

Preview

Takács and DeMaine embark on complete Beethoven cello & piano cycle

by Daniel Hathaway



Oberlin piano professor Peter Takács was just finishing his decade-long project of recording all of Beethoven's piano sonatas when he met Detroit Symphony principal cellist Robert DeMaine at the Charleston (SC) Chamber Festival. "We had one of those meetings of the minds which is not that common, but when it happens, it's very, very nice. After I finished my solo sonata project I was trying to ponder what to do next. I could have rested and said, 'OK, I'm done', or I could have said, 'Let's do something completely different'. But I decided to stick with The Big Guy (Beethoven) and I thought about Robert because we had such a good time together."

Takács emailed DeMaine, who was enthusiastic about preparing a series of paired recitals featuring Beethoven's five cello sonatas and three sets of variations for cello and piano, all in two programs.

Takács has been there before, having performed the cycle three and a half years ago with Oberlin faculty cellist Darrett Adkins, but that pair of concerts took place on the same day. "That was a scheduling issue", Takács recalls, "and I thought better of it this time. We had only twenty minutes between the two concerts then. This time we'll do the concerts two weeks apart." The first recital will take place in the Oberlin Conservatory's Kulas Hall on Sunday, April 14 at 4:30 pm, the second on Sunday, May 5 at the same hour.

What does a performer learn from playing the whole Beethoven piano and cello repertory in two sittings? "I'm struck by the extraordinary variety of these pieces. Each one is a universe in itself," Takács says. "The g minor sonata is serious, almost tragic, with an amazing slow introduction. The F major is sunnier and lighter, the A major a ray of sunshine, and the last two sonatas couldn't be more different. The variations are *entremets* but very inventive; they're written to a kind of formula with an *adagio* as the high point."

Takács is also fascinated by the stylistic evolution of Beethoven's writing, particularly as the composer-pianist discovered how to write for the cello as a solo instrument. "The first two sonatas are very virtuosic for the pianist, but already Beethoven was doing a new thing by treating the cello as a solo rather than as a continuo instrument."

Another cycle of the complete Beethoven cello and piano works took place earlier this year at Oberlin when fortepiano professor David Breitman and Dutch cellist Jaap ter Linden performed the works on period instruments using two different early pianos. “I thought that was wonderful”, Tákacs said, noting that the balances were not problematic at all. “Although I believe that the cellist who first performed them was playing on a Strad, which I think led Beethoven to sometimes mark the piano dynamics louder than the cello!”

Thanks to new technologies, both of Peter Takács and Robert DeMaine's performances will be streamed over the Internet, allowing a world-wide audience to watch and listen. And by the time the second performance rolls around, DeMaine will have taken up a new post as principal cellist of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. “That will make rehearsals more difficult,” Takács said, “but it also opens up the possibility of more performances on the West Coast.” There's also a recording project on the horizon.

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