

# Sounds of America

Gramophone's guide to the classical scene in the US and Canada



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## Beethoven

A Single Breath: Beethoven's  
Last Three Piano Sonatas'  
Piano Sonatas - No 30, Op 109;  
No 31, Op 110; No 32, Op 111

**Beth Levin** *pf*

Navona © NV5908 (67' • DDD)



### Brooklyn-based pianist takes on Beethoven's final trilogy

The slightly airless and nasal qualities of this otherwise full-bodied recording may be due to the hazards of reproducing a large concert grand in a relatively small venue. Or perhaps it's the instrument, which does not ideally hold its tuning in the higher register. In any event, Beth Levin's expansive and free-flowing way with Op 109's *Vivace, ma non troppo* will remind listeners of the young Barenboim, although she goes her own way regarding *rubato* and accents. She tempers the *Prestissimo*'s fury but without compromising the music's quick dynamic contrasts, even if the quiet central section is a tad rounded-off. The third movement's long playing time is due to Levin's unusually slow and hauntingly sustained statements of the theme, framing her intensely expressive treatment of the variations proper.

Op 110 begins with a long-lined and rhetorical yet knowingly proportioned first movement that launches into an impressive, headlong *Allegro*, despite Levin's slight reticence in the *sforzando* leaps (in bar 47 and similar places). The third-movement fugue unfolds in smooth, passionate arcs, while the bar-lines of the central 'klagende Gesang' are liberated by way of Levin's carefully gauged balances between the floating right-hand melody and steady left-hand accompaniment.

Levin's big-boned dynamism in Op 111's first-movement *Allegro* is more about the larger picture than the detailed exactitude that Pollini brings to the music. And while Levin fully conveys the Arietta's disembodied, otherworldly spirit, here the *rubatos* and tempo modifications within variations often threaten the music's cumulative trajectory. In all, Levin's seriousness of purpose and absorption in these oft-recorded scores are never in doubt.

**Jed Distler**

## GRAMOPHONE *talks to...*

### Beth Levin

The pianist on Beethoven's last three piano sonatas and the advantages of recording them live

#### What's happening in these pieces? Is

#### Beethoven 'taking leave', as Adorno said?

Perhaps he's coming to a new sensibility. Op 111 may be the one that ventures off the most. He seems to be going to a new place, letting go of the rules more. There's this variation that's so syncopated and jazzy. Maybe he's searching and coming to a peaceful conclusion. The creation is so much purer and simpler that in a sense the piano itself is less important. You feel the imagination, emotion and experimentation in each moment.

#### But you have to balance that with keyboard technique...

It all seems like one thing by the end - emotion, technique, ideas, execution. If you're doing it right it should all happen together. The pieces aren't that hard per se. It's getting to the essence that is important, and getting it over to an audience. These three sonatas are



almost one flowing idea...you really sense that when you play them all in one evening.

#### You played them all in one concert for this live CD. How would studio conditions differ?

You're still aiming for the same expressive goals. One indefinable dimension might be missing, but then it might have been more perfect. I love the projection in playing live - a bit like acting, speaking to the last row. In recording you don't have that same responsibility. I just thought these were good performances and wanted to share them. I listened to the variation movement of Op 109 recently and thought it might be a tad slow. But in person I think it worked...maybe you had to be there! And anyway, it takes time to express something profound. As Serkin used to say: 'Don't be afraid to be boring.'

## Brahms • Debussy

**Brahms** String Quartet No 1, Op 51 No 1

**Debussy** String Quartet, Op 10

**Ceruti** Quartet

MSR Classics © MS1424 (61' • DDD)



### Memphis and Michigan players join for an uncommon coupling

Although Brahms and Debussy make strange bedfellows - this is the only such coupling currently in the catalogue - the attraction to the Ceruti Quartet, members of the faculties at the University of Memphis and the Interlochen Center for the Arts, Michigan, could well be the lush symphonic colour they bring to both the Romanze in the Brahms and the *Andantino* in the Debussy. While such

autumnal richness works its usual wonders in the Brahms, richness is not usually associated with what 'authentic French' style is presumed to be: more refined and perfumed. But considering that Debussy enjoyed a contemporary organ transcription of the *Andantino*, the Ceruti's full-bodied performance may reveal more of the physically emotional power that enabled works like this to reshape chamber music, and that the composer expected.

The Quartet was named for the Italian violin maker Giovanni Battista Ceruti (1756-1817), described by luthier Marilyn Wallin as not one of 'the tidy boys, but acoustically rock solid. He didn't have the best wood, but he knew what to do with it.' The exquisite, tawny, presumably 'Ceruti'-like sound, recorded in the Harris