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MUSIC REVIEW

A master class in Beethoven: Sonata cycle an accomplishment

By Anne Midgette
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NIMBLE FINGERS: Pianist François-Fréderic Guy delivered a strong finale in his ninth show. (Guy Vivien)

Enlarge Photo

When a pianist plays nine concerts in 10 days, he can only hope to end with a bang. Fortunately, Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas allow a performer to do just that. Not that Op. 111 in C Minor is a very bang-y piece -- rather the opposite, in fact -- but it packs a powerful emotional wallop. And François-Fréderic Guy rose to the challenge with the last of his nine Beethoven recitals, a cycle he began at La Maison Française on Nov. 13 and concluded with the final three sonatas, Nos. 109, 110 and 111, on Sunday afternoon.

Thirty people purchased tickets to the entire nine-concert cycle. Before Sunday's concert, Roland Celette, the French cultural attache, oversaw the distribution of specially made buttons graced with Beethoven's face to everyone who had attended at least three of the concerts. Only a handful of people in the large audience (Maison Française's auditorium was nearly full) had been to the whole thing, but there was a sense of camaraderie, of conversation, of shared experience that isn't always present at a one-off concert.

There was certainly the sense that a mountain had been ascended; Guy, who did the cycle twice in Europe last year, looked drained. This contributed, perhaps, to the notable sense of reverence permeating the auditorium -- and Guy's performance. This was worshipful Beethoven, Great-Man Beethoven, with the quirks and foibles smoothed away or elevated (in the so-called boogie-woogie variation of the final movement of Op. 111) into a kind of divine frenzy. Attacks were gentle, little nicks of detail varnished over into larger, greater gestures. And rather than making in-your-face assertions, Guy maintained a general tone of restraint. The final movement of Op. 110 in A-flat, was played with supreme control and a feeling of held breath; a chain of left-hand chords in the bass, building with mounting ferocity, pushed the music to some emotional brink, but were reined in sharply as the music returned to its fragile semblance of decorum.

Even the darkness at the start of Op. 111 was tempered so that rather than abrupt jerks and changes of mood, Guy presented a wondrous sleight of hand, pulling one mood out of another, diminishing mountains into molehills and blowing them up all over again, so seamlessly that it was hard to notice the transitions. My own preference is for a little more brashness and a little less reverence, but there was no denying the power and authority of Guy's performance of this final sonata, in particular, which ascended to angelic, aching heights under the famous long trill near the end of the final movement. Rather than bringing the music back to earth, as some players do, Guy let the last bars remain otherworldly, until the sonata evanesced like a soap bubble: a gentle pop, and the whole shining surface was gone.

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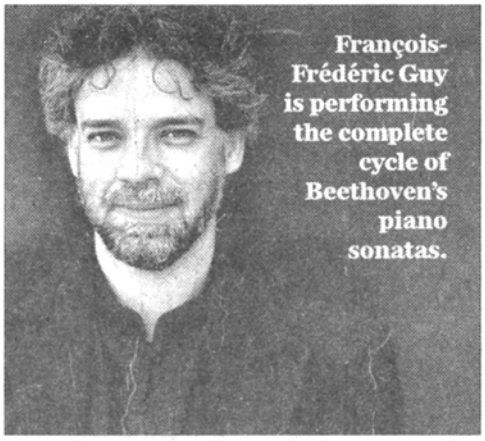

François-Frédéric Guy is performing the complete cycle of Beethoven's piano sonatas.

GUY VIVIEN

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François-Frédéric Guy

François-Frédéric Guy began a complete traversal of Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas on Friday night at La Maison Française. The schedule of nine concerts over nine days, with a two-day break in the middle, is an epic feat of concentration and endurance, and that is just for the listener. Guy played the Beethoven cycle twice last year, in Monaco and Paris, in the same, mostly chronological sequence. That ordering creates, in his words, an "immense crescendo," a stylistically driven motor that powers him through the exhausting task.

In keeping with that idea of developmental accretion, Guy began the cycle with a soft, understated performance of the three sonatas of Op. 2. It was Beethoven imbued with many subtle colors and lyric phrasing, drawn from the pianist's poetic fantasy, often with a quiet rumbling of inner melancholy. In the mixing of his color palette, Guy relied perhaps too much on the sustaining pedal, blurring the trio of the rather fast third movement in No. 1, for example, into a cloud.

While the first sonata seemed the least polished, No. 2 had a technically brilliant first movement, with right-hand roulades light as a feather, and a grand, steady slow movement positioned more or less as the recital's centerpiece. A slight uncertainty about one passage in the development of No. 3's first movement unsettled Guy momentarily, but he recovered to give an unforgettable rendition of the second movement, with exquisitely voiced melodic interchanges in the crossing of the left hand. The trills at the end of the fourth movement were a flawless whirr of seamless oscillation.

— *Charles T. Downey*

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THE BEETHOVEN SONATA CYCLE

A major movement: 32 works add up to greatness

BY ANNE MIDGETTE

Till Fellner, the Austrian pianist, plays Beethoven sonatas like a poet. In a recital of five of them he gave at the National Gallery two weeks ago, he performed with a simplicity, a lack of showiness, an absence of affected mannerism. He played like an early romantic poet in the age before romanticism became synonymous with "over the top" — the age, that is, in which Beethoven wrote these works.

The layers of analysis and performance and recording and interpretation that have accrued around Beethoven's 32 piano sonatas over the generations can obscure the fact that Beethoven isn't rocket science. If these sonatas were poems, many of them would be about flowers, birds, and love: 19th-century subjects, expressed in a 19th-century idiom. As it is, their meaning is often comparably direct. The sonatas are "about" the contrast between loud passages and soft, high notes and low ones, a rising figure in the right hand played off against a descending one in the left. They're "about" the stirring heroism expressed by dotted rhythms (in which long notes alternate with short ones: baDUM, baDUM). They're "about" the way that a C minor chord is startling when it comes in a place where the 19th-century ear expects a straight E-flat major (at the opening of the 26th sonata, called "Les Adieux"). To contemporary ears, a C minor chord is not very surprising. The art of Beethoven performance lies in finding ways to make it fresh.

ASSOCIATED PRESS

STRIKING CHORDS: Beethoven still commands attention.

Masters of the cycle

Beethoven's piano sonatas represent one of the widest-ranging bodies of work by a composer within a single genre, extending from his early years all the way through to his late great works, mysterious and episodic and heart-rending. More and more, they are taken in as a unit rather than 32 separate pieces. Playing the cycle, once a nearly unimaginable feat, has become a calling card for pianists like Daniel Barenboim and Alfred Brendel.

This season, there are three different ways to experience the cycle in the Washington area alone. Fellner is in the midst of a seven-concert cycle over two seasons that he is playing in cities around the world; Washington gets the next (fifth) installment on Feb. 7. On Friday, the French pianist François-Frédéric Guy started an intense, nine-concert traversal of all 32 sonatas, lasting until Nov. 22. And in Baltimore on May 10, Leon Fleisher's piano students at the Peabody Conservatory will play all of the sonatas in a single marathon session lasting from 10 in the morning to around 11 at night.

Hearing all the sonatas at one go is a monumental experience, like a "Ring" cycle for piano lovers. But — particularly when the sonatas are played in chronological order — it tends to change the focus from poetry to story: The individual sonatas lose a touch of their individuality and become chapters in an artistic biography. Here's where Beethoven had intimations of his impending deafness (the slow movement of the seventh sonata: a favorite of Fleisher's). Here's where he says goodbye to his patron, who was leaving on a trip ("Les Adieux"). Here's where he commemorates two young women he taught (the ninth and 10th sonatas).

Or perhaps not. Perhaps the real point of these ninth and 10th sonatas is their exploration of the principles of contrast so dear to the composer's heart: two contrasting elements in the first sonata, one pleading and one resisting. Beethoven once allegedly said this, in a comment attributed to him and discussed by the musicologist Konrad Wolff. But today, it's harder to hear the distinction Wolff (or Beethoven) is describing, and more superficially appealing to see these sonatas as portraits of the sisters Therese and Josefine von Brunswick — as they are described in the liner notes to the impressive new set of the sonatas the pianist Paul Lewis has just released on Harmonia Mundi.

The right order?

So how do you approach the cycle? The chronological approach — which Guy is largely following — allows one to hear the composer's development. But it also tends to reduce the early sonatas to the status of mere student work, looking ahead to the composer's middle-period maturity (which kicks in around the 21st sonata, "Waldstein," with its tautly driven opening). (Most of the major sonatas have nicknames, like the eighth one, the "Pathétique," or the famous "Moonlight," No. 14; and most of those nicknames reflect nothing more than the publisher's desire to make them more easily identifiable to customers. Musicians usually refer to the sonatas by their opus numbers, reflecting their position in Beethoven's oeuvre as a whole: The "Waldstein," for example, is Op. 53.)

The early sonatas "have a silly reputation of being early drafts," said the pianist Jeremy Denk in a recent e-mail, "as if Beethoven were kind of sitting around waiting for the middle style." But, he adds, "those earlier sonatas are full of shocks; he's the same person as in the late style, in many crucial ways" — as if, he continued, "in old age he came back to the more disjunct thinking of his youth. Even in the earliest sonatas, the slow movements are truly epic . . . oversized statements." He cited the slow movement of the fourth sonata, which Fellner played in his last National Gallery concert: "astounding, austere, finding the most beautiful corners of the basic building blocks, the girders of tonality."

The chronological approach also tends to emphasize seriousness — the story of the Great Man, leading through suffering to transcendence — when part of the charm of these pieces is their moments of deliberate quirkiness. "I love Beethoven when he is being impish or perverse," says Denk, citing the 16th sonata, with "the 'ragtime' quality of the first movement . . . and then a kind of 'Keystone

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François-Frédéric Guy, left, and Till Fellner are among current Beethoven-focused pianists.

Kops' second theme."

The other approach, like Brendel or Fellner, or Lewis's recording, is to group the sonatas into viable programs on their own, following thematic and dramatic rather than chronological imperatives. The arrangement also allows the lesser sonatas to be tucked away unobtrusively; Fellner uses Nos. 19 and 20, which Beethoven used primarily for teaching purposes, as encores.

'States of ecstacy'

There are, inevitably, certain highlights. The 29th sonata, known as the "Hammerklavier," is one of the longest and most technically challenging in the entire repertory ("Hammerklavier" refers simply to the German name for the instrument it was composed for, more commonly known as "pianoforte," but it also evokes the hammering chords of the opening bars).

And it's hard to avoid grouping the last three sonatas together as a sublime group, culminating in what Denk describes as the "flowing stasis" of the final heavenly movement of Op. 111.

"A lot of fast playing in the late Beethoven sonatas," Fleisher says, "I think represents varying states of ecstasy."

Fleisher has witnessed two previous Beethoven marathons by his students in years past. It doesn't make the works any less individual and specific. "People talk about sonata form," he says. "Well, here are 32 examples that have no relation to each other whatsoever. You have 32 different sonata forms. That's pretty impressive."

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THE BEETHOVEN SONATA CYCLE
with François-Frédéric Guy, through Nov. 22 at La Maison Française, Embassy of France, 4101 Reservoir Rd. NW. Call 202-944-6091 or visit *www.la-maison-francaise.org*.