

REVIEW RECORDING OF THE YEAR



Print



Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 30, Op. 109 in E major
[19:20]

Piano Sonata No. 31, Op. 110 in A flat major
[19:12]

Piano Sonata No. 32, Op. 111 in C minor
[25:53]

◆ Penelope Crawford (fortepiano, Conrad Graf, 1835)

rec. 5-8 April 2010, First Presbyterian Church, Ypsilanti, Michigan, USA

◆ **MUSICA OMNIA MO0308** [64:25]

This has been a very good year for Beethoven piano sonata aficionados who prefer the sound of the period pianoforte. [Alexei Lubimov](#)'s idiosyncratic but mostly engaging account of the final three sonatas appeared early in 2011, joining two previous accounts of the last three well worth recommending: Ronald Brautigam's fast, fleet, comparatively 'classical' approach and Paul Komen's warm, rich reading on the Globe label. And now Penelope Crawford, maybe the leading American fortepianist, weighs in with her interpretation - arguably the best of all. It's closest to Komen's in its lyricism, poetic demeanor, and spiritualism. I wouldn't want to miss any of Crawford, Komen, or Brautigam, but then I'm mad about this music.

Penelope Crawford actually jumps into Op. 109 with abandon and virtuosity, and there is not much relenting in the drama or the fine percussive attack of the Conrad Graf 1835 instrument until the slow movement unfolds over thirteen expansive minutes. A few of the variations here really do have the healing magic that distinguishes the very best performances: just listen to the extraordinary muted tones of the Graf instrument at around 7:25. Op. 110 follows a similar pattern: there is no short-changing any of the moods Beethoven strikes, nor an attempt to

homogenize them; if Crawford has a leg up on the speedy Brautigam or the warm Komen, it is that her approach to the music cannot always be packed up in a single adjective. The fugal sections of the work are played with a Bach-like coolness and objectivity which melt away in the adagios (the transition from 5:40-5:55 is masterfully done), and in the triumphant final climax.

The final sonata lacks, in its opening pages, the extra savagery which is so compelling in Brautigam's reading; one misses the fiery drama which can tie the first movement to the mood of Beethoven's past struggles in C minor. But the arietta is something altogether different, and here Crawford offers as lucid and transcendent a reading as you can hear anywhere. I've long felt that the fortepiano sound is irreplaceable in some of the variations of the movement: they still sound alien on a modern concert grand, but they are really daring, especially magical on the more alien variations at the topmost registers of the instrument. If you know the sonata only from performances on a Steinway, you'll know there are variations of somewhat mystical, esoteric tinkling: but on this instrument, with its extraordinary muted sonorities, those passages sound dangerous, new, startling, and chillingly beautiful.

Even setting performance aside it's an attractive package: the sound is ideally welcoming, the pianoforte a marvelous warm instrument (as mentioned) tuned as scholars estimate the keys would have been tuned at the time, and the booklet essay, by Jeremiah McGrann, is really an outstanding (and in-depth at 14 pages) look at these works. I prefer my Opp. 109-111 to be spiritual exercises, and in the first two it hardly gets better than Gilels/DG for me; Penelope Crawford comes from this tradition and she is a rare fortepianist who could stand up to direct comparison to Gilels or Pollini. She is clearly a major artist able to find both classical backbone and poetic blood in the lives of these works, and the Graf instrument is one of the best to ever be deployed in these sonatas.

When I got this disc for review, I was still working on a write-up of Alexei Lubimov's disc, covering the same sonatas and on an Aloiss Graf instrument; I thought, "oh, no, not another one". My reaction would have been much different had I known. This disc is special.

Brian Reinhart

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