

Pianist Peter Takács to perform three recitals at Carnegie Hall

by Mike Telin



On Sunday, October 18 at 2:00 pm, pianist Peter Takács will present the first of three recitals titled *The Beethoven Experience* in Weill Recital Hall at Carnegie Hall as part of the new Key Pianists concert series, conceived by pianist Terry Eder to fill a void in New York concert life.

According to Eder, “many wonderful pianists playing with wisdom, insight, sensitivity, and beauty are not heard in New York.

These stellar artists, as well as New York audiences, deserve an event to share this extraordinary music-making.”

Area audiences can hear Takács perform selections from his Carnegie Hall program on Thursday, October 8 at 8:00 pm in Oberlin Conservatory’s Warner Concert Hall. The program will include three of Beethoven’s early sonatas: Op. 2, No. 1 in f; Op. 13, No. 8 in c (“Pathétique”); and Op. 2, No. 3 in C.

Eder’s choice to have Takács perform Beethoven to kick off the series was an obvious one. Throughout his career Takács has earned critical acclaim for his performances, as well as his 2011 release of the complete Beethoven piano sonatas. Writing for the Cleveland Plain Dealer, Donald Rosenberg noted, “The 11-CD set is a supreme achievement for Takács and a gift to listeners who value artistic profundity.”

Having a conversation with [Peter Takács](#) is delightful. In addition to being an accomplished performer he has a brilliant mind, and is passionate about all things Beethoven. He also has a good sense of humor. “Beethoven’s musical output really is an

embarrassment of riches,” the soft-spoken pianist told me as we walked to his studio at the Oberlin Conservatory, where he has served on the faculty since 1976.

With such a vast and stylistically varied repertoire to choose from, how did he decide to represent the composer’s three distinct periods? “ I wanted to include the bookends — the first and last sonatas. Then the remaining programming was about variety.” I asked Takács to talk about each of his programs.



Recital I. Sunday, October 18, 2015 (Early Beethoven)

Piano Sonata No. 1 (Op. 2, No. 1) in F Minor, Trio for Piano, Clarinet and Cello (Op. 11), Piano Sonata No. 8 in C Minor (Op. 13, “Pathétique”), and Piano Sonata No. 3 in C Major (Op. 2, No. 3).

“This is a nice program to begin the series. It has a lot of variety of keys, styles, and moods that represent the different aspects of the young composer. In 1795 and 1796 Beethoven was twenty-five years old. He had just arrived in Vienna and wanted to prove his mettle. All of these pieces show different aspects of his brilliance and a lot of promise for the young composer.

“In keeping with the bookend idea, I’ll open with the first sonata. Terry Eder and I decided that we wanted to include chamber music, as well. I chose the early trio with clarinet and cello, which is a popular piece with a gorgeous slow movement, as Beethoven’s early period works often have. One of the joys of this whole enterprise was being able to invite wonderful musicians to join me, and Boris Allakhverdyan (principal clarinet of the Metropolitan Opera Orchestra) and Carter Brey (principal cello of the New York Philharmonic) are both phenomenal people and players.

“I didn’t want to exclude famous pieces like the ‘Pathétique’ just because they’re famous — they are famous for a reason. That piece is also representative of early Beethoven in a kind of early romantic style. I’ll end with the very brilliant third sonata in C major. It

turns out that every concert ends in C major. It was almost a subconscious affirmation of something.”

Recital II. Thursday, November 12, 2015 (Middle Beethoven)

Piano Sonata No. 17 (Op. 31, No. 2, “Tempest”), Sonata No. 3 for Piano and Cello (Op. 69), *Andante favori* (Wo057), and Piano Sonata No. 21 (Op. 53, “Waldstein”).

“I chose the ‘Tempest’ because it has a lot emotional storminess that represents the beginning of Beethoven’s middle period. Beethoven was being a little cagey by telling people if they wanted to understand the piece, they should read Shakespeare’s *Tempest*. I don’t know how much to associate the piece with the play, but it has a lot of drama. I particularly love the slow movement. After all the drama of the first, it shows his reverence for nature.

“I have the perfect piece to follow the ‘Tempest.’ I’ve been playing the cello sonatas with the wonderful cellist Robert deMaine, principal of the Los Angeles Philharmonic. One day I was leafing through Beethoven’s catalog and noticed that the A-major cello sonata is Op. 69, and his last work is Op. 138, so it is smack dab in the middle of his opuses. But it is a great piece, and it’s a joy for me to play it with Robert.

“I’ve also programmed the *Andante favori*. It was originally the second movement of the ‘Waldstein,’ but Beethoven was advised to replace it, and strangely enough, he took to advice.

“There are only two choices to end a piano concert of Beethoven’s middle period. Those are either the ‘Waldstein’ or the ‘Appassionata,’ and I chose the ‘Waldstein.’ It’s an epic work which I think of as two separate pieces. The first movement is very energetic, and the second and third movements feel like a different composition.”

Recital III. Thursday, January 14, 2016 (Late Beethoven)

Six Bagatelles (Op. 126), Sonata No. 10 for Piano and Violin (Op. 96), *An die ferne Geliebte* (Op. 98), and Sonata No. 32 (Op. 111).

“I chose the Bagatelles, the very last piece he wrote for solo piano, because they’re lavishly composed with a lot of care and thought put into them. I also wanted to include a violin sonata, so I chose Op. 96. This will be my first time working with violinist Soovin Kim, but I’ve heard him perform a number of times. He’s a wonderful chamber music player, and I’m very happy he agreed to do it.

“Tenor Virgil Hartinger is a former artist diploma student at Oberlin. He lives in Salzburg, which is also where he was born. The song cycle is an odd piece for

Beethoven to have written during his late period. He wrote some separate lieder, but never a cycle. It's a fabulous work with quite a bit of nature in it.

“I don't think there is any other way to end the series than with Op. 111. The piece is in two movements — the passionate first and the aria with variations — and there's a funny story connected to it. Beethoven sent it to his publisher, who wrote back saying that it was very nice, but when could they expect the third movement? I guess they wanted a rondo or something to appeal to the masses. But Beethoven wrote back, saying, 'yes I know, but I've been very busy lately.' Nothing can follow that set of variations which is absolutely transcendental, and encapsulates the miracle of late Beethoven. It's an absolute peak of Western culture.”

Takács pointed out that one of the difficulties of preparing for the three concerts is that the repertoire of each is so stylistically different. “Beethoven never wrote the same piece twice. It's also highly taxing to play Beethoven. You need to have endurance, focus, and concentration in a way that is different from playing music by other composers.

Preparing for Op. 111 is always an undertaking.”

Did Takács always have an affinity for Beethoven? “It took me a while, but the tipping point came in the mid-1990s. By then I had learned half of the sonatas, and wondered if I should complete the cycle. It was a decision, but I decided yes, I wanted to go ahead. So I booked recital dates here at Oberlin and dove into the deep end, which is what you have to do. Playing the cycle used to be a unique thing, and of course Artur Schnabel was the first to record all of them. But these days people are learning the cycle as young pianists. So it's now a known territory, although Club 32 is still fairly exclusive, but it's growing. Climbing this mountain did make a big difference in my life. I just felt like conquering something hugely significant.”

In conclusion, I reminded Takács of a story he told during his CD release concert about his first encounter with the “Waldstein” sonata. “It's a long-ago story,” the pianist said. “My family immigrated from Romania in 1961, when I was 14, and we spent a year in Paris being processed for immigration to somewhere. It's kind of relevant now with all that is happening in terms of immigration issues, both here and in Europe. But I was practicing in somebody's house and the Beethoven sonatas were on the music rack of the piano, and the book was open to the ‘Waldstein.’ I started reading through it, and though I was a kid at the time and didn't know anything, I thought, ‘this is a tough piece, but someday I'm going to play it.’ That was 1961 and my release concert was in 2011, so it took fifty years to finally fulfill my childhood dream.”

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