

BEETHOVEN'S CELLO SONATAS

Spanning all three periods of Beethoven's compositional output, the Cello Sonatas depict his entire life story. Two sonatas from the early period, one from the middle, and two from the late, render the voyage through the cycle truly extraordinary. In front of our ears, Beethoven transforms himself from confident virtuoso to supreme master of classical form, and then beyond that to a mystic exploring strange new worlds of unearthly beauty—a wondrous transfiguration. The works are staple to the cello repertoire.

The first sonata, Op 5 No. 1, feels experimental, as if Beethoven is cautiously exploring the unknown. In fact, it is a new world—Beethoven was practically inventing the medium as he wrote. This is the first major cello sonata with a written-out keyboard part, and quite a keyboard part it is, too—a vehicle for Beethoven the performer. In 1796 Beethoven paid a visit to the Berlin court of Friedrich Wilhelm II, King of Prussia, and composed the opus 5 sonatas in honour of the occasion. The king was himself a keen



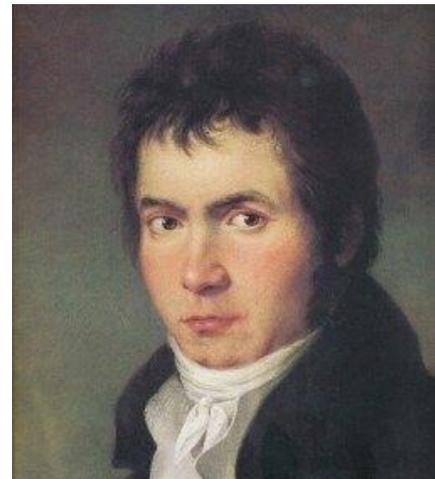
1 Jean-Louis Duport

amateur cellist, for whom Mozart had written the challenging cello parts in his late 'Prussian' string quartets; furthermore, Friedrich employed at his court two famous French cellist-brothers, Jean-Pierre and Jean-Louis Duport. It is unclear with which of the brothers Beethoven performed the sonatas—perhaps both. The sonatas were published in 1797, described as *'Deux Grandes Sonates pour le clavecin ou piano-Forte avec un Violoncelle Obligé.'*

The Cello Sonata in F major Op 5 No. 1 is almost like a concerto for the two instruments. The introduction is followed by a vivacious Allegro, its concertante nature emphasized by a cadenza for both instruments. The final rondo is even more extrovert although towards the end of the work the music dissolves into a poetic sunset, out of which we are abruptly jolted and hustled away towards a noisy conclusion. It is a vivid reminder of one of Beethoven's favourite tricks as a performer: having reduced his listeners to tears with the beauty of his improvisations, he would suddenly burst into loud laughter!

The opening of the Cello Sonata in G minor Op 5 No. 2 (by far the most substantial of the few works Beethoven wrote in this key) takes us firmly into the opera house. Following a dramatic opening chord, we hear the pianist's right hand winding down a descending scale. Out of this suspenseful atmosphere emerges a poignant aria which launches us on an eventful journey through an introduction that is practically a full movement in its own right. The ending is particularly theatrical, lengthy silences hover over a chasm of darkness, and it is through the dark key of C minor that we are introduced to the *Allegro molto più tosto presto*—the most explosive (and surely the longest) movement of any duo sonata written up until that time. In contrast, the last movement, another rondo, takes us straight from grand opera to opera buffa. From the opening notes, humour rules. The composer-performer stretches out his material with mischievous glee, reprising every possible section. A contemporary of Beethoven recalled: *'When he laughed you not only believed in him, but in all humanity.'*

The Cello Sonata in A major Op 69 inhabits a completely different world. Dedicated to another cello-playing aristocratic patron of Beethoven's, Baron von Gleichenstein, the sonata was completed in 1808, making it a close contemporary of the two piano trios Op. 70, and the fifth and sixth symphonies. This work, now perhaps the most popular of all cello sonatas, is the creation of a grand master at the very height of his powers. Beethoven, by this time plagued by increasing deafness, had given up his life as a virtuoso



2 Beethoven 1804/5

to concentrate almost solely on composition. For his third effort in this genre, Beethoven set himself the challenge of writing a truly equal duo sonata, all the material being equally adaptable for either instrument. The result is a triumph.

Beethoven once again incorporates a sense of exploration into the first subject of this work. The cello, as if to establish its new equal role, begins alone, posing a graceful question; this is taken up by the piano, and repeated with the voices reversed. The concluding flourishes for both instruments give the impression of an unfinished sentence; we have to wait until the end of the movement for its completion. There is certainly drama aplenty here, particularly in the central development section, but overall the abiding impression of this *Allegro, ma non tanto* is one of lofty serenity and lyricism. The second movement, a craggy Scherzo, is cast in a form Beethoven also used in his sixth and seventh symphonies, as well as in the string quartet Op 95: we hear the scherzo section three times, the middle trio section twice. The *Adagio cantabile* that ensues appears to promise a full slow movement, in E major; but within fourteen bars, Beethoven apparently changes his mind and whirls us into the gloriously sunny *Allegro vivace*. Lyricism, virtuosity and wit combine here to produce a dazzling celebration.



3 Joseph Linke

In the last two sonatas Beethoven takes us to a world undreamt of before their time—the world of late Beethoven. Increasingly isolated from the society in which he lived; Beethoven had withdrawn into an art that made no attempt to pander to the concert-going public. This is the purest of music, its new challenges for players as well as listeners reflected in the fact that these are the first of Beethoven's chamber works to be published in full score - with the cello line printed not only separately, but also above the piano part. Written in 1815, the sonatas were first played by the cellist Joseph Linke, with whom Beethoven spent that summer at the holiday residence of the Countess Marie Erdödy, the dedicatee of the sonatas. Linke was the cellist in the premieres of Beethoven's last three piano trios and his late quartets.

The music of the Op. 102 sonatas is profoundly compressed, free of any unnecessary notes - these works are roughly half the length of the opus 5 sonatas. The Sonata in C major Op 102 No.1 displays a concentration of material new even for Beethoven. The principal themes all derive from the cello's opening phrase, and this deeply organic approach unifies the work in an extraordinarily powerful way. From the outset of the sonata, marked to be played *teneramente*, we are in an unexplored, heavenly world. The contrast when the *Allegro vivace* begins could not be more vivid. An *Adagio* returns us to heavenly spheres before, bringing us back to life, the work's opening *Andante* returns magically transformed and Beethoven surprises us by opening the door into another, very different *Allegro vivace*. Humour rules again, and still all the main material comes from the work's opening two bars—right up until the sonata's final phrase.

With the Cello Sonata in D major Op 102 No 2, the last in the series, we have for the first time in the cycle a regular three-movement sonata, with the customary fast-slow-fast sequence. That, however, is where 'normality' ends. From the audacious opening, with its bold rising octave followed in the next bar by an even bolder rising tenth, we know that this is to be a major statement. A feeling of defiant strength suffuses much of the *Allegro con brio*. The *Adagio con molto sentimento d'affetto* is the only full slow movement in any of the five sonatas. According to his friend Karl Holz, Beethoven felt that: '*A Requiem ought to be quiet music—it needs no trump of doom; memories of the dead require no tumult.*' Perhaps that was in his mind as he composed this prayer-like chant. As in the C major sonata, we are left at the close of this movement on the brink of a question; but this time Beethoven gives us for a finale a powerful fugue—the first of the great fugues that were to become a regular feature of his late works. The conclusion of the fugue is exultant: we can feel the triumph of man over all adversity. This is surely Beethoven's story.