PROGRAM NOTES

Violinists and cellists are like cats and dogs—clearly, nature meant them to fight. They fight about all sorts of things, of course; but one perennial bone of contention is the relative value of Beethoven’s violin sonatas and his cello sonatas. There are ten of the former, which is a source of much crowing for violinists; but cellists can boast with justifiable pride that, unlike the violin sonatas, the five cello sonatas span all three of Beethoven’s major creative epochs—the so-called early, middle, and late periods. And therefore we cellists would never dream of swapping, even if the exchange were to gain us five extra sonatas. Actually, the very fact that there are only two sonatas from the early period, one from the middle and two from the late, makes the voyage through the cycle all the more extraordinary. In front of our very 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.

It is hardly surprising that the opening of Beethoven’s first cello sonata in F Major, Op. 5 No. 1, feels experimental, as if he is cautiously exploring a new world. 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, almost all earlier examples having been works for solo cello with basso continuo. 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 honor of the occasion. The king was himself a keen 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 (though not simultaneously, one presumes). At any rate, perform the sonatas he did, and seems to have made a great impression on the king. Friedrich, in his enthusiasm, rewarded him with a gold snuff-box “suitable for presentation to ambassadors,” as Beethoven boasted to his friends. Back in Vienna, Beethoven performed the sonatas with the famous cellist and composer Bernhard Romberg, whom he had known from his early years in his native Bonn. (The fact that they performed the sonatas together gives the lie, I hope, to the oft-repeated story—which would be too frustrating to be borne, were it true—that Beethoven offered to write a cello concerto for Romberg, but was turned down on the grounds that Romberg would only perform his own music.) Both sonatas were published in 1797, described as “Deux Grandes Sonates pour le clavecin ou piano-Forte avec un Violoncelle Obligé Composées et Dediées a sa majesté Frederic Guillaume II Roi de Prusse par Louis van Beethoven” (with the king’s name in much the largest print). Hard to imagine how they would work on the harpsichord (clavecin); but Beethoven—or his publisher—probably wanted to boost sales.
The F Major Sonata is almost like a concerto for the two instruments—the piano taking the lion’s share of the difficulties, true, but with enough tricky passages in the cello part to have kept both Duports wide awake. The introduction is followed by a vivacious allegro, its concertante nature emphasised by a cadenza for both instruments, with a brief reference to the introductory adagio thrown in for good measure. The second movement, a cheerful rondo, is even more extroverted, its most memorable melody being the bucolic third theme—one can almost see the beer-glasses swaying and clinking. Towards the end of the work, the music dissolves into a poetic sunset—out of which we are abruptly jolted, and hustled 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, adding extra offense with a contemptuous insult: “You fools!” Beethoven was not known for the delicacy of his humor…

If the first sonata belongs in the concert hall, the opening of the second Sonata in G Minor, Op. 5 No. 2 (much the most substantial of the few works Beethoven wrote in G minor) takes us firmly into the opera-house. Following a dramatic opening chord, the curtain seems to rise in the darkened theatre, as we hear the orchestral violins (in this case the piano’s right hand) winding their way down a descending scale. Out of this suspenseful atmosphere emerges a poignant aria; this launches us upon an eventful journey through an introduction that is practically a full movement in its own right. The ending is particularly theatrical, the lengthy silences seeming to hover over a chasm of darkness; and it is in the dark key of C minor that we are introduced to the allegro molto, piu tosto presto—the most explosive (and surely the longest) movement of any duo sonata written up till that time. How it must have shocked its first audiences! In relieving contrast, however, the second movement, another good-natured rondo, takes us straight from grand opera to opera buffa. From the opening notes, this time in C major (Beethoven loved to start pieces in the wrong key), humor rules. The composer/performer stretches out his material with mischievous glee, reprising every possible section almost to the point of eye-rolling (was he being paid by the minute?) Finally the cello loses patience and kicks us unceremoniously down the stairs to the final double-bar. According to his friend Ignaz von Seyfried, “in the art of laughter [Beethoven] was also a virtuoso of the first rank”; we can feel that here, echoing across the centuries.

The third sonata, in A Major Op. 69, inhabits a completely different world. Dedicated to another cello-playing aristocratic patron of Beethoven’s, Baron von Gleichenstein (who seems to have acted as both financial supporter and match-maker to Beethoven, and whose descendants are today successful wine-makers), the sonata was completed in 1808, making it a close contemporary of the two piano trios of Op. 70 and the 5th and 6th symphonies. This work, today perhaps the most popular of all cello sonatas, is the creation of a grand master at the very height of his powers. By this time, Beethoven, plagued by increasing deafness, had given up his life as a virtuoso; he was now concentrating almost solely on composition. The two opus 5
sonatas are really (as advertised) sonatas for piano with cello obbligato, wonderful though the cello parts are; but for his third effort in the genre, Beethoven set himself the challenge of writing a fully equal duo sonata, all the material being equally adaptable for either instrument. The result is a triumph in every way—it is, in fact, the perfect classical sonata.

Although dispensing with the self-contained introduction which had opened both the earlier sonatas, Beethoven incorporates a similar sense of exploration into the first subject of this work. The cello, as if to establish its new equality, begins alone, posing a graceful question; this is taken up by the piano, and then 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 the scherzi of 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. Within this substantial structure, Beethoven unsettles our perceptions with his constant use of syncopations, both in small-scale terms (the main theme of the scherzo starts on the last beat of the bar), and on a larger scale (the melody of the trio starts on the second bar of a 4-bar phrase).

(A brief note on our interpretation here: Beethoven indicates a change of fingering for the pianist within the tied notes of the scherzo’s main theme. It is difficult, but by no means impossible, to re-sound these notes gently with a change of finger on a heavy modern piano; on a fortepiano, however, it is very natural—and Beethoven demands it again in the both the Hammerklavier sonata and the piano sonata in A-flat, Op. 110. So there seems little doubt that he meant the note to sound twice despite the tie, especially since his student Carl Czerny, in his performing notes to the cello sonatas, tells us that “the ties in the right hand and the fingering placed over them, here signify something wholly peculiar. Thus, the second note is repeated in an audible manner with the third finger.” But whether the cello should respond in kind or not is an open question. There is no indication that it should do so—but I find it impossible not to react to the piano articulation; and therefore, with Robert’s full concurrence, I do so. We shall have to wait till the next life to find out whether we were right or not; actually, I look forward to asking the composer about a few such points.)

The adagio cantabile that ensues appears to promise a full slow movement, in E major; but within 14 bars, Beethoven apparently changes his mind, taking us back to A major, and thence, without much further ado, into the gloriously sunny Allegro vivace. Lyricism, virtuosity and wit combine here to produce a dazzling celebration. A particularly magical moment occurs in the final coda, where Beethoven introduces a melting passage which, although derived from earlier material, sounds so unexpected and fresh that we feel as if he has given us a new theme as a parting gift.
So, having conquered the medium of the cello and piano sonata, it would not have been surprising had Beethoven abandoned it forever; where could he go from there? The answer comes in the last two sonatas which (along with the Piano Sonata in A Major, Op. 101, which, despite the earlier opus number, was written the following year) take 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 now makes no attempt to please. Whether or not these works became instantly popular was probably of little interest to their creator; 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 (i.e. with the cello line printed not only separately, but also in 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; he also took part in the only public concert of Schubert’s music held during the composer’s lifetime, as well as performing at Schubert’s memorial concert. If only Linke had written an autobiography - or better still, invented the tape-recorder!

The music of the Op. 102 sonatas is profoundly compressed, free of any unnecessary notes; it is no accident that these works are roughly half the length of the opus 5 sonatas. The C Major Sonata, Op. 102 No. 1—originally entitled “free sonata,” presumably because of its fantasy-like qualities—displays a concentration of material new even for Beethoven. The principal themes of both movements all derive from the cello’s opening phrase, which consists of only the simplest of elements—three motifs, spanning a falling fourth, a rising fifth, and a questioning falling third respectively—in the “basic” key of C major. There is no way, of course, that a first-time listener could be aware of these connections—any more than a spectator at a Shakespeare play could understand the layers of meaning in the great speeches on a first hearing; but this deeply organic approach unifies the work in an extraordinarily powerful way. From the outset of the sonata, marked to be played teneramente (tenderly), we sense that we are in an unexplored, heavenly world; the contrast when the allegro vivace begins—with a rising fifth with dotted rhythms providing the inverse of the opening’s falling fourth—could not be more vivid or angry. This jolting effect is bolstered by the fact that this section, which constitutes the main body of the first movement, is not in the tonic, as would be expected, but in the relative key, A minor—yet another audacious innovation.

The amazing range and depth of Beethoven’s genius is nowhere more apparent in this work than in the 16 bars that comprise the introduction to the second movement. An adagio returns us to heavenly spheres, with upward runs floating into the stratosphere, before taking us through dark expanses, in a questing three-part sequence. From this shadowy realm we emerge, in a moment of quintessential late Beethoven, into the light of a quietly heroic phrase; time stands still. And then,
bringing us back to life, the work’s opening andante returns, magically transformed; but the question posed by the falling third remains unanswered. There is to be no answer, in fact; instead, Beethoven surprises us by opening the door into another, very different allegro vivace. Here the gentle falling fourth of the sonata’s first motif is reversed again, converted into a jaunty rising fourth. It is as if Beethoven has brought us to the edge of a great mystery—and has then shown us that, not only is there no answer: there is in fact no question. Humor rules again—albeit a deeper-layered humour than that of the finales of those in opus 5. And still all the main material comes from the work’s opening two bars—right up until the sonata’s final phrase where, embedded within the gruff final explosion with which Beethoven closes the work (“you fools!”), the questioning falling third is heard for a last time. For Beethoven, it seems, profundity and laughter go hand in hand.

So now we come to the last sonata, Op. 102 No. 2 in D Major. Here, for the first time in the cycle, we have a regular three-movement sonata, with the customary fast-slow-fast sequence. That is where “normality” ends, however. 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 movement; but a sudden hush, and drop of a semi-tone transforms the atmosphere, and prepares us for the second movement. This adagio con molto sentimento d’affetto is the only full slow movement in any of the five sonatas; it proves well worth the wait. 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, with its gently consoling middle section. As at the end of the introduction to the last movement of the C major sonata, we are led to the brink of a far-reaching question that finds no answer; 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 last works. A last surprise awaits us here: the music fades away into the distant key of F-sharp major—and then, as if from afar, we hear a new, unexpected motif. This has always sounded to me like a quotation; but I needed Robert’s encyclopedic knowledge to identify it. It transpires that there are at least four passages in works by earlier composers from which Beethoven could have been quoting, all of which contain an almost identical motif; two are by his hero Handel (“the father of us all”), one by Bach, and one by Mozart. The Handel possibilities are the Alleluja from his Dettingen anthem, HWV 265, or the chorus “And with His stripes we are healed” from Messiah; the Bach contender is the opening of the Fugue in A Minor in Book 2 of The Well-Tempered Clavier; and Mozart’s is the Kyrie Eleison (“Lord have mercy”) from his Requiem. Beethoven could have been thinking of one or all (or none, but I find that hard to believe) of these; any of the texts would fit perfectly as Beethoven nears the end of his extraordinary journey. The conclusion of the fugue is exultant—we can feel the triumph of human nature over all adversity. It is surely Beethoven’s story—and the story of the human spirit as Beethoven saw it.
If Beethoven was indeed quoting Handel in the D Major fugue, he might have cast his mind back almost 20 years to his first “occasional” piece for piano and cello, his variations on Handel’s “See the Conquering Hero Comes” from the oratorio Judas Maccabaeus, composed shortly after the opus 5 sonatas. Perhaps the reference to a “conquering hero” was a tribute to Friedrich Wilhelm; at any rate, one can feel Beethoven’s characteristic strength, as well as his humor, even in this comparatively slight work. He must have enjoyed writing and playing this set of variations, for it was quickly followed by another, this time based on Papageno’s aria from The Magic Flute in which he expresses his longing for a girlfriend or (failing that!) a wife. Beethoven treats the initial statement of the theme quite freely; even the thought of the great Mozart (who had died only a few years earlier) could not intimidate the young firebrand. As in the Handel set, the first variation is for piano solo; and as in the earlier piece, Beethoven makes amends to the cellist by writing one hideously difficult variation for cello (variation 7 in the Handel, No. 2 in the Mozart). The third set, on Pamina and Papageno’s duet in praise of love, also from The Magic Flute, was written in 1801; the variations seem to depict various aspects of romance—from excited gossip to lofty ardor. Curiously, the first edition fails even to mention the cello on its title-page; pianistic chauvinism.

Lest we forget Beethoven’s own arrangement for cello of his Horn Sonata, Op. 17, composed in 1800. It is certainly not a profound work—Beethoven is evidently having fun here; but, as with all the works on this program, it could not possibly be by anyone else.

– Program notes by Steven Isserlis