

## **AN ACT OF HUBRIS**

*The pianist's foreword to the present recording.*

*By Emil Gryesten*

### **A lifelong relationship**

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) has been a very dear friend of mine for almost my entire life. The engagement with Beethoven's piano music has been a near-constant occupation since my first attempts at performance of the *Bagatelle in A minor WoO 59*, more commonly known as "Für Elise", at the age of eight or nine. Nonetheless, it was the disruption and sudden abundance of free time during the coronavirus pandemic that became the starting point for the project, which has led to the creation of this double album. My recording of the late sonatas of Beethoven represents at once a culmination of my lifelong involvement with Beethoven and an exploration of yet unexplored paths.

The classical music world was looking forward to the year 2020 with the expectation of massive celebrations of the 250 years anniversary of the birth of Ludwig van Beethoven. I had been invited to perform recitals focusing on the German titan at concert series and festivals in Denmark, and I decided to challenge myself to perform two sonatas, which I did not yet have in my repertoire: The gigantic, seemingly unplayable op. 106, known as the "Hammerklavier", and the most spiritual and mysterious of the 32 Beethoven sonatas, the final sonata, op. 111.

As the year 2020 unfolded, the pandemic meant that most of the planned concerts did not happen. Instead, I used the opportunity to convert my current involvement with the late piano sonatas into an artistic research project at the Royal Danish Academy of Music (RDAM) in Copenhagen, where I had been a faculty member since 2017, combining my work on Beethoven with a focus on a particular branch of music theory.

### **The Schenker project**

I had long wished to dive deeper into the music analysis method developed by Heinrich Schenker (1868-1935), which I had encountered during my studies at the Sibelius Academy, where professor of music theory Lauri Suurpää held weekly lectures on the topic. Schenkerian analysis is fascinating territory to explore for the curious mind and has inspired eminent musicians such as the conductor Wilhelm Furtwängler, who was in fact a kind of student of Schenker, and more recently Murray Perahia and Antti Siirala, among others.

This mode of music analysis, the truth status of which remains a hot topic in musicology circles, understands tonal music as elaborate structures of expansion and ornamentation of a basic contrapuntal skeleton. Oftentimes, motion in melodic lines occurs simultaneously at several structural levels, from the sounding foreground, through a middle ground, to the deepest foundational structure of a composition, the *Ursatz*. The ideas of Schenker are inspired in part by organicist natural philosophy, comparing the elaborate embellishment of an underlying *Ursatz* to the growth and blossoming of a plant; in part by Sigmund Freud's psychoanalysis, according to which the human psyche is governed by hidden, subconscious forces, which can be excavated by the analyst. Due to historical circumstances, Schenkerian theory and analysis have remained largely unknown in Scandinavia (excluding Finland), which is an interesting fact, since Schenker is taken more or less for granted as standard music theory in the Anglo-American tradition.

Though I possessed a certain level of theoretical insight into Schenkerian analysis, I had never had the courage or commitment to really experiment with the application of the method as a tool in interpretation and performance at the piano, though this endeavour had always seemed intriguing to me.

Thus it happened that I decided to make use of the unforeseen opportunities appearing in 2020 to launch a project combining my current focus on late Beethoven with diving really deep into Schenker. I teamed up with my colleague at the RDM, professor of music theory Thomas Solak, and together we launched an ambitious artistic research project on the application of Schenkerian analysis in the interpretation of piano works by Beethoven, titled

*Beethoven Reconstructed*. The outcome of the project was to be workshops for students, an international seminar on Schenker, some articles, a series of lecture-recitals, and this recording. We decided to expand the scope of the repertoire for the project to include all five of the late sonatas, from op. 101 to 111.

Not only did we aim for finding a way to use Schenkerian analysis as the basis for building an interpretation from the ground up (hence 'Reconstructed'); we furthermore intended our interpretations to be truly innovative reinterpretations of these much-performed works. The aim was to approach the scores with fresh ears, mind and spirit, allowing the chosen analysis method to function as the main interpretive lens, and leaving behind the patinated baggage of tradition. This was a real experiment with the aesthetics of piano performance, as we honestly did not have a clue what the performances were going to sound like in the end.

Thomas Solak and I worked on the Beethoven-Schenker project for two years, during which time we communed at weekly sessions of deep exploration of the scores and analytical graphs, consuming powerful doses of esoteric French philosophy as an accompaniment to the similarly convoluted writings of Schenker himself - we discovered that Bergson and Deleuze resonate particularly well with Schenker.

We also were fortunate enough to get the opportunity to bring our work to inspirational surroundings such as the Danish artist retreat San Cataldo overlooking the Amalfi coast, and allowing interpretive ideas to simmer while cooking kidneys of lamb in Marsala sauce in Solak's countryside villa.

### **The Shepherds and the Angel**

Finally, at the arrival of spring in 2023, I felt ready to commit a version of the Beethoven-reinterpretations to recording. In the week of Easter, the brilliant, young Italian sound engineer Federico Mattioli and I rolled up our sleeves and got down to business in the breathtakingly beautiful late-1930s concert hall of the Royal Danish Academy of Music. It took three long days and many pots of extra-strong Japanese green tea to capture enough interesting takes of the op. 101 and the Hammerklavier. Three months later, during the quiet weeks of the summer holidays, we returned to the hall in order to reach the end of the journey and record the last three sonatas.

Whether we succeeded in creating truly novel reinterpretations of these works is open for discussion. As classical music performers, tradition and experience are constitutive at a fundamental level and are difficult to bypass even through conscious will. It is possible, though, to set up creativity-inducing obstructions and also to invite innovation to emerge as a result of the deliberate intake of novel inspiration. Indeed, it may be that the work process which I have committed myself to in this project has been as valuable as the analytical findings themselves.

I think what the listener might notice in these recordings is a performance style that is eclectic in the sense that it plays with stylistic characteristics which could be heard as belonging to quite diverse epochs and styles. There are certainly elements inspired by historical performance practice and a close reading of Beethoven's scores. But just as much, one might sense a fundamentally romantic sentiment governing the overall tone and pacing of the interpretations. However, this is upset by occasional jazzy or modernistic details. Last but not least, it is our hope that the perspective of a Schenkerian understanding has helped to provide a sense of overall organic cohesiveness - that the performances, though fairly free in terms of rhythm and dynamics, feel natural and logical. I point the interested reader to articles by Thomas Solak and myself about our project for a thorough explanation of the profound ways, in which a Schenkerian approach has shaped these interpretations.

In the spring of 2023, the Danish National Gallery held a special exhibition devoted to the works of Danish late-romantic painter Carl Bloch (1834-1890). I visited the exhibition on the Saturday of Easter, a few days after recording the op. 101 and Hammerklavier. A particular painting - *The Shepherds and the Angel* - had a strongly captivating effect on me. I was struck by how the bright, white light surrounding the angel seemed more white and more luminous than any earthly light could ever be; and by how the contrasting darkness was a deeper, richer, more nuanced darkness than any pure darkness or blackness.

The juxtaposition of an overwhelmingly bright, divine light and a rich, deep darkness resonated in a powerful way with my overall conception of a work like the op. 111, which contains two movements, similarly representing darkness and light. In the other four sonatas, the contrast between the expression of the deepest despair found in the minor-mode movements and the ecstatic joy of the final movements is one of the striking features of the overall dramaturgy of the works. Also, this was the sonic image that I hoped Federico Mattioli would be able to create for my Beethoven recording: A rich, warm bass sound, that is darker than dark, and a full, luminous treble, seeming to transcend the bare physical qualities of the piano sound. This idea of darkness and light seems to be a main conceptual motif throughout my Beethoven album.

### “Es ist vollbracht”

Endeavouring to create yet another CD recording of the late sonatas of Beethoven is already an act of hubris. Attempting to contribute worthwhile commentary to these works, which have been covered in great depth in books and lectures by musician-scholars like Edwin Fischer, Charles Rosen, and Sir Andras Schiff, as well as by musicologists such as Donald Francis Tovey, and indeed by Heinrich Schenker, might very well turn out to be a kamikaze mission. I am indebted to all of these great minds, and I highly recommend consulting their work.

Rather than providing an extensive commentary on each sonata, I will merely note a few observations about aspects of each sonata, which carry a special significance to me.

Beethoven’s musical language in the **A major sonata op. 101** (1816) is characterized by a newfound poetic subjectiveness, which will eventually evolve into the wonders of musical spirituality of the final sonatas. It is noteworthy that the first movement of this sonata was Richard Wagner’s favourite movement of all the piano sonatas. Indeed, it is easy to see that the fluidity and expressivity of the contrapuntal motions would have inspired Wagner. The sonata is remarkable in its organic cohesion, its tonal structure based on a unifying motif of a descending tetrachord. It is a truly brilliant work, full of subtle, warm-hearted humour and vitality.

It is not quite obvious whether the **sonata in B-flat major op. 106**, (1818) the monumental *Grosse Sonate für das Hammer-klavier*, was intended for actual performance, or conceived rather as an abstract work of art and a Herculean challenge for pianists of the future. A work of mythical status, its first performance was given by Franz Liszt, some 20 years after its composition. It opens with a majestic first movement inscribed with the infamous all-but-unplayable metronome marking 138 on the half-note. A witty and brilliant *scherzo* follows. The enormously long slow movement, *adagio sostenuto*, seems to depict a deep existential loneliness. The closing fugue, at once genius and mad, is one of the legendary moments of the piano literature.

Having traversed the stormy peaks of the Hammerklavier, the **E major sonata, op. 109** (1820), reveals itself as a beautiful, tranquil valley. However, demons appear at night, as the tranquillity is disturbed by the wild, nightmarish *Prestissimo*. Serenity is restored in the concluding variations, which seem to recollect the *Goldberg Variations* by Bach. In general, Beethoven’s late style is dense in contrapuntal complexity. However, in the op. 109 sonata, there are some very touching moments where a simple, yet immensely beautiful, melody is given space to sing undisturbed.

**The A-flat major sonata op. 110** (1821) contains several significant intertextual references. The second, *scherzo*-like movement quotes two comical Austrian folk songs. The contrast to the third movement could not be greater, as the *arioso dolente*, a song of suffering, which appears after an introductory recitative, is based on Bach’s aria *Es ist vollbracht*, one of the darkest moments of the *St. John’s Passion*. The grand fugato which follows is also in the style of church music, and the sonata reaches a jubilant culmination at its very end. The first movement bears resemblances to the song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte*, and the attentive listener may find a melody from Gluck’s *Orfeo* hidden in the fabric of the composition.

In the **final sonata, op. 111 in C minor** (1822), the sonata as an idea reaches its ultimate destination. After the magnificent variation movement carrying the humble title *Arietta*, there was no more to be added in the medium of a piano sonata, and Beethoven's sonata cycle concludes with the music drifting away into eternity. Many commentators share the intuition that this final movement is a profoundly spiritual work of music. Calling it a hymn of thanksgiving would not be far off the mark. It seems, though, that somewhere around the fourth variation a quantum leap occurs, and we find ourselves in a realm beyond what is describable in any other language than music.

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