

“Giving inside thoughts about Beethoven and his compositions”

Interview with Maestro Ivo Pogorelich

Dear Maestro, it's really a revelation to see the program of your all Beethoven recital. First of all, could you be so kind to share with us your thoughts of the composer? Does Beethoven mean something special to you?

To me, ever since I was a child, coming across Beethoven's music was filled with respect that came from my father. As far as his works written for the orchestra, I was always surprised at how much impact it had on me, it was almost overwhelming and for a child often frightening. It was all the more frightening when it came to playing his music for the first time on the piano. When I look back, I sympathize with teachers, for there is not an optimum time to introduce a young pupil to his music. It so happened that the program I will be playing, has two pieces, first of which is Sonata No. 8, Pathétique, that was given to me when I was 9/10 years old and which created a confusion on the hands. On the one hand I liked the piece but on the other hand I was technically not advanced enough at that age for such a complicated work. So the result was frustrating and I never went back to that work for more than 40 years. Similarly at the age of 12, I heard in a concert, offered by pupils of the school where I studied at that time, a concert in which one of my colleagues, a young lady, played Rondo op. 129 and then, when I said to my teacher in the following week, that I liked the piece very much and that I would want to study it, the teacher said that he preferred me to practice some romantic piece instead. So I never learned that piece until recently - 40 years later. This illustration demonstrates how sensitive the subject of Beethoven – in the repertoire of a young, very young pupil – is and how one can easily hit the wall, even if the intentions are positive.

Ten years later, however, you stunned the world by Beethoven's last piano sonata. Even to this day, it's still very rare for anyone to record the Sonata Op.111 as his or her first Beethoven recording, not to mention the formidable musical and technical achievement you displayed in the recording. Could you reveal some "personal experience" of your journey of mastering Beethoven's piano music?

As I explained, the encounter with Beethoven's compositions could be very rough. I had the fortune to study the Sonata No. 1 in f-minor with a very intelligent teacher, who replaced the one who recommended to me the Sonata op. 8, Pathétique. She realized that I was unhappy about the experience and she began very carefully but very systematically to prepare me for the exam and so I felt that I had accomplished one of his works well and that I have had some advance. The problem with showing Beethoven to others lies in the incredible complexity of his piano music that comes from his complexity as a composer and person in actual life. He was so gifted that anything he touched, he showed excellence in; he was a high virtuoso, capable of astonishing the public with his improvisations, able to develop a theme into variations in front of the public. He could play other instruments like Cello and Viola and the music that he left, in my view is like a continent. If we imagine that there are beautiful islands and each island represents one composer, than his island is as big as a continent. Regarding my own contribution I have to say, that I did not ever leave his music outside of my programs and I would normally play one or two of his works every second season and it is relatively recent that I came to the decision to study one of his most well-known and famous works, called Appassionata. My motivation was to find for myself an answer to the strange question, why is this music considered so beautiful when it is

played so brutally. The place where I studied, you could hear the sounds of that Sonata banging from every window. Everybody was tremendously excited about being able to present Appassionata at the exam or in concert. And to this day it is one of the pieces that you will probably find has been played at some stage of the development by any piano student or a concert performer. I could never understand the spirit of that piece whenever I heard it and so I stopped listening to it either in concert or on the recordings. This happened many years ago until one day I opened the book of Beethoven Sonata's in my library and looked at the music without touching the piano. I was suddenly attracted to the 2nd page of the first movement and when looking at a material that connects the first and the second theme, I came across something truly fascinating and that was the bait that I suddenly felt the Sonata has invited me to look at it. So I looked and looked and then I started to read it at the piano. It took me a very long time, a long part of one summer about four years ago, until I came to the realization that, in order to understand and possibly perform this piece, I needed to forget anything I knew or heard about in the past. So there was this music that looked to me like a labyrinth – the material was at the same time so known to me but also absolutely unknown in real sense - and then the process began.

You are not only going to present Appassionata alone, but also the piano sonatas published before (No.22) and after (No.24) it in your recital?

Actually, it's my fortune that I studied and performed Beethoven's other sonata and that is the one in two movements Op. 78, written after Appassionata. The reason why I think it was fortunate was that it was so as if you are asked to resolve a puzzle and you are given a certain clue. The Sonata op. 78 is printed in the book of Sonata's as No. 24 corresponding to the fact that Sonata Appassionata is under No. 23 and here we come to the second part of the puzzle. The Sonata which was written before Appassionata, also in two movements, is printed in the book as No. 22. This proximity was sensed by me as the important factor in understanding each of the three works. First of all it is very clear that the mastery of the instrument that Beethoven had reached towards that particular period of his life, was so high that, speaking about command of the instrument and the virtuosity content it is very difficult to find two relatively short works, each in 2 movements, that are flanking this big expansive partitur of the Appassionata, where the virtuosity will be pushed to such a height. I honestly believe in all the music that I played until now I did not come across such difficulties in reading the material, finding the right fingering or the right gestures for the hands. It is only then that I understood how advanced the composer was – both in his spiritual development as a philosopher with a beating heart - but also how tremendously ahead of his time he was pianistically. Only then I understood that Appassionata is a piece, where virtuosity is and has to be presumed before you even play the first note of it. The author himself, by the time he wrote the work, was a leader in virtuosity, not only for his contemporaries but for the time to come, including our time today. It is why, if we look at others and compare them to islands, I compare him to a continent.

I think it's definitely a tremendous challenge to perform all these works in one recital?

This program – although not as a goal or objective but rather as a consequence – will demonstrate to the listeners the wide spectrum and the truly astounding variety, the seemingly endless invention of this composer through a mixture of pieces that are performed most regularly, like the Pathétique and Appassionata played by the students, like the Rondo 129 (much like I wanted to play it when I was 12 years old) as well as the works that are so seldom performed in concerts, like the Sonata op. 54 and the Sonata op 78, the reason being the mysterious difficulty and enigmatic aspect that both works contain; so it

is very hard to imagine something so demanding on the performer and it is very curious that, before I played it for the first time in public, I had a mixture of willingness but also trepidation about bringing together all these works in one single recital. In the process of preparation for this recital I sometimes had the feeling that I was climbing mountains, both pianistically and musically. To get in the right motion, so to speak, for the music to flow as it needs to, but also to feel comfortable at the same time, was very hard and I often felt that I was touching the wall with my nose, just as it happened so many decades ago, when I was a child and aware of the colossal task I was facing. The only difference is that today I have more solutions available, more options that I can employ. Still, without the full engagement of the mind, of the heart and of the fingers the doors do not open. Once they do open, an incredible world, noble and beautiful, is there for the artist to experience and transmit to the public.

I was wondering, for you, what are the most misunderstood aspects of Beethoven and his music nowadays? It seems that for many people Beethoven has been highly (but not always correctly) stereotyped, and so many pianists are playing his works in very similar ways. How do artists bring back the revolutionary qualities in performing his music?

First of all one has to take away the stigma that frightens young pupils. In my opinion slow introduction to Beethoven works - like a slow exposure photo – is the best method. Teaching the young pupil not to play the whole Sonata but may be one movement or even part of one movement over a long period of time so that the pupil could feel that this music is more than just a melody and the accompaniment. Second, early introduction into listening to his other works – not only Symphonies but also works for Cello, Violin and Ensemble music like Quartet's, could be very helpful but in reality all of that is not enough. One also has to belong to the tradition of Beethoven Piano School to which, for example I do through Liszt and Liszt's followers. But even that is not enough as really, to imagine that just because you played one Sonata well – and we now go back to the beginning of this interview – quoting you and stating how, at the age of 22/23 (Sonata op 111, No. 32 was on my graduation program I played and also recorded for Deutsche Grammophon - my privilege was that the entire project was instigated, worked through with me and supervised by Mme. Alice Kezderadze in the period of 1979 through 1982) does not put me in a position today of somehow being able to automatically interpret any other of the Sonata's, because playing any of the 32 Sonata's is not like meeting brothers or sisters, it is like meeting 32 completely different people who each speak and sing in their own language. So once again we go back to the question of humility. We are in front of a colossal building we want to enter, we don't know how to do it, but if our intention is honest and if we look for substance rather than "applaudissement" and if we are ready to be patient, sometime during the process, inside the big cathedral, there is a chest of jewels awaiting us so that we can gaze at them. A reward that gives back to us the same sentiment of warming the heart as we feel when we have done something right and righteous.

I am very touched by what you just said. Thank you very much for sharing that with us. And now, let me continue our interview by more detailed questions about the sonatas in your program. First of all, about the Sonata No.8, I was wondering how you find the correct sound and dynamics for the Rondo movement?

The question about the Rondo is that the power needs to come from the recognition and understanding of the character, which is very often surprisingly intriguing and elegant, but it has a very healthy earthly vigor as well.

About Sonata No.23: As far as the structure is concerned, everything in this Sonata comes from the first two lines of the piece. It's such an incredibly built work, but how do pianists properly present the wonder of this structural achievement? Again, how do you find the correct colors for it?

Sometimes you feel as if you are walking in a dark room, being blindfolded. I think that you really have to employ all of your senses, but also rely on what Beethoven as a composer did and what was his instinct and intuition were. Although this work is mathematically so enormously logical, it still requires artistic instinct as an indispensable element needed for performing

About Sonata No.22 Op.54:

I have been amazed by this sonata since I heard it for the first time. For me, Beethoven creates a truly unique world for the people who really understand his musical language—and he also plays with the conventional forms and rules in a very personal way. Actually reading the score usually gives me more pleasure than listening to many (mediocre) performances. Could you be so kind to tell us more about your thoughts on this special piece?

There is no composer of any époque or culture after Beethoven, who wrote for the piano and was not influenced by that piece. You can find rhythmical and harmonic references in the works of Schumann, in the works like for example "Toccata" you can also find rhythmical references and harmony as in the music of Rachmaninoff, Granados and all the prominent 20th century composers. Going back in time for example in all piano works of Brahms one can see the direct influence in terms of coordination between the two hands. In terms of the spectrum of the keyboard no one could write for the piano in the same way any longer, because that work not only stretched the piano keyboard to previously unseen heights of virtuosity but also changes began in the stylistic approach, for example the first movement is not called a Minuet but instruction is given to make us understand the time or else the tempo or else the character or else the spirit. So in this way transcending the form is what other composers began once Beethoven showed them the example.

About Sonata No.24 Op.78:

Five years after the Op.57, Beethoven wrote this piece as a new start in his journey of piano sonatas. Probably most people do not realize how difficult that sonata is! But even so, I am still a little bit surprised that you have decided to play it after the Appassionata (if the order is correct). Could you be so kind to tell us more about that?

Yes it is definite that in terms of perception, this Sonata, according to some rapports, was the favorite one of the author himself. Whether or not such a revelation is historically correct, one thing is certain, much like the Sonata op. 54, that work is a laboratory piece, experimental and fantastical in its imageries. He comes very close to the later development in cinematography, where, without any intervening sections, the material is presented as changing pictures. Very short segments, powerfully connected together do create a feeling of surprise in both movements of the work. What is also astonishing is, that before humour began to play part of the imagery of program music, this Sonata, as enigmatic as it is, offers to us passages of humour, a quality we enjoy as species. The other astonishing aspect is condensation, where so much acoustic information is reduced to two very short

*movements and the effect is the one of the explosion of spirit, very potent and very lasting.
Much more can be said about this work.*

Thank you very much – it was a pleasure to interview you

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