Power, Passion and Ecstasy

Beethoven Piano Sonatas:
The Tempest, Pathétique and Opus 110

crd
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Virginia Black *piano*

What an impossible task — to select for this recording just three out of Beethoven's extraordinary body of piano sonatas! I've settled on three from different periods of his life, both to demonstrate the striking originality of his output and to illustrate how the challenges of his difficult life and health are reflected in his music. These sonatas express so excitingly the elemental power of Beethoven's music and its impact on the human psyche.

The three Sonatas are perfect examples of how Beethoven broke the rules of composition that preceded him, establishing his own trademark style. Loud, soft; fast, slow; dramatic key changes; silences… harmonically daring, provocative, surprising.

The uncompromising emotion and energy in Beethoven's music, combined with his propensity to break the compositional 'rules' of the day, is what leads to the visceral thrill these sonatas provide. No wonder the *Pathétique* reportedly had ladies swooning in the aisles at early performances by Beethoven himself!

It's illuminating to listen to Beethoven's works with an awareness of his personality and mental state at the time of composition,

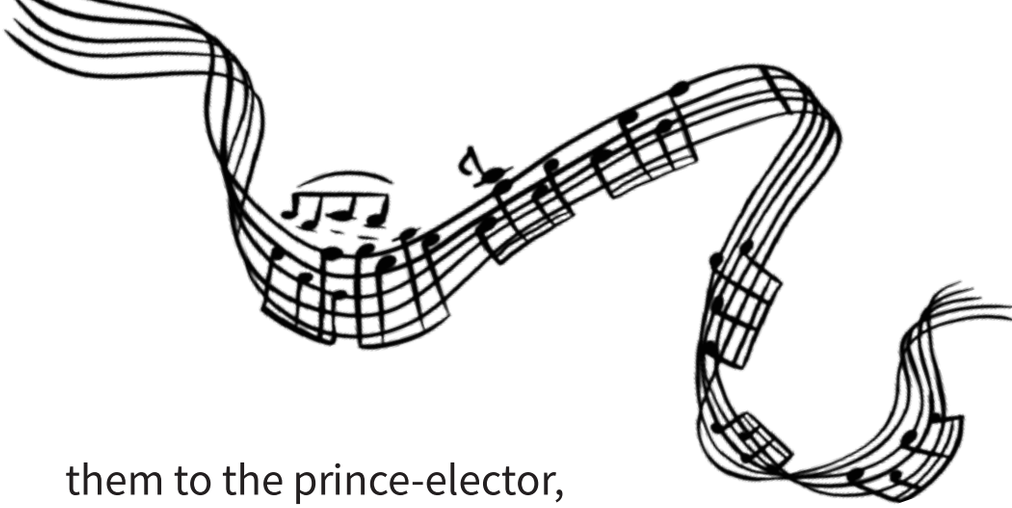
Photo: Matthew Johnson

and in the notes that follow, John Suchet sets the scene for us. I'm indebted to John for so vividly setting the piano sonatas in the context of Beethoven's life and times.

PASSION is the word most associated with Beethoven and, ultimately, the only thing that really mattered to him was his music. For that reason, perhaps, the best way to listen to these sonatas is to allow yourself to be drawn into the music, and to be swept along by the emotion, to share in Beethoven's passion, and to be consumed by it!

Virginia Black, 2023

The Sonata as Beethoven's Autobiography



Beethoven composed music for practically every combination of instruments imaginable — from symphonies for full orchestra, to trio for two oboes and cor anglais, and sonatinas for mandolin and piano. But we should never lose sight of the fact that he was himself a keyboard player: clavichord and harpsichord in his youth, and then early versions of what we know today as the concert grand in adult years.

His early compositions, written mostly for competent aristocratic string or wind players, gained him entry into aristocratic salons. However, it was his virtuosity at the keyboard that really made his name in those early years. His calling card was Bach and Mozart, but once he had their attention, it was his own compositions he wanted them to hear — above all, his piano sonatas.

In his lifetime Beethoven composed 35 complete piano sonatas. I believe the three sonatas of his early years, composed when he was just 12 years of age, must be included, even if Beethoven himself did not accord them opus numbers. Known as the *Kurfürsten* Sonatas because he dedicated them to the prince-elector, they contain the seeds of the great works to follow.

These 35 piano sonatas are the only form in which Beethoven composed without a significant break throughout his lifetime. Take the symphonies — the first eight were composed in around thirteen years and then there is a gap of more than a decade before he composed the Ninth (even if sketches and ideas were noted earlier). The string quartets were composed in three distinct blocks, to the extent that they are known today as the Early, Middle and Late Quartets.

The piano sonatas, by contrast, encompass Beethoven's life. From those first early sonatas to the final sonata, composed five years before his death, there is no significant gap in the composition of the intervening thirty-one. Even in the most fallow creative period of his life, the draining four-and-a-half years of the court case he took out against his sister-in-law, he still produced a piano

sonata — not just ‘a’ piano sonata, but the longest, most complex, he would compose in his entire life, the ‘Hammerklavier’.

The piano was Beethoven’s voice — increasingly so as his deafness took hold. There is anecdotal evidence that if a friend asked him a deep and meaningful question, such as whether he believed in God or an afterlife, he would go to the piano to give his answer. More trivial matters too could lead to inspiration. Who amongst us has not dropped a small coin, or similar, and simply never found it again? It happened to Beethoven too, and it led directly to one of his most humorous — and challenging — pieces for piano.

In the piano sonatas Beethoven is telling us about his life. He tells us of his joy, his anger, his frustration, his passions, his pain, his triumph. They are, I believe, his autobiography.

The three sonatas that Virginia Black has chosen for this album are prime examples. They each tell us about different aspects of his life as well as, of course, being masterly compositions in their own right.

The earliest of them is Piano Sonata No. 8, Op. 13, the *Pathétique*, which Beethoven wrote in 1798 at the age of twenty-seven. It begins in a way which sets Beethoven apart once and for all from his great predecessors Mozart and Haydn. A *fortepiano* chord consisting of no fewer than seven notes. *Fortepiano?* How on earth do you reproduce that? In short, you cannot. The player must strike the chord and then hold it till it fades. A motif of chords follows, and is repeated in the following bar, but with a demi-semiquaver in the low left hand a fraction ahead of it.

Quite simply, no one had composed for the piano in this way before. It is as if Beethoven is demanding our attention. Furthermore, he uses more keys than existed on conventional pianos for this sonata. He was fortunate to have as friends the piano building husband and wife team of Andreas and Nanette Streicher who began to build larger and sturdier instruments to cope with Beethoven’s demands.

A sublimely melodic slow movement (borrowed by Billy Joel for his song *This Night* on his 1983 album *An Innocent Man* — the booklet notes ‘words by B. Joel, music by L. van Beethoven) gives way to a passionate final movement. This is the piano sonata in which Beethoven announces he has arrived.

Only three years later and we have Piano Sonata No. 17, Op. 31, no. 2, *The Tempest*, which opens this album. Just look at that — only three years later, and we have gone from No. 8 to No. 17. As I said, the piano is Beethoven's voice, and he is speaking volumes. Why? He has noticed a problem with his hearing. Who knows when he might have to stop composing and performing, and there is still so much to say.

It has always been thought the name derives from a casual remark Beethoven made many years later referring to this sonata. He said anyone wanting to understand it should read Shakespeare's *Tempest*. Much more likely he was referring to the works of Christoph Christian Sturm ('*Sturm*' = tempest in German), whose works he knew, and the best-known of which was *Reflections on the Works of God in Nature*. See what I mean about Beethoven expressing deep convictions in his piano sonatas?

And so to the final sonata on the album, No. 31, Op. 110. No name, just an opus number, and it is the middle of the final set of three, the last he would compose. In my view this is the most personal of all Beethoven's piano sonatas.

In the final movement — which is really more than a single movement but by now Beethoven has dispensed with convention — he writes a mournful melody, one of the saddest he was ever to write. He knows it. On the manuscript page he writes 'klagender Gesang' ('doleful song'). When it comes round for a second time, he breaks it off with a chord, which he repeats no fewer than nine times, before launching into a huge inverted double fugue, one of the most complex pieces of writing he ever composed for the piano.

Is this not a metaphor for his deafness? I believe he is telling us that he suffered the worst fate that can befall a musician — he lost the one sense that in a musician should be more acute than in anyone else, as he himself put it in his Heiligenstadt Testament — yet he overcame it. In this sonata he reveals his suffering to us but shows us how he triumphed over it.

Listening to that blistering final fugue as performed by Virginia Black on this album, Beethoven's music surely offers us the strength to overcome whatever life may throw at us. That is the power of Beethoven's music.

Virginia's life in music

"... a communicative artist, extrovert, colourful, spontaneous but with a deep sense of poetry."

— Gramophone

Virginia made her concert debut at the age of 17, playing Beethoven's Piano Concerto No.3 with the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra. After studying piano and harpsichord at the Royal Academy of Music (RAM), she made her debut as a solo recitalist at Wigmore Hall, London and has given numerous performances on the Southbank and major music venues worldwide. In addition to pursuing a busy international concert schedule, she has made recordings for radio and television around the world and, in England, has been featured as 'Artist of the Week' on BBC Radio 3. Her library of CD recordings has been recognised through Editor's choice in *Gramophone* and Critics Choice in *Classic CD*.

Following a dazzling worldwide performing career, specialising in the virtuoso harpsichord repertoire — '…one of the world's finest harpsichordists' (*The Daily Telegraph*) — Virginia has now returned to her roots as a pianist.

She has once again delighted audiences in recent concert performances in England, France, Italy and Australia, playing both solo recitals and concertos, with a repertoire encompassing Bach, Beethoven, Chopin, Debussy, Handel, Mozart, Rameau, Soler and Scarlatti, together with some more contemporary works.

Following a long career at the RAM, as Professor of Harpsichord, Chair of Postgraduate Diploma Studies and Senior Postgraduate Tutor, Virginia maintains her work in music education through giving masterclasses and recitals at conservatoires, universities and colleges worldwide.

Virginia is a Fellow of the Royal Academy of Music (FRAM), an honour limited to 300 members. It is 'awarded to those musicians who have distinguished themselves within the profession'.

www.virginiablack.net

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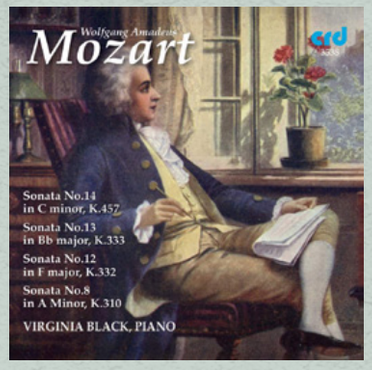
— Sonograma Magazine



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Sonatas CRD3538

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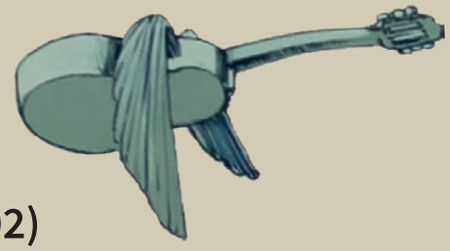
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Virginia Black, piano



Sonata No. 17 in D minor, Op. 31, No. 2 “The Tempest” (1802)

1.	Largo – Allegro	8:17
2.	Adagio (B flat major)	5:55
3.	Allegretto	7:11

Sonata No. 8 in C minor, Op. 13 “Pathétique” (1798)

1.	Grave – Allegro di molto e con brio	9:19
2.	Adagio cantabile	5:10
3.	Rondo – Allegro	4:32

Sonata No. 31 in A-flat major, Op. 110 “Opus 110” (1821)

1.	Moderato cantabile molto espressivo	6:44
2.	Allegro molto	2:28
3.	Adagio ma non troppo – Fuga (*Allegro ma non troppo*)	9:27

Total time 59:03

Executive Producers: Emma Pauncefort, Tom Pauncefort
Producer: Annabel Connellan
Balance engineer: Ben Connellan
Director, Performance and Repertoire: John Sutcliffe
Recorded 2019 at SJE Arts, Oxford. Piano: Steinway Model D.

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