



High opera and irony — Herbert Schuch's reflections on Beethoven

On his new solo album “Reflecting Beethoven”, the German pianist Herbert Schuch casts a surprisingly fresh look at this many-faceted classical composer, with three modern piano miniatures by Henri Pousseur, Mike Garson and Leander Ruprecht acting as commentaries on the sonatas No. 8 (“Pathétique”), No. 16 and No. 17 (“The Tempest”) in a process of mutual enrichment.



Reflecting Beethoven

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 8 in C minor Op. 13 „Pathétique”

- [1] GRAVE — ALLEGRO DI MOLTO E CON BRIO
- [2] ADAGIO CANTABILE
- [3] RONDO. ALLEGRO

Mike Garson (*1945)

[4] PATHETIQUE VARIATIONS, FOR PIANO

Henri Pousseur (1929-2009)

[5] COUPS DE DES EN ECHOS, POUR PIANO

Herbert Schuch piano

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Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 16 in G major Op. 31 No. 1

- [6] ALLEGRO VIVACE
- [7] ADAGIO GRAZIOSO
- [8] RONDO. ALLEGRETTO

Piano Sonata No. 17 in D minor Op. 31 No. 2 “The Tempest”

- [9] LARGO — ALLEGRO
- [10] ADAGIO
- [11] ALLEGRETTO

Leander Ruprecht (*1999)

[12] SONATA IN D MINOR (2ND VERSION)

Is Beethoven being played to excess in the anniversary year of 2020? “There is no such thing as too much Beethoven!” says the pianist Herbert Schuch with conviction. He is sure that a whole lifetime would be too short for a pianist to completely sound out this Viennese master in his diversity, his different moods, his occasional flashes of ambiguity and his palpable irony: “With Beethoven, it is amazing how many options are open to you. But in the end, it should be precisely the option that you yourself feel is the best one. And to find out which one this is, a lifetime is really not enough – let alone a year.” All the same, this pupil of Alfred Brendel, born in Romania, is always finding new, **fascinating ways to connect Beethoven's musical world with that of today**. Reviewing Schuch's previous solo CD, “Bagatellen” (2019), critics enthusiastically acclaimed how the Cologne-based pianist had turned “Beethoven (almost) into a contemporary” of György Ligeti, some of whose works are also played on the album. The concept behind it is “simply brilliant in the way it is carried out, particularly in the moments when Beethoven seems to be a child not of the 18th, but of the 20th century.” (Tobias Stosiek on br-klassik.de)

Schuch, whose outstanding interpretation of Beethoven has already won him an Opus Klassik award (for his recording of the Piano Concerto No. 3), continues with this concept on his **new CD “Reflecting Beethoven”**, combining the three piano sonatas Nos. 8, 16 and 17 with three miniatures by Henri Pousseur, Mike Garson and Leander Ruprecht that contain strong references to the Beethoven works. His rejection of any routine approach to repertoire is also made clear in his detailed analyses of the works recorded here. The album opens with the **“Pathétique” Sonata, op. 13** – for Schuch, a “very big Italian opera with a weighty introduction, great drama, an altercation between two people in the second subject, the middle movement a bel canto aria and the finale as a farewell scene.” The **“Pathétique Variations” by Mike Garson** that follow then make the impression of an improvised tour

de force through the stylistic pluralism of today's more demanding forms of popular music (it is no coincidence that Garson is known as David Bowie's keyboarder of many years) – Schuch himself will certainly not be the only person to find them “an enchanting homage to Beethoven as melodist”.

Henri Pousseur's “Coup de dés en échos” acts as a kind of prologue to Beethoven's Sonata in G Major, op. 31/1. For Schuch, Pousseur's piece not only stirs memories of his own pianistic training as a 13-year-old (“my very first really modern piece ... after that I was more or less hooked”), but also conjures up rhythmic associations between the semiquaver displacements right at the beginning and the first movement of Beethoven's work. The **G major sonata** seems to reveal Beethoven's ironic side. For Schuch, its second movement is “like an exaggerated depiction of an overstrung soprano diva singing her coloraturas to the accompaniment of mandolins. For me, the attempt to transform piano sound into a human instrument is something wonderful because it allows me to slip into a completely new role.” The following Sonata in D Minor, op. 31/2, with the popular nickname “The Tempest”, is the dramatic sister piece to its predecessor. According to Schuch, it confronts the pianist with several fundamental challenges at once: it begins “like the first sentence of a novel, awakening maximum curiosity, before a lot happens in quick succession and we struggle to keep up with events ... Beethoven shows himself to us as a person in all his vulnerability.” The middle movement is a true mystery: “Three notes, unaccompanied: done! This means that I as a musician have to care so unbelievably much more for these three notes.” And in the final movement, the challenges culminate in avoiding the temptation of turning it into a Chopin nocturne (before its time) owing to its constant pulsating semiquaver rhythm. To close the album, we travel forward in time to the 2010s to the **“Sonata in D minor (2nd version)” by Leander Ruprecht**, one of the most promising young composers in Germany. This work refers back to the “Tempest” sonata both in its motifs and its mood, although Schuch reads an almost humoristic episode into the modern score: “Leander Ruprecht takes the opposite path by turning music back into the noise from which the music perhaps arose. Beethoven was always having problems with his neighbours, who are sure to have complained at some stage by tapping with a broomstick. I imagine this mad background noise. Ruprecht provides the soundtrack.”

Anyone who has listened to Herbert Schuch's new CD will want the Beethoven anniversary year to go on forever, as it obviously has so much unheard potential to offer.

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