

Isserlis and Levin: Beethoven sonatas on the Cleveland Chamber Music Society Series

by Daniel Hathaway



Those who thought they knew the Beethoven cello sonatas probably had to think again after last Tuesday's recital by Steven Isserlis and Robert Levin on the Cleveland Chamber Music Society series at Plymouth Church in Shaker Heights. Over the last decade, the two performers have turned these pieces inside out and explored every crevice in their musical narrative. Heard in

a performance like that on Tuesday evening, the results of that joint inquiry are a revelation.

Performing on a gut-strung cello and a Wilhelm Leschen fortepiano built in Vienna in 1825 and on loan from Malcolm Bilson, Isserlis and Levin gave CCMS half of their normal, two-evening, all-Beethoven program on Tuesday. (They've recorded the whole program of five sonatas and the variation sets for a CD released in 2014).

Sonatas 1, 3 and 5 give an overview of Beethoven's evolution from 1796 (the Sonata in F, op. 5, no. 1) through his middle period (Sonata in A, op. 69, written in 1807-1808) to the beginning of his visionary late period (1815, the Sonata in D, op. 102).

Isserlis and Levin chose to play Nos. 1, 5 and 3 in that order, with a cheerful *entremet* as the next-to-last piece, the variations on Papageno's aria, "Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen," from *The Magic Flute*.

The immensely long first movement of the opus 5 sonata began with an exquisitely floated cello melody that gave the audience the opportunity to adjust its ears to the sonic parameters of the period instruments. That's especially true in the case of the fortepiano, which can draw you in to admire a passage at the softest end of the auditory spectrum, then knock your socks off with a sudden burst of ferocity. Though it can't play with the sheer volume of a modern Steinway, the fortepiano has resources of color, subtlety and percussiveness that work wonderfully to put the mercurial music of Beethoven across to an audience. And with its light touch, the fortepiano allowed Levin to play fast passagework at warp speed.

Isserlis and Levin have melded their minds in interpreting this repertoire, and their agreement on details of phrasing, articulation and musical emphasis was astonishing. As that long opening movement of the first sonata unfolded, they lit up dark corners that are rarely illuminated, and found ways to make special moments out of expressive sections without impinging on the flow and integrity of the piece.

The normally proper CCMS audience — who would never be so gauche as to applaud between movements — broke into spontaneous applause at the end of the first part of the opening work. The two performers smiled, and Levin quipped, “We’re still going to play the second movement.” And so they did, winningly.

Op. 102, no. 2 is a more compact work with more equal roles for cello and piano. Again, the dynamic range Isserlis and Levin explored seemed enormous, and they slyly snuck into the fugue with the same kind of instant transitioning they achieved all evening.

Humor and subtlety — and some extraordinarily percussive sounds from the fortepiano — marked the Papageno variations. Finally, the op. 69 sonata, with its terse Scherzo, intriguing finale, and finely-coordinated playing, brought the evening to an exhilarating conclusion. As though spring-loaded, the audience leapt to its feet for a tremendous ovation.

That was an earful of Beethoven and Isserlis and Levin wisely chose to leave the audience with a single, expressive encore: the beautiful *Ich ruf' zu dir* from J.S. Bach's *Little Organ Book*. Just a cello melody supported by an undulating middle line and gently pulsing bass line from the fortepiano — simple but austerely gorgeous.

Photo by Zsolt Bognar via Facebook.

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