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Summer at Snape 2025

Saturday 30 August 7.30pm
Snape Maltings Concert Hall

Duration: 95', including an interval of 20'

Imogen Cooper: Beethoven

Imogen Cooper piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Piano Sonata No.30 in E, Op.109 (1820) *22'*

i. Vivace, ma non troppo – Adagio espressivo – Tempo I
ii. Prestissimo
iii. Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung (Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo)

Piano Sonata No.31 in A flat, Op.110 (1821) *30'*

i. Moderato cantabile molto espressivo
ii. Allegro molto
iii. Adagio ma non troppo
iv. Fuga (Allegro ma non troppo)

INTERVAL

Piano Sonata No.32 in C minor, Op.111 (1822) *28'*

i. Maestoso – Allegro con brio ed appassionato
ii. Arietta (Adagio molto semplice e cantabile)

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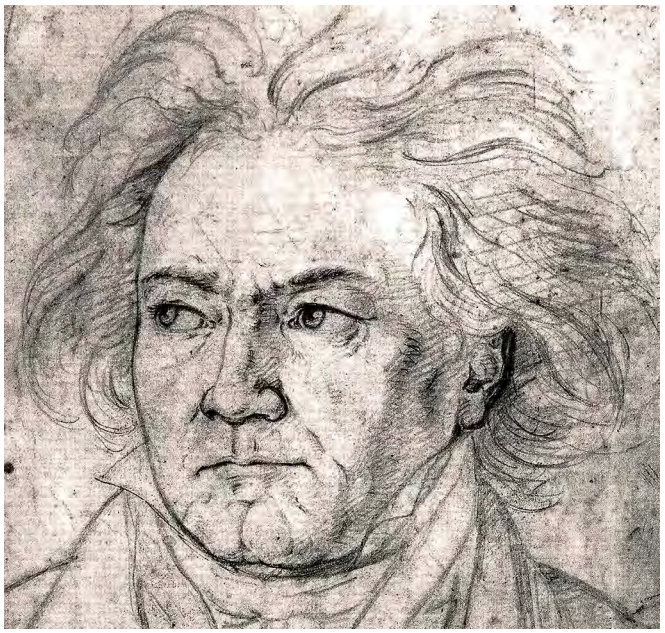
Three is the magic number. It is tempting to group significant trilogies of great works together in the course of a single performance: a journey through evolving styles, or a culmination of the composer's art – a programmer's cheat code. The last three symphonies of Mozart, or Sibelius, the Diaghilev–Stravinsky ballets, Schubert's last three piano sonatas. This is not to decry such an approach, though sometimes it can be impractical, or simply indigestible to the listener – we can have too much of a good thing.

Laying Beethoven's last three piano sonatas end to end, however, works beautifully, placing the challenge – technical and interpretative – mainly on the performer. All three are remarkably concise essays in the form; 'never has infinity seemed so economical' observes pianist Jonathan Biss wryly. They are wonderfully varied (in a fine mixture of major and minor, sharp and flat keys), markedly different to what had come before, and share many characteristics and some thematic and stylistic cross references. Compared to conventional sonata structures they all appear – at least initially – curiously lopsided, in that the last movements are the longest and weightiest.

Beethoven fitted their composition around his work on the mighty *Missa Solemnis*, with which they seem to share the same lofty ambition and spiritual intensity, albeit in abstract form. Interestingly, musical expression markings relating to song and singing abound in the sonatas – *cantabile*, *mezza voce*, *arioso*, *recitativo*, *arietta*: Beethoven wanted his pianist to sing, albeit in songs without words.

He also might have assumed they had access to modern technology. The sonatas were written at a new piano gifted to Beethoven by British piano-maker Thomas Broadwood in 1818. It was sent from London to Vienna on a journey so tortuous as to make modern piano technicians wince – a Mediterranean voyage to Trieste, a delay in port to wait for the snows to melt and then over the Alps by horse and cart. Whether or not his new piano made a difference to the style and content of the compositions, it may well have proved the spur to Beethoven's burst of creativity. He was clearly delighted with this louder, more robust instrument, which helped him as he struggled with his deafness, and was pleased even to own an instrument outright – he had previously relied on a variety of loans from Viennese piano-makers. 'I shall look upon it as an altar upon which I shall place the most beautiful offerings of my spirit to the divine Apollo' read his effusive thank-you letter.



August von Kloeber: Portrait of Beethoven (1818)

These 'beautiful offerings' begin in simplicity itself. The broken-chord patterns in the opening of **Op.109** are akin to a Bach prelude. The pace slows for a contrasting second theme with a restless feel. In four minutes, the movement is over, followed without a break by a stormy – but even briefer – minor-key fast movement. The core of the musical argument lies in the finale, a set of variations on a hymn-like melody. Beethoven's original manuscript was headed *Gesang* (song) which his publisher, presumably with permission, changed to *Gesangvoll* (song-like, or songful), confirming the composer's lyrical intentions for this music. 'Variations' seems a woefully inadequate term to capture the transformative processes to which Beethoven subjects his theme. It takes on a fresh character at every turn, without ever losing sight of its unbreakable, dignified beauty. Never has piano writing seemed so modern, exploratory and vividly coloured. Every extreme of the piano's register is used: Beethoven's Broadwood had six octaves, or 73 keys, compared to a contemporary concert grand's eight octaves (88 keys). The final passage of the variations is remarkable, with intricate embellishments and frame-rattling trills that seem to ebb away as if Beethoven has wrung all he can from his theme before it returns. Nothing has changed from its original iteration, and yet everything has changed; the effect is akin to the returning aria that concludes Bach's Goldberg Variations – time has been suspended, the object lifted, examined, turned to catch the light in as many ways as possible, and reset upon its plinth, the same, but altered, somehow.

Op.110 opens with a four-bar kernel that develops into a broad theme, marked *con amabilita* (amiably), decorated and embellished at leisure before coming to a contented conclusion. There is conjecture that the fast second movement draws on bawdy or nonsense drinking songs Beethoven may have heard. Whether true or not, this robust scherzo and trio has an element of mischief about it. The abrupt change in dynamics, the call-and-response nature of the themes and Beethoven's swaying syncopations and written-in silences does give it the air of the *bierkeller* – a little unsteady on its feet, with belligerent but short-lived arguments. From beer to Bach: Beethoven's finale borrows openly from the Baroque, beginning with soft-pedalled solemnity, a recitative that seems to search for the light as tremulous repetitions of a single 'A' lead to a lament

underpinned by throbbing left hand chords. A fugue ensues but dissipates into an even more doleful rendition of the lament, marked *ermattet* (exhausted). Perhaps here is where it ends, all energy spent. But Beethoven revives the flagging momentum with another fugue, its theme an inversion of its predecessor's initial subject – in other words, whilst the first fugue theme confidently stepped upwards, this one descends in mirrored intervals, with Beethoven hurling all the contrapuntal tricks of the trade at fugue 2.0 as it barrels towards a triumphant conclusion.

Did Beethoven know **Op.111** would be his final piano sonata? He showed no inclination to write another such work for his own instrument, though he was to live for another five years. At the time of its completion, with the small matter of the Ninth Symphony still to come, the *Missa Solemnis* to be completed, the last six quartets and the Diabelli variations yet to be written, it may simply have been for want of space in his schedule, or a suitable commission. Whether conscious of it or not at the time, this, then, is his farewell to the form. His publishers weren't even sure if it was Beethoven's last word on this particular sonata (having been presented with only two movements instead of the expected three), though it seems impossible to imagine anything following the grandeur and eloquence of the second movement.

The key signature is the portentous C minor, Beethoven's go-to key for turbulence and drama – as, for example, in the Fifth Symphony. And as in that symphony, fiery opening gestures are followed by an *allegro con brio* of furious kinetic energy. Even the contrasting second theme is underlaid by ceaseless activity. A fugal development section cannot dispel the storm, and the movement ends in a glowing, but unconvincing, C major chord – a chink of light rather than a true resolution. What follows is another sublime theme and variations movement, flowing here from an 'Arietta' – literally 'little aria'. This astonishing variation finale seems to be an encyclopaedic summation of all the piano's capabilities, exploring its extremities of range and dynamic, its potential for resonant spaciousness, percussive energy and intricate detail. There is even an improvisatory feel and syncopated swagger in the third variation that is more reminiscent of jazz than early 19th-century art music. Eventually, a succession of trills heralds journey's end, and the music cascades, subsides, and comes to rest in the poetic simplicity with which this movement – and the whole trilogy – had begun.