

Again, a sense of abandon is needed to raise the level of excitement.

A fine recording if you are attracted to any of the participants, but not essential to the crowded world of Beethoven recordings.

ALTHOUSE

BEETHOVEN: *Piano Sonata 29;*
LISZT: *Sonata*

Haochen Zhang
BIS 2781 [SACD] 76 minutes

Sonatas 1+29—Aleck Karis
Romeo 7344—67 minutes

Sonatas 21, 22, 23, 28, 29; Andante Favori
David Korevaar
Prospero 111 [2CD] 138 minutes

Beethoven's music—pace the faddish academics who want to decolonize the music of the oppressive white patriarchy—continues to challenge, inspire, and exhilarate composers, performers, and audiences. The best performances of his music capture the complexity but also its deep and often straightforward virtue; it inspires me to celebrate the classical music culture that so many of us love and whose future we sometimes worry about. But there are performers who make me hope that this music will begin to reach the many and not just the few. Mr Zhang is one of the great ones: I don't have quite the same impression as Mr Wright, writing about a review of the Beethoven concertos (Mar/Apr 2023): "Zhang's pianism is poised, unhurried, and Apollonian, often reminiscent of Wilhelm Kempff, though his passagework is more articulated and textured than Kempff's unending velvety legato". There's certainly clarity and poise in Mr Zhang's recording of the *Hammerklavier*, but much else besides. His is the latest release—of any music—that I find truly mesmerizing.

In the first movement, he follows the fast tempo marking, imbuing the complex textures with extreme clarity. He takes time when he needs to; indeed, some may find he takes too much time, as in the unison Ds just before the second thematic section or the longer pause on the B-minor chord in the recapitulation. (Zhang chooses to hold out the chord as well as the pause.) The overall result is a thrilling account of this movement. I also find his fidelity to the expressive markings of the score unbelievably precise—for instance, the sudden

accented eighth note figures in an inner voice near the end of both exposition and recapitulation.

The scherzo, which I instinctively feel is a kind of terser commentary on the first movement, also bristles with imagination—for example, the halting and rushing in the Presto portion of the trio and the daring use of the damper pedal to hold through the Prestissimo scales leading to the climactic F.

The slow movement—oh my gosh, the slow movement—is probably the best performance I've heard—ever. Here Zhang displays perfect, lyrical phrases, and the sound he produces often seems to go beyond the piano and into the realm of chamber music or even orchestral music in its nuance. Some moments that particularly stand out include his occasional emphasis on the low octave of an important melody (rather than the default upper), giving the rest of the harmony an almost celestial sheen. And there's a spot in the main theme where Beethoven moves magically from F-sharp minor to a moment of hopeful G major (the lowered second degree of the scale), which functions as a placid way station on the way to the inevitable F-sharp-minor cadence. It appears 3 times, each with a different voicing. Zhang lingers on each of these moments, varying the timing on each one and relishing the rich variation in the passages.

IV (a 3-voice fugue with some licenses, as Beethoven describes it) is preceded by one of those ethereal introductions that grace some of his music. And again, Zhang is not disappointing in his variation of tone, careful modulations of tempo, and judicious pedaling. As for the fugue: well, the phrase "some licenses" doesn't begin to describe the discursive character of this movement. It threatens to break apart at any moment, and the constant appearance of the trills can distract or confound. Not here: Zhang's clarity fits the music like a glove, and all the expressive elements I hear in the earlier movements appear in this one as well. In a word, the fugue sounds beautifully inevitable and coherent as it leads carefully yet convincingly to the final measures. It's all there in the music, of course, but so few pianists seem to understand it as well as Zhang. (Or few seem to convey it as effectively.)

Zhang couples the Beethoven with Liszt's B-minor Sonata, so I beg the reader

to permit a side trip into the later 19th Century. Our index reveals a bevy of recordings to choose from, including the authoritative performance of Michel Dalberto that I reviewed (Sept/Oct 2022). I commented specifically on his ability to make various thematic cross-references across the sonata's 30-minute span very clear without becoming dogmatic, and a general transparency that led me to say it was "the best B-minor Sonata I've ever heard". Well, Zhang's is breathtaking, and with generous rubato—the slow acceleration to the principal Allegro energico is one among many inventive examples. The pedaling is quite varied: sometimes there's none at all; this results in a somewhat brittle tone that might be what past reviewers have complained about, but it works well here. Sometimes he will deliberately overpedal to accentuate dissonances (as in the "development 1" preceding the slow movement), and in one instance he released the pedal gradually, but I think kept a finger on the lowest note so that it sounded by itself after the rest. As in the first movement of the Beethoven, his fermatas are quite long. His tone in the slow, espressivo sections is lucent—difficult to achieve. BIS captures all of this sound beautifully, of course.

Before I move on to more Beethoven, let me comment briefly on the competition that came to my mind: Dalberto, Argerich, Brendel, Bolet, Arrau, and Zimerman. I could have included Horowitz, Li, and many others also important, but I felt this sample was sufficient. I still like Dalberto, and the rest all have their merits: I like the more expansive approach taken by Arrau, the virtuosic fireworks of Argerich and Zimerman, the more modern (some might say clinical) reading by Brendel. Bolet was the best—he captures the romantic spirit of the work, and his technique, of course, is superb. Nevertheless, Zhang is decidedly in their company: he is an important artist whose work I'll follow eagerly.

Back to Beethoven with Aleck Karis: it's been a long journey for Karis and me, going back as far as 1996, when I favorably reviewed his compilation *Secret Geometry* (July/Aug). That release included a very exciting, thrilling reading of Milton Babbitt's *Reflections* (including an electronic part—what we used to call "tape"). His Beethoven program counterpoises the *Hammerklavier* with the first of the Op. 2 sonatas. In the for-

mer, he sometimes plays things a little too safe. For instance, there's careful articulation and sparing pedal in the first movement (which makes things very clear but a little perfunctory), but there's also sudden and rather strange rushing a page or so before the end of the exposition. The scherzo is fine, though I think Karis makes too much of the sudden turn to D major at the end (though I suppose a case can be made for B minor)—part of what makes the joke so delicious is that it doesn't call too much attention to itself. The slow movement's a hair faster than I like but has a lot of detail and some good variation in pulse. The haunting quality of the melody when the movement gets underway (measure 28, if you have your scores handy) is *extremely* good; when done right, as here, I really do feel shivers up and down my spine. There's wonderful clarity in the finale, though also some moments that seem labored. (But let's face it, this is a very strange and formidable fugue.) Sonata 1 is more of a mixed bag, chiefly for the last movement, which isn't Prestissimo enough (and this from someone who usually abhors extremely fast tempos).

Finally, David Korevaar presents a program titled "Heroic to Hammerklavier"; he deserves his own review, but our editor wanted the 3 releases in one review for easier side-by-side comparisons. In that spirit, I'll begin with his *Hammerklavier*. In the past, Mr Korevaar has had a mixed reception, varying from Mr Vroon's review of Chopin pieces—"not outstanding" (Mar/Apr 2017); to Mr Beverluis's review of Book II of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*—"acceptable but not exciting", "secure and seemingly effortless technique", and an "unyielding and sometimes relentless quality that creeps into his counterpoint" (Sept/Oct 2000); to my review of the Bach partitas (July/Aug 2013)—his "interpretive choices are compelling and often quite fresh", particularly "the elegant Sarabande in Partita 5 (where he makes more sense out of Bach's ornaments than any other pianist I've heard)". He has recorded all of Beethoven's piano sonatas in 6 volumes; this particular release is the first in a projected second series. I'm sorry to say that none of the early set appears to have been reviewed in our pages.

Well, I think his *Hammerklavier* is a great performance and well worth studying. In I, he takes a slower (and to my mind

more musical) tempo; he stresses the frequent anapestic rhythms with a kind of grandeur that recalls to my mind middle Beethoven: this is particularly apparent in the fugato of the development. And all along the way, he slightly changes tempo to distinguish further the various moods of the movement. I like the way he makes important phrase arrivals clear with a very slight slowing of tempo. All in all, he gives the first movement a very aristocratic spirit; different from Zhang, to be sure; but Beethoven's piano sonatas admit many possible interpretations—which is why so many pianists play them.

The scherzo has a more rustic, almost brusque, character than the others. If Beethoven meant this movement to have musical humor (and I think he did), Korevaar emphasizes this to very good effect. In case you're wondering, he plays the sudden turn to D major at the end perfectly by *not* making too much of it.

III is expansive and extremely moving (Beethoven marks the expression as *Appassionato e con molto sentimento*); the motion is never hurried, the wayward principal theme given a sense of confusion akin to a fantasia, the contrasting idea reassuring. Then, where the music shifts to B major, he beautifully captures a great simplicity that recalls for me what Raymond Knapp said of a moment in the last movement of Beethoven's Sixth—a theophanic quality, and what a friend might have dubbed a phrase in the subjunctive mood. Of the 3 recordings, my vision of III is very much like Korevaar's, down to the enigmatic *bebung* effect in measure 165. What is *bebung*, you ask? It's a clavichord technique which the player produces by a subtle variation of pressure on a key after striking the initial note; this gives the sound a kind of trembling vibrato. Most pianists ponder what to do in this moment, since the piano cannot produce this effect. (In a rich Catalan accent, Professor Julio Estaban said to our piano lit class at Peabody the unforgettable line, "*bebung*—in the piano—is the same—as *nothing*".) Korevaar strikes the note a second time to produce a distinct but unobtrusive echo.

The introduction to the finale begins much more introspectively than the other recordings, making the sudden change of tempo somehow more wonderful and strange. The fugue has great variety: some-

times the counterpoint is very gentle, almost effervescent; and when required it becomes insistent and violent. As I've said, it's a very strange movement: in Korevaar's hands I don't sense the continual thread that I perceive in Zhang; instead, the music seems a confusing jumble of different ideas that are obsessively developed—but, you know, that might be just what Beethoven intended. Korevaar pulls it off brilliantly.

Sonata 21 (*Waldstein*): I—fulfills all my expectations. I love the subtle use of pedal (and perhaps half-pedal). The tone is perfect for the piece; never overdone and often unexpectedly (but pleasantly) light. He makes certain breaks to emphasize a musical point or phrase; these pauses are of varying lengths and completely appropriate for each instance. And I hear new things, for instance accenting the sudden introduction of a C-sharp in the bass just before the recapitulation and its continuing the melodic ascent to the following D in the next measure. Perhaps other pianists do this and I haven't noticed, but Korevaar turns it into an extremely dramatic moment—which I can see now that it is.

I often feel that pianists play the following "*Introduzione*" a little bit too strictly. Korevaar does just the opposite, lingering or elongating the tempo as he sees fit (and perfectly justified by the music)—the result is a thoroughly sonic oasis between the energetic first and last movements. For the latter, Korevaar takes a rather brisk clip (Beethoven's marking is "*Allegretto moderato*", and I definitely prefer it more on the *moderato* side). He observes Beethoven's pedaling instructions quite strictly, often resulting in a beautiful gleam of the scalar or arpeggiated passages. The held pedal is also effective in the closing measures. And as I continue to listen, it occurs to me that perhaps the faster tempo improves the overall sound of these overpedalled ideas. It's a thrilling, deeply considered reading of a very familiar piece. I learned new things and felt new things. One can't ask for more than that. A footnote: Korevaar includes a gentle performance of the original slow movement, the *Andante favori*, which was excised for length (and for me at least, the lighter character of the piece could really defuse the momentum toward the finale—one of these days I'll listen to the sonata with this movement with that in mind).

Sonata 22: I once read an article about

22 (I think it was in *Clavier* magazine) that referred to the first movement of this (only) 2-movement sonata as “beauty and the beast”, offering a hint as to how to contrast the genial minuet-infused opening idea with the rather stentorian triplets in octaves that follow. Naturally, Korevaar makes the distinction clear but with much more nuance than that little article advised. As the figuration becomes increasingly complex, he astonishes me with its clarity and the deft realization of Beethoven’s ornaments.

In II, as expected, the tempo is quite a bit speedier than Beethoven’s marked *Allegretto*. Still, this is the usual tempo in every performance I’ve heard, including two of my touchstones, Stephen Kovacevich and Claudio Arrau—who both can do no wrong—but in fairness, Arrau is a little slower. With a faster tempo, Beethoven’s kaleidoscopic harmonic changes sound more shocking than perhaps they would at a slower speed. Still, I think there would be a more effective contrast between the bulk of the movement and the brief coda (marked *piu Allegro*). Incidentally, Bulow’s edition (as published by Ditson in 1896) marks it at 69-72 per half note and the coda at 76 per half note—the values are converted from the original quarter-note tempos to show an easier comparison. An earlier (1837) edition marks the tempo at 76 per half note, which is even faster than the norm! (There’s no indication for the coda).

Sonatas 23 (*Appassionata*) and 28: I will cover these two performances a bit more briefly, as they exhibit the same qualities I’ve observed earlier: he is always extremely musical, and his musicality affects me deeply. In the *Appassionata*, he communicates very well the sense of striving that is the expressive key to the first movement; his handling of the second principal theme gives it many different shades of character, especially in the development. In II, I love his tempo for the theme; Beethoven’s marking is *Andante con moto* and Korevaar is generally a little slower than that. In the variations, the tempo vacillates very well to fit the character of each one—the serene flow of Variation 2 is especially beautiful. For the finale, various uses of rubato keep the tempo very near the marked tempo of *Allegro ma non troppo*; it evokes the dread of a gathering storm, which finds its fruition in the truculent coda.

Sonata 28: Beethoven’s German marking for the tempo, which I translate as “somewhat cheerful and with the deepest feeling” (that last word, “*Empfindung*”, has a special shade of meaning that can’t be rendered well in English) has always puzzled me. Korevaar captures it beautifully: sometimes the tempo is rather moderate and lilting, but when the music requires Beethoven’s *Empfindung*, Korevaar delivers. The trio of II generally keeps the quick tempo of the scherzo proper. This gives the music a very intense *Empfindung* in the mode of CPE Bach; I don’t believe I’ve ever heard it played quite that way, but it’s very convincing. In the slow interlude that follows, he takes his time and even includes occasional asynchronization of the hands where a particularly beautiful moment in the melody appears. The finale is glorious; it seems that he is performing the movement to clearly show its synthesis of the expressive orbits of the sonata—the *Empfindung* of the first movement and the more extroverted March in II.

Returning to Mr Beversluis’s review of Korevaar’s Bach WTC II, where he observed that, like many recordings, his was “neither truly outstanding nor truly dismal, and therefore hard to review”, I listened to some of it out of curiosity. I like quite a bit of what I sampled; it is sensitive, imaginative, and full of life. Likewise, I didn’t find any difficulty in assessing Mr Korevaar’s recording of these sonatas. If I were to sum up his Beethoven, I would describe it as full of magnificence and humanity—he has a fantastic gift of carefully propelling us through the various moods of Beethoven; nothing is perfunctory, and everything leads to something in a compelling manner. In a catalog with many, many other fabulous recordings of the sonatas (see our Index), Mr Korevaar’s voice is singular, and I very much look forward to the completion of his series.

HASKINS

BEETHOVEN: *Quartets 1-6*

Ariel Quartet

Orchid 100378 [2CD] 161 minutes

Beethoven composed his first set of string quartets from 1798 to 1800; he was 27 to 30 years old. They are the product of the last years of his youth and are remarkable for their quality. I don’t believe that Haydn or Mozart wrote anything better. If Beethoven