – The Final Trilogy'

Piano Sonatas – No 24, Op 78; No 30, Op 109; No 31, Op 110; No 32, Op 111

Martin Roscoe *pf*

Deux-Elles ® DXL1163 (74' • DDD)



Contrast rather than chronology: François-Frédéric Guy's second box of Beethoven



Late sonatas and final volume in Roscoe's Beethoven cycle

How are Beethoven's markings in the *Arietta* of Op 111 meant to be interpreted? On the one hand he specifies a constant tempo; on the other he appears to speed up for Vars 2 and 3. Most pianists play the notes faster but stick to the basic pulse. Others maintain a steady pace by adjusting differently to the change of time signature and matching tempo to pulse. Christoph Eschenbach and John Lill pull this off to tremendous effect. Martin Roscoe prefers the first option, unsettling the benedictory calm he creates so strikingly in the theme and Var 1.

It's a discrepancy that stands out because he is so often percipient – in his awareness of harmonic foundations trenchantly expressed through an unambiguous left hand, instantly noticeable in the opening of Op 78; or stealing into Op 109, the rhythm winsomely flexible, the main tempo perhaps not quite *Vivace ma non troppo* yet finely integrated with the two interludes, *Adagio espressivo*; or in the reposeful return of the theme to round out the finale.

Roscoe senses the schematic but form always yields to musicianship, supremely so in Op 110, as he reaches out to a spirituality behind the creative force. The nodal point is probably the

third-movement *Adagio ma non troppo*, ethereally withdrawn. Roscoe's grasp of plaintive mourning through shrouded tone in *una corda* and the ultimate release of new life founded in fugal inversion is indescribable. Experience the message in this marvellously wrought interpretation. **Nalen Anthoni**

Opp 109-111 – selected comparisons:

Lill (6/81*, 1/82*) (ASV) CDQS6064

Eschenbach (EMI) 585499-2

Brahms

Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op 24.

Sixteen Waltzes, Op 39. Six Pieces, Op 118

Leon McCawley *pf*

Somm Céleste © SOMMCD0116 (68' • DDD)



Handel Variations from the former Leeds prizewinner

In Brahms's *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel*, should a pianist zero in on the overall grand design and try to build cumulative momentum? Or, instead, focus on the intricate contrapuntal textures and subtle rhythmic felicities? Or perhaps both? Leon McCawley is less of a big-picture person than a detail maven. Cases in point: his affectionate accentuations and inner voices in Var 2, the strict adherence to Brahms's dynamics and articulations in

Vars 7 and 10 (easier said than done), Var 16's carefully voiced canons and the beautiful, bell-like sonorities he obtains in Var 22. A few miscalculations lead him to fall short of the reference standards set by Perahia, Ohlsson and Arrau's strikingly different interpretations. He softens the rhythmic build in Vars 23 and 24 by slightly slowing down for the latter, while Var 3's off-beat right-hand accents throw Brahms's intended phrasing off-kilter and Var 13 moves too fast to allow the triplets and quintuplet figures to speak comfortably.

McCawley lets his hair down in the Waltzes, allowing himself less leeway than the relatively rhapsodic Cédric Tiberghien and Gerhard Oppitz, yet retaining plenty of dynamism and passion. However, the Op 118 Piano Pieces showcase McCawley's most consistent and inspired playing. Listen, for example, to the A major Intermezzo's conversationally phrased outer sections, the F minor Intermezzo's fascinating interplay between the hands (many pianists maintain the textures at a uniform level) and how the E flat minor Intermezzo's registral extremes seem to emanate from two very different instruments. Clearly McCawley's artistry is evolving. **Jed Distler**

Handel Vars – selected comparisons:

Ohlsson (11/10) (HYPE) CDA67777

Perahia (2/11) (SONY) 88697 72725-2