

ALAN HOBBS PLAYS BEETHOVEN

Alan Hobbins, pianist | Maestro Music Co.

Liner Notes by Jack Behrens, Professor Emeritus, The University of Western Ontario

Alan Hobbins (who on this CD offers four contrasting Beethoven piano sonatas) can trace his pianistic and pedagogical lineage back to Beethoven (1770-1827) via Sonja Behrens, a student of Adele Marcus who – as did Leon Fleisher – studied with Artur Schnabel (1882-1951) who was taught by Theodor Leschetisky (1830-1915), a student of Karl Czerny (1791-1857), the Austrian pianist, teacher, composer (of more than a thousand works) who was a piano pupil, friend and disciple of Beethoven. (Schnabel was the first to record – in 1927 – all the Beethoven piano sonatas).

"I was so fortunate", Czerny asserts, "in my musical memory that – I could play by heart, and absolutely perfectly, everything Beethoven wrote for the pianoforte..." Czerny prepared four-hand piano versions of many Beethoven compositions, including the symphonies.

The quotations incorporated into the liner notes (below) are from Czerny's *On the proper performance of Beethoven's works for piano* as edited by the distinguished Austrian pianist, Paul Badura-Skoda (b. 1927). Czerny assures his readers that "the author of this manual has often been asked to discuss the performance of Beethoven's piano works. In undertaking to do so, he is confident of his qualifications for the task, inasmuch as in his early youth (from 1801 on) he was tutored in piano playing by Beethoven; he was extremely partial to Beethoven's piano music, studying all such works immediately they appeared, some of this under the Master's own supervision..."

The *Sonata in C-sharp minor, Op. 27, No. 2* (1801) was nicknamed *Moonlight* by the poet and music critic Heinrich Rellstab (1799-1860) who, in 1832 associated the first movement with moonlight on Lake Lucerne. (Schubert and Liszt made settings of Rellstab's poems). This sonata is one of two "quasi fantasia" sonatas that comprise Op. 27. Czerny described this first movement as "highly poetical and therefore perfectly comprehensible to anyone. It is a night scene, in which the voice of a complaining spirit is heard at as distance". Alan Hobbins' rendition is notable for adhering to Czerny's admonition that it "must be played in moderate *andante* time (rather than *adagio* as indicated on the score).

The *allegretto* Scherzo "is certainly lively, but requires rather to be performed agreeably... Humorous mirth would contrast too greatly with the first movement". The *presto agitato* which concludes "one of Beethoven's most impassioned" Sonatas is performed by Alan Hobbins with the required "powerful, clear, and brilliant touch" (but always within the context of the Sonata as an entity). The exuberant arpeggios of the this movement are indeed impassioned in contrast to the placid first movement broken chords.

The first movement of the *Sonata in D minor, Op. 31, No. 2* (1801-02), known as *Tempest*, is described by Czerny as "perfect...the unity of the ideas and the tragic character, the artistic form,

which is disturbed by no episode, and the romantic and picturesque nature of the whole, will never fail to produce the greatest effect." Czerny describes the *Largo* "recitative" which follows the fortissimo *allegro* section as sounding "like one complaining at a distance". The movement concludes with "the bass like distant thunder". (An early Beethoven biographer, Anton Schindler (1795-1864) - regarded as not always a reliable source - claimed that when he asked Beethoven "the meaning" of this Sonata, Beethoven responded, "Read Shakespeare's *Tempest*". Be that as it may, there is no reason whatsoever to doubt Schindler when he affirmed to Alexander Wheelock Thayer (1817-1897), an American biographer of Beethoven that "Czerny was the only one among the Viennese virtuosi who took the pains to hear Beethoven often during his prime".

"The *Adagio* is equally elevated". Alan Hobbins performs this movement "in strict time and not in a dragging manner". The attentive listener will have observed that in the first movement the damper pedal was depressed during the recitatives; in this second movement, "the pedal must assist in sustaining the harmonies, in suitable places".

"Beethoven extemporized the theme" for the concluding *Allegretto* "as he once saw a horseman gallop by his window. Many of his finest works were produced under similar events. With him, every sound, every motion was music and rhythm".

The *Grande Sonate Pathétique in C minor, Op. 13* (1798) – named thus by Beethoven's publisher evidently to the composer's satisfaction – is regarded by some (on the basis of its keyboard writing) as the first modern sonata. The work opens with a *Grave* introduction (to be performed "slowly and pathetically") which is followed by an "extremely impetuous and incited" *Allegro molto e con brio* "by which the composition acquires a brilliant character in the symphony style" with the staccato middle section a "mournful expression" heard above and below an incessant reiteration of 152 quarter notes.

The *Adagio Cantabile* begins "legato, and the melody clearly brought out"; midway through the movement when the theme returns, the triplets are to be "very intelligible" with "the whole not dragging nor spun out."

The *Rondo*, "Very lively and with pathetic expression, but not impetuous" with the middle subject "soft, *legato* and intelligible" and the conclusion "fiery", is performed on this CD in a manner "intelligible" indeed.

Beethoven's predilection for C minor has frequently been noted. C minor as a key had traditional theatrical links; the Italian composer and violinist Francesco Galeazzi (1758-1819), described C minor as "the tragic key". Among Beethoven's other well-known compositions in that key are the *Piano Trio, Op. 1, No. 3*, the *Coriolan Overture* and the *Symphony No. 5, Op. 67*.

Rather than using traditional Italian terms for his two movement *Sonata in E minor, Op. 90* (1814), Beethoven writes for the first movement, "Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck" (with liveliness, and feeling and expression throughout); Czerny described this movement as "remarkably beautiful" and draws attention to a sparse canonic

passage (based on the first three pitches of the opening theme) just prior to the return of that theme which "must be performed in time, lightly, and particularly distinct".

The second movement, "Nicht zu geschwind und sehr singbar vorzutragen" (not too swiftly and conveyed in a singing manner) requires of the performer "the utmost sweetness and feeling". The discerning listener will notice "a perverted, slow shake, in the middle part...the conclusion is remarkable, as the last eight notes almost disappear, strictly in time, but *pianissimo* and unexpectedly, and thus the piece must close".

Recorded evidence being unavailable, what do we know about Beethoven's playing? Perhaps because he had studied not only piano, but also violin and organ, Beethoven was credited by his contemporaries as discovering *legato* and *cantabile* effects on the piano. (Beethoven observed that Mozart's playing was delicate, but without *legato*). Czerny was quoted by Thayer as saying that Beethoven "used the pedal a great deal" and that his playing "Adagio and Lento in the strict style exercised a well-nigh magic influence on every hearer". Beethoven's pupil Ferdinand Ries (1784-1838), noted that "In general, Beethoven played his compositions very moodily, but he did remain for the most part strictly in tempo".

Regarding Beethoven's compositions, Czerny stated that "the general character...is fervent, grand, energetic, noble, and replete with feeling; often also humorous and sportive, occasionally even eccentric, but always intellectual; and though sometimes gloomy, yet never effeminately elegant, or whiningly sentimental".

Having now pondered the contributions of Czerny and his contemporaries to our understanding of Beethoven's music (devoid of the formal analysis we encounter today), and having benefited from the illuminating performances of Alan Hobbins, perhaps we arrive at that place described by T. S. Eliot (1888-1965) in *Little Gidding*, the final poem of *Four Quartets* (published 1943):

"We shall not cease from exploration,
And the end of all our exploring,
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time".

Jack Behrens
Professor Emeritus,
The University of Western Ontario