

CD Review

Peter Takács: Complete Beethoven Piano Sonatas

By Daniel Hathaway



For all those who fondly recall the LP era with its lavishly produced and documented boxed sets of complete recordings of this composer's symphonies or that composer's complete violin sonatas; for all those who were led reluctantly into the CD era with its tiny, antiseptic, plastic “jewel cases” and itsy-bitsy booklets packed with six-point type; for all those who take no physical pleasure in digital downloads and who really like the idea of owning beautiful, tactile objects: help has now arrived in the form of Oberlin piano professor Peter Takács' *The Complete Beethoven Piano Sonatas*.

This stunningly beautiful boxed set of eleven compact discs inspires delight right out of the shipping package. The color scheme of the enclosing box is a rich, chocolate brown overprinted with Beethoven's signature (the “L.v.” on the spine, “Beethoven” on the front cover). It feels heavy in the hands, suggesting the weightiness of its musical contents. Turn it to the open end and you find two distinct components, each of them booklike in form and made to last. Something makes you want to open the “Notes” before you even get to the discs themselves.

The table of contents promises four articles: “The Mind of Beethoven: A Performer's Perspective”, “A Note on Interpretation”, “The '32' — Beethoven's Piano Sonatas: The Birth of a Canon in Recital and on Records”, and “The Discs”.

The first two articles were both written by Peter Takács. In the first, he shares insights — literally his learnings from the inside out — into what “ideas, values and visions” fueled Beethoven's long output of piano music. He finds that four overriding characteristics breathe through the whole of Beethoven's compositions: restless energy; deeply felt expressivity; an antic sense of humor; and an impatience with limitations, traditions and inherited rules (“even his own”). He goes on to identify seven specific techniques and artistic goals that motivated Beethoven's creative process: A desire to surprise, startle and delight the listener; the influence of other instrumental forms on the color and texture of his piano music; operatic influences; nature as mystical inspiration; illness and healing; improvisation as a compositional device; and the search for transcendence.

It's worth quoting these topics at length because they provide a clearer view into Beethoven's mind than many more scholarly dissertations on Beethoven's piano sonatas or on his works in general. Takács goes on to amplify and demonstrate what he means with a well-chosen set of musical examples. In the ensuing article, "A Note on Interpretation", he notes some of his performing philosophy: that the musical text (in Beethoven's case, fraught with contradictions) is a "point of departure for the interpreter", not its final destination, and players must take historical and artistic contexts into account when making decisions; that he has taken some liberties with details in the sources; and that he's on the same page with Beethoven in thinking that tempo choice is "the most important element of interpretation" — but that the character of the musical material is always the foremost consideration in determining how fast or slow a movement should go.



The "Notes" go on to include a brief history of "complete performances" by Michael H. Gray, Takács' detailed, disc-by-disc program notes with musical examples, and a long list of acknowledgements and credits. The whole booklet is elegantly typeset and lavishly furnished with historical graphics, ending with a two-page spread depicting the composer's funeral in Vienna on March 29, 1827.

But there's more inside the "Notes". The fat back pocket houses a timeline assembled by Marina and Victor Ledin, printed double-sided on heavy, coated paper that unfolds to an extraordinary 18" by 19" and chronicles, year by year, parallel events in the areas of Beethoven's biography, and the worlds of music, literature, science and history. Just to choose one year at random: in 1798 when Beethoven was 28, he wrote both the opus 10 piano sonatas and the opus 12 violin sonatas; Wordsworth and Coleridge published their *Lyrical Ballads*, black holes were predicted by a French astronomer, Malthus published his theories on population, Cavendish measured the density of the earth, Nelson won the battle of the Nile, and Napoleon marched into Egypt.

The other part of the package houses the CDs, each in its own spine-bound envelope, each envelope bearing a contemporaneous image of Beethoven. The first ten discs contain the 32 sonatas in chronological order. The eleventh, which was a late idea for the project, makes this complete set truly complete by adding the "WoO" (works without opus numbers) Sonatas for solo piano and the Sonata in D for piano four hands of op. 6, for which Janice Weber joins Takács as *secondo* pianist.

Recording every piano work Beethoven wrote in the form of a sonata isn't something you can accomplish in the course of a week or a month. In Peter Takács' case, the project grew out of a set of solo recitals he performed over two years in Oberlin's Finney Chapel beginning in 2001 (read our interview published last September [here](#)). Recording the complete set on a Bösendorfer Imperial Grand in the concert hall at Austin Peay State University in Clarksville, TN, occupied Takács and his Boston recording team for twenty-nine days between March, 2002 and June, 2007, and the ensuing years were given over to editing, design and production. This set is obviously the realization of a lifelong dream for Peter Takács, and the results are splendid in every way.

Though the sonatas were recorded over the span of five years, there is a remarkable uniformity to the ambiance and sound. The Bösendorfer may provide more heft than some listeners would prefer for their Beethoven, especially in the bass, but Takács' touch and voicing are unerring throughout the cycle. He brings an appropriate sense of wit, humor, tragedy, poignancy, relief or delight to individual movements while steering well clear of any distortions of expression or musical form, and he makes sense and lucidity out of some of Beethoven's strangest moments. Takács closes his "Mind of Beethoven" essay with these words: "...at every point, I have tried to create a sense of naturalness and inevitability in my interpretive choices". He has done exactly that in this impressive set of CDs.

The Complete Beethoven Piano Sonatas would make a splendid holiday gift for Beethoven devotees as well as for casual listeners. Those who want to follow the composer on his journey into the possibilities of that musical platform might want to spin one sonata a day for a month with Peter Takács' notes in hand. Or, to get into the mind of the performer, listeners could recreate the recital he gave in Oberlin's Warner Concert Hall last September 22 — the tenth anniversary of the launching of his live Beethoven cycle. On that evening, he offered some of his favorite items in the Beethoven canon: the *Sonata in G, op. 49, no. 1* from 1797 (the first sonata Takács ever learned), the many-mooded *Sonata in D, op. 10, no. 3*, the *Andante in F, WoO 57*, aka *Andante favori*, and what the pianist described as "the crowning achievement of Beethoven's middle period", the "*Waldstein*" *Sonata, op. 53*. Thanks to Takács' complete Beethoven recording, the curious listener might even reassemble the original version of the Waldstein — with the *Andante favori* as its second movement — just to see if Beethoven's publisher was right about advising Beethoven to replace it with the current slow movement.

Peter Takács' Complete Beethoven Piano Sonatas was released earlier this year by Cambria Master Recordings as CD 1175-1185. The recording is in DSD (direct stream digital) and is released in Hybrid SACD multi-channel format, playable on all SACD and CD players. More information on Takács' [website](#).

Published on clevelandclassical.com December 6, 2011