EMANUEL AX, piano

ALL-BEETHOVEN PROGRAM

Bagatelle No. 25 in A minor, WoO 59, Für Elise

Sonata No. 2 in A, Opus 2, No. 2
   Allegro vivace
   Largo appassionato
   Scherzo. Allegretto
   Rondo. Grazioso

Sonata No. 3 in C, Opus 2, No. 3
   Allegro con brio
   Adagio
   Scherzo. Allegro
   Allegro assai

EMANUEL AX

Born in modern day Lvov, Poland, Emanuel Ax moved to Winnipeg, Canada, with his family when he was a young boy. His studies at the Juilliard School were supported by the sponsorship of the Epstein Scholarship Program of the Boys Clubs of America, and he subsequently won the Young Concert Artists Award. He also attended Columbia University, where he majored in French. Mr. Ax made his New York debut in the Young Concert Artists Series. He won the first Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Competition in Tel Aviv, the Michaels Award of Young Concert Artists, and the Avery Fisher Prize. Emanuel Ax appears as orchestral soloist and in recital throughout the U.S., Europe, and Asia. He is a perennial guest as chamber musician, recitalist, and orchestral soloist with the Boston Symphony Orchestra at Tanglewood. A committed exponent of contemporary composers he has recently added HK Gruber’s Piano Concerto and Samuel Adams’ “Impromptus” to his repertoire. A Sony Classical exclusive recording artist since 1987, Mr. Ax has recorded Mendelssohn trios with Yo-Yo Ma and Itzhak Perlman, Strauss’s Enoch Arden narrated by Patrick Stewart, and discs of two-piano music by Brahms and Rachmaninoff with Yefim Bronfman, among many others. He received Grammy awards for two of his volumes of Haydn sonatas and for his recordings with Yo-Yo Ma of Beethoven and Brahms cello sonatas. Mr. Ax contributed to an International Emmy Award-Winning BBC documentary commemorating the Holocaust on the 60th anniversary of the liberation of Auschwitz. He has performed chamber music regularly with such artists as Young Uck Kim, Cho-Liang Lin, Yo-Yo Ma, Edgar Meyer, Peter Serkin, Jaime Laredo, and the late Isaac Stern. Mr. Ax resides in New York City with his wife, pianist Yoko Nozaki. They have two children together, Joseph and Sarah. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences and holds honorary doctorates of music from Skidmore College, Yale University, and Columbia University. For more information about Mr. Ax’s career, please visit www.EmanuelAx.com.

Notes on the Program

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827), one of the leading virtuosos of his time, composed the first important body of work for the piano as we know it. He grew up in the first generation of pure pianists and was determined to find new and idiomatic ways to compose for and play the instrument, thinking of his keyboard music as an ongoing exploration of the piano, both in the unsatisfactory present and in the future. As a young virtuoso in Vienna he hectored piano makers to give him more range, more sound, more robust instruments. Every time new notes appeared on the keyboard he immediately used them, thus making them indispensable.

As a performer Beethoven was celebrated for his blazing improvisations, his velocity, his double and triple trills. Observers noted that his fingers were remarkably still on the keyboard, barely seemed to move in rapid passages. Other times he broke strings and hammers, furious at the fragility of the instruments. The keyboard was his laboratory; he conceived and refined much of his music in improvisation. It is and especially in the solo sonatas that the unmistakable Beethoven voice first makes its appearance. He wrote piano sonatas more consistently through his career than any other genre, so in them we see every stage in his evolution.

The hoary division of Beethoven’s work into First, Second (aka “Heroic”), and Third Periods endures in how we perceive Beethoven, but the sonatas show that the perception of the First Period in particular is historically problematic. There are no apprentice works in the sonatas. The first published, the three of Opus 2, show a mature artist, already a master of form both technically and psychologically (though that mastery would deepen steadily). In the same period that he was composing the somewhat careful, rather backward-looking string quartets of Opus 18,
he composed the epochal *Pathétique* Sonata, which shows the fully-developed Beethoven voice and fire.

Along with the sonatas, Beethoven throughout his life sketched out, perhaps through improvisation, dozens of smaller pieces, many of which he collected and published in groups of Bagatelles—the word connotes a trifle, a musical knick-knack—including his Opus 119, which gather pieces written over the course of some twenty years, and Opus 126, one of his last published works. Many such smaller works, though, were not published in his lifetime, such as the famous “Für Elise” (“For Elise”) dating from 1810 but not discovered and transcribed for publication until forty years after Beethoven’s death. There is no definitive answer as to who Elise may have been, but best guesses point to Beethoven’s piano student and friend Therese Malfatti or the young singer Elisabeth Röckel, daughter of the tenor who sang the role of Florestan in an 1806 production of Beethoven’s opera *Leonore* (later revised as *Fidelio*). The haunting, recurrent E–D-sharp oscillation of the opening is one of the most recognizable gestures in all of music. This fully formed piece, though, has much more to offer, with two harmonically contrasting episodes interspersed with its poignant A minor main phrase.

The three sonatas of Beethoven’s Opus 2 date from 1795. If the first is terse, driving, and minor, the Sonata No. 2 in A, Opus 2, No. 2 is playful, eruptive, and visceral, though a certain incipient melancholy turns up repeatedly, and always unexpectedly. It opens with three gestures: a hop, a swoop, a staccato stride, all of them downward. That foreshadows a three-part first theme section: that opening, then gentle lines flowing upward, then a scale zipping upward. There will be lots of zipping, rippling, and swooping to come. In the second theme section the gaiety runs head-on into an E minor that is troubled, surgingly passionate, almost Schubertian.

The Largo, in D major, is dominated by a quiet, string-like chorale theme with a quasi-pizzicato striding bass. Near the end the theme erupts fatalistically in d minor—the incipient melancholy, again unexpected. The scherzo’s theme is marked by giddy ripples; its Trio is an a minor expanse that tempers the high spirits without disturbing them.

The swoops find their glory in a final rondo, marked *Grazioso*, whose main theme rushes upward only to dip gracefully back down in a lilting, wide-spanning gesture. The middle—another surprise—is a pounding, staccato, A minor *furioso* section. With a quick, almost choked ending the music seems to leave the struggle against melancholy unresolved. Already Beethoven shows his gift for psychological subtleties.

The brilliant and thematically tight-knit Sonata No. 3 in C, Opus 2, No. 3 alternates quiet, inward music with explosions of virtuosity, the whole seeming a two-handed version of a piano concerto, complete with cadenzas at the end of first and last movements. It begins with a measured trill that will resonate all the way to the spectacular triple trills at the sonata’s end. After what sounds like a quiet orchestral introduction in strings, the piano breaks into pealing virtuoso figuration—and thus the basic pattern of this expansive and largely high-spirited movement.

With the slow movement we are in virtually middle-Beethoven territory: its key a jump to distant E major, the poignant, thoughtful first theme falling into a darker, pleading middle section. The third-movement scherzo largely banishes the heaviness of the slow movement, its main theme wry and contrapuntal. For contrast, a babbling and entirely untragic A minor Trio.

Everything comes down to a scampering and brilliantly virtuosic rondo finale, its main theme, like all the main themes, subtly based on the opening bars of the sonata. Here the unflagging rhythmic drive is entirely at the service of gaiety.

From notes by JAN SWAFFORD and ROBERT KIRZINGER (“Für Elise”)

*Jan Swafford is a prizewinning composer and writer whose books include “Beethoven: Anguish and Triumph”; “Johannes Brahms: A Biography”; “The Vintage Guide to Classical Music,” and “Language of the Spirit: An Introduction to Classical Music.” An alumnus of the Tanglewood Music Center, where he studied composition, he is currently working on a biography of Mozart.*

*Composer and writer Robert Kirzinger is the Boston Symphony Orchestra’s Associate Director of Program Publications.*

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