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François-Frédéric Guy Ascends the Mountain

by Charles T. Downey | Monday, November 16, 2009



Read my review today in the actual *Washington Post*, the thing printed on paper:

Charles T. Downey, *François-Frédéric Guy*
Washington Post, November 16, 2009

“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. [Continue reading]



François-Frédéric Guy (photo by Guy Vivien) --
extra credit for anyone who can identify the
location

François-Frédéric Guy, piano
Beethoven Piano Sonatas, Complete Cycle, Concert 1
La Maison Française

FFG Beethoven:



Piano Sonatas 8/19/29
Naïve V 5023



Piano Concertos 1/5
Naïve V 5084



Piano Concerto 4 / Piano-Wind
Quintet
Naïve V 5148



Piano Concerto 2/3
Naïve V 5179

François-Frédéric Guy's more or less numerically ordered cycle of the Beethoven piano sonatas is intended to reach its apogee at the end of the "crescendo," the last two concerts this coming Friday and Saturday. Guy's acclaimed 2006 recording of some of the later Beethoven sonatas gives an idea of what to expect, a much more explosive approach than the restrained, delicate sounds heard on Friday night. The infamous op. 106 ('Hammerklavier'), which will conclude the November 21 concert, is one of Guy's obsessions: he made his first recording of the work a decade earlier and does not deny that he will likely record it again later in life. Guy's interpretation foams at the mouth more than Till Fellner's graceful take on the 'Hammerklavier' at the Austrian Embassy last May, but without devolving into a performance merely about forceful attack as heard from [Valentina Lisitsa](#) at the National Museum of Women in the Arts around the same time.

The transitional phase of the cycle, the beginning of the crescendo, has likely already begun, judging by Guy's chiaroscuro recording of no. 8 (op. 13, 'Pathétique'), an almost violent opposition of light and darkness in terms of dynamic choices. A performance of no. 7 at the Corcoran in 2006 showed a similar unpredictability in choice of tempo especially. The piano brought in for these concerts at La Maison Française, a brightly voiced but versatile Yamaha, plays right to this kind of interpretation. In any case, it is not too late to hear the majority of this extraordinary pianistic undertaking, and what remains will likely be the most noteworthy parts of the experience, beginning this evening:

- November 16, 7 pm (Nos. 16-18, includes 'The Tempest')
- November 17, 7 pm (Nos. 15, 19-21, includes 'Pastorale' and 'Waldstein')
- November 20, 7 pm (Nos. 22-26, includes 'Appassionata' and 'Les Adieux')
- November 21, 7 pm (Nos. 27-29, includes 'Hammerklavier')
- November 22, 4 pm (Nos. 30-32)

Guy has also made a complete recording of the Beethoven piano concertos, in three discs released over the past couple years: Naïve has announced plans to release a box set this coming January. For these releases he has partnered with Philippe Jordan (one of each of their hands is shown on the covers of the three discs) and the [Orchestre Philharmonique de Radio France](#), and they have been performing the entire cycle at Paris's Salle Pleyel, beginning last February and set to conclude next June. Jordan, a Zurich-trained pianist and conductor, got his start as assistant conductor to some big names like Jeffrey Tate and Daniel Barenboim, and he has appeared as a guest conductor with many orchestras around the world and with the Berlin Staatsoper.

Starting this season Jordan is the [new music director](#) of the Opéra national de Paris, "replacing" Sylvain Cambreling, the (heavily criticized) favorite of Gerard Mortier, who was never actually appointed to the position (it had remained vacant since the departure of James Conlon in 2004). Philippe, now 35 years old, is the son of Armin Jordan, one-time conductor of Geneva's Orchestre de la Suisse Romande. Their Beethoven concertos are worthy, in spite of fierce competition both present and past (a longer series of posts to consider the full field is in the offing), made more attractive by the inclusion of a little-known quintet for piano, oboe, clarinet, horn, and bassoon (E-flat major, op. 16) on the second disc, where it is paired with the fourth concerto.