

BEETHOVEN Piano Sonatas Nos. 30–32 • Beth Levin (pn) • NAVONA 9508  
(66:00)

I am of the generation brought up on Schnabel's recordings from 1932. I have, at one time or another, heard many, possibly even most of the recordings of the countless pianists who have had the opportunity to record Beethoven's sonatas. I do not intend to analyze those recordings. I will, however, share the names of the pianists to whom I regularly listen: To comment on recorded performances of these much recorded works is a daunting task. They have been performed by every great pianist of the last two centuries and recorded by those of the past 90 or so years. In a January 25, 2015 review of Beethoven sonatas by another artist, *NYT* critic David Allen complained he did not hear "... the kind of Beethoven that shocked or surprised." I thought as I listened to Beth Levin's playing for the 10th or 12th time in a month of rehearsals: Does one want, necessarily, to be shocked? Surprised, maybe, but shocked? I want, rather, to have my knowledge of the music expanded. I want, also to sense the performing artist's reaction to the music — the feeling, as Levin expressed in correspondence, that to play these sonatas *seriatim* is an "exhilarating" experience. Surely that is conveyed here, and, my own horizons have been broadened. This is, I believe, an exceptional release: self-recommending Beethoven.

I listen, also, to Backhaus' first recording of op. 109, and to Awadagin Pratt and Giesecking in both opp. 109 and 110. I like Pratt; don't much care for Giesecking in those works. In earlier years, I listened often to Hess in opp. 109 and 110, and to Backhaus in op. 111, particularly. And to Serkin, Russell Sherman, and the late Claude Frank. I've yet to hear Paul Lewis and Jonathan Biss in their Beethoven sonata recordings; Schubert, but not Beethoven.

The Petri performances were taken from a July 1954 California recital. The only time I've heard the three works played "at a sitting" was a recital by Serkin, in his late years, in Minneapolis's Orchestra Hall. Serkin did not convince me these three works are necessarily meant to be heard as Beethoven said they were composed, "in a single breath." Beth Levin, who studied with Serkin and was mentored by him at Marlboro, has pretty much changed my mind. This CD was recorded in recital, April 20, 2012 at Faust Harrison Pianos in NYC. Op. 111 followed a short interval. The Steinway C (c. 1887) had only just finished a restoration process at the Faust Harrison shop in White Plains, NY. We hear Beethoven on a concert grand built some 65 years after the music was composed.

It has been noted in *Fanfare*, and elsewhere, that Levin's playing is not much like that of her mentor Serkin, nor of her other great teacher, Leonard Shure (with whom she studied at Boston University). Jerry Dubins notes in his review of Levin's *Diabelli Variations* (\*35:5\*) that she "presents the work from a different and personal perspective that is very much her own." His words apply as well to the sonatas at hand. Dubins also addresses comments sometimes made that Levin is a "slow" interpreter. This was also discussed in *Fanfare*'s review of her *Goldberg Variations* (\*32:3\*). I find the description simplistic beyond belief. I have not heard her *Diabelli*, but know her Bach well. Both are also concert recordings. Her overall timings in the Bach are nearly 10 minutes slower than Gould, identical to Tipo, and 10 minutes faster than Schiff. It is a function of repeats as much as tempos. In the *Diabelli*, she is 10 minutes faster than Serkin, five minutes faster than Schnabel. In these three Beethoven sonatas, her overall timing is within a minute of Schnabel (who was never considered slow). She takes a minute longer in the last movement of op. 109 and a minute or so less

than Schnabel in the final movement of op. 111. Erich Leinsdorf once told a group of us at Blossom that “the important thing is not so much the basic tempo, but, rather, the relationship of tempi. They must make sense.” To my ear, on that score, Levin shows mastery here.

Levin IS a deliberate player — ruminative, spontaneous. To paraphrase Dubins in his review, she takes her own time getting to where she feels she needs to be, or in my words, to find her end point. Sometimes “her time” is pretty fast and her approach impetuous, aggressive, even. I find her second movement of op. 109 a bit over-driven; it comes close to ending in a flurry of notes. One might, of course, say that Beethoven in his deafness wrote a flurry of notes. These sonatas, whether or not written intellectually and emotionally in that “single breath” were, in fact, composed over a two-year span of 1820–22. Just as Beethoven may have forgotten what the human voice could do (in his hearing loss), I sometimes think he forgot what was most pianistic. Also, the works shift mood constantly, from anger to repose, from frustration to acceptance. Perhaps this is why he made such use of fugal and variation forms. I learned them first from the American pianist Lee Pattison, who freely admitted he expected never to understand them fully. Not for nothing did Schnabel say it was “music greater than it can be performed.”

But Beth Levin does it full justice, and full justice to her teachers as well despite a very different approach and response to the music. Her final movement of op. 109 is improvisatory, breathless, at times almost suspended in time. I’ve never heard anything quite like it. I suppose Hess was closest, but not as technically assured. Op. 110 opens with ravishing piano tone and the entire performance holds together superbly. The artist conveys that she knows just where she is going. Similarly, after the break, just listening to this disc you would not believe a break had occurred: Op. 111 carries forward in a performance no less compelling, in toto, than that which preceded intermission. The final sonata may be the most finely played of the three, although technical accuracy is high throughout.

This CD makes for fine listening, both tonally (the piano) and sonically (the engineering). Bass response is superb, and so are the piano’s upper registers — a magnificent instrument. Session engineer Joseph Patrych’s recorded media went to Navona’s New Hampshire facility for mixing. All did their jobs well, as did the quiet audience. Cautionary note: The CD must, to sound its best, be played on equipment capable of good bass response. Hear this disc. You will not be sorry.

— James Forrest, \*/Fanfare/\* \*38:5\* (May / June 2015)