

Orbiting Around Op. 109

Thoughts on the Music by Víkingur Ólafsson

When you spend an entire year playing virtually nothing but Bach's *Goldberg Variations* in different concert halls around the world, strange things start to happen. Slowly, the work takes over your perception of reality, forcing you to notice how, really, everything can be viewed as a set of variations: places, events, people. Trees, leaves, houses, streets. Thoughts and ideas. Cells and DNA. All the things that start from something very small, repeat themselves, multiply and diversify, until they reach a level of great complexity, before returning to their origins, shrinking and vanishing altogether. Entire civilizations.

A little less unnervingly, you also become aware of how the *Goldberg Variations* themselves have influenced the great composers of the Western tradition that came after Bach. You start finding the footprints of this great work in other great works – in their form, their counterpoint and musical spirit. As I started searching for my next recital programme, I was immediately drawn to a set of works where I felt the presence of the *Goldberg Variations* in the most inspiring way: the last three sonatas of Ludwig van Beethoven, opp. 109, 110 and 111.

I should probably add that I do not think that a year-long immersion in the *Goldberg Variations* is necessary in order to appreciate how the music of Bach informs the astounding internal revolution that we call Beethoven's third creative period. The works of this period seem to achieve the impossible in all sorts of ways: they are both intimate and cosmic in their scope, rigorously polyphonic and fleetingly improvisatory. Their wild inventiveness and transcendence of traditional form is rooted in a deep engagement with Baroque elements. They are the music of the future, and yet they are fuelled by the music of the past – the music of Bach.

After a few days in my practice studio, I decided against the time-tested method of performing these three great final sonatas together and releasing them as one album. There are some great recordings of the "three sisters" in the catalogue already, but I felt that playing – and listening to – all three in succession would not necessarily be the most

illuminating way of approaching them at this point in time. Placing just one of these three sonatas at the gravitational centre of a programme, conversely, would allow me the joy of travelling freely in its orbit, discovering new perspectives on it, while also encountering other works within its realm. Beginning with a programme focusing on the Sonata op. 109 (No. 30), I could indulge in wondering what path led to this work, what else was happening around the time it was written (1820), and how those developments might have influenced other composers. Most importantly, I could adhere to the pleasure principle and create the sort of recital I myself would like to listen to.

And so, this programme begins with Johann Sebastian Bach. The opening work is the Prelude in E major BWV 854 from Book 1 of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*. With its serene beauty and its bittersweet chromaticism, it feels both like an invitation and a prophecy for the music that lies ahead.

Beethoven and Schubert

I have always been somewhat pitch-oriented when building my programmes and albums. Having synaesthesia may play some role here. For instance, I perceive the pitch of E as green in colour, so works in both E major and E minor evoke different hues of green, ranging from dark and lush to bright and vibrant. I am naturally drawn to exploring the parallels that exist within a given key in a composer's body of work, and so, in relation to op. 109, my mind went in the direction of the Sonata in E minor op. 90 (No. 27), written six years earlier. As it turns out, the two works do share more than the interplay between E major and E minor. The deceptively compact but richly imaginative two-movement Sonata op. 90 feels in many ways like a precursor to op. 109. Many have noted the contrasting elements at play in this subtly experimental work, variously portrayed as a battle between head and heart, prose and poetry, or speech and song. The first of the sonata's two movements is fragmentary and ruminative in structure, full of unexpected twists and sharp changes in affect. But what drew me to this work more than anything else is the second movement, the rondo in E major, where all the preceding storms are stilled by a gloriously sonorous, tender melody. In my mind, this music belongs to the same amiable and warm side of Beethoven as the outer movements of op. 109, written in the same key.

Playing Beethoven's op. 90 again and again in my studio and revelling in its lights and shades, a faint memory from my teenage music school days in Reykjavík emerged in my mind – of a friend of mine playing the first movement of an early piano sonata by Franz Schubert I had never since heard – or seen in a concert programme. This, I summoned up, was Schubert's Piano Sonata in E minor D 566, written by the twenty-year-old composer in 1817, two years after Beethoven's op. 90 was published in their mutual home city of Vienna. Playing through Schubert's sonata myself for the first time felt like a revelation. Here was a strikingly beautiful but generally overlooked Schubert sonata that seemed to have been hiding in plain sight: a small gem that, for all its brevity, contained both the contemplative depth and the songful, timeless expanse of the composer's later piano sonatas. The reason it has been largely absent from the concert hall is its perceived status as unfinished: ever since its earliest, posthumous editions, scholars have sought to supplement its two fully completed movements, in E minor and E major, with additional music to complete a four-movement structure, with what I consider wholly unsatisfactory results. But playing it alongside Beethoven's op. 90 – and comparing the wonderfully mellifluous second movements in both works – I became convinced that Schubert's D 566 did not have to be treated as a fragment, but rather as a perfect and assuredly sculpted two-movement sonata in the mould of Beethoven's¹.

Not a Stream, but an Ocean

If Beethoven's influence helped Schubert reach artistic maturity, Bach was the compass on Beethoven's journey into the unknown. Throughout his career Beethoven studied Bach's works and copied them out to internalize his techniques. A famous (and probably too-good-to-be-true) legend quotes Beethoven in a humorous play-on-words with Bach's name, which in German means "stream", exclaiming with characteristic persuasion: "Nicht Bach, sondern Meer sollte er heißen: wegen seines unendlichen, unerschöpflichen Reichtums an Tonkombinationen und Harmonien" – "Not a stream, but an ocean should be his name, because of his infinite, inexhaustible wealth of tone combinations and harmonies." I get a

¹ In fact, Princeton musicologist Edward T. Cone had made this argument in 1970 (Cone, E. T. (1970), *Schubert's Beethoven*, *The Musical Quarterly*, 56 (4), pp. 779–793). For a general discussion on Beethoven's relationship with and influence on Schubert, I also recommend Maynard Solomon's article on the subject (Solomon, M. (1979), *Schubert and Beethoven*, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, pp. 114–125).

sense of this vast ocean in Bach's final, monumental Partita No. 6 in E minor BWV 830, which I have placed in between Beethoven's op. 90 and Schubert's D 566 in order to provide a little distance between the two. In a programme that revolves around Beethoven's op. 109, it is worth noting how Bach, too, is testing and transcending the limits of his chosen compositional form in his final Partita, taking elements that originated in dance and turning them into formal abstractions, free to travel into uncharted musical territory. Take, for instance, the work's remarkable opening Toccata – which for the most part is not really a toccata, but a fugue. Or the Air, which in some playful subversion is the most instrumental, un-songlike movement in the whole work. Or the Tempo di Gavotta – is that really a gavotte? A Gigue in quadruple metre instead of the traditional triple? Unanswered questions like these opened up the form for generations to come.

Nothing to Prove

Writing about the last three piano sonatas of Beethoven, Glenn Gould warned against superimposing periods on the creative outputs of great composers, and particularly against monumentalizing their last works in any genre as final testaments, rightly pointing out that composers themselves usually do not plan for any work to be their *last*². But, the dangers of cliché aside, there is something in Beethoven's last piano sonatas that unmistakably belongs to a "late style": a realm of creativity that only seems attainable through experience. This is the music of someone who has had to come to terms with the evanescence of public approval, patronage, fortune and health. This is the music of someone whose imaginative and technical mastery now transcends tradition, but also transcends the youthful urge to rebel against tradition. This is the music of someone who no longer has anything to prove.

This is the feeling I get when I play the unassuming opening of the Sonata op. 109, that gentle and natural exploration of the keyboard that could almost stem from Bach's *Well-*

² See Gould, G., & Page, T. (1999), *The Glenn Gould Reader*, Faber, pp. 54–57

Tempered Clavier (and was indeed perhaps originally conceived as a piano étude), before it is ruptured by the passionate, virtuosically expressive brush strokes of the contrasting *Adagio espressivo*. Throughout the work we sense a unique coexistence of Baroque discipline and spontaneous freedom – and, as the work progresses and its originality intensifies, the presence of Bach is only more pronounced. Take, for instance, the fiery *Prestissimo* that jumps out of the final chord of the first movement without warning. Its nervous tension is driven by a Baroque polyphony where an exquisite arsenal of Bachian counterpoint is on display.

And finally, there is the grand, awe-inspiring third movement, longer than the first two combined. For the first time in Beethoven's piano sonatas, this finale is a set of variations. To me, it feels like a deeply felt homage to the *Goldberg Variations*. Just as in Bach's great work, the opening theme here is a graceful sarabande that embarks on a wild journey of transformation, reaching metaphysical heights of virtuosic keyboard writing. And, as in the *Goldberg Variations*, this sarabande returns at the end in all its original, disarming simplicity. This was the only time Beethoven wrote variations with this kind of cyclical return of the theme and, just as in the *Goldberg Variations*, the re-encounter at the end feels profoundly meaningful. Smaller, delightful references abound – compare, for instance, Variation 3 in op. 109 with Variation 8 in the *Goldbergs*, or Variation 4 in the Beethoven with Variation 3 in the Bach. And there is the use of both earth-shattering and stratospheric trills in Beethoven's cataclysmic final variation that echoes Bach in his 28th variation. And, just as for Bach, the inherently open, exploratory nature of the variation form makes it a perfect vehicle for Beethoven's limitless musical imagination.