

# Santa Fe CHAMBER MUSIC FESTIVAL

51<sup>ST</sup> SEASON

Tuesday  
12 p.m.  
JULY 23

St. Francis Auditorium in the  
New Mexico Museum of Art

## NOTES ON THE PROGRAM by Eric Bromberger

### LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770–1827)

*Sonata in E Major, Op. 109 (1820)*

*Sonata in C Minor, Op. 111 (1821–22)*

The years 1813 to 1820 were exceptionally trying for Beethoven. His “heroic” style—which had shaped his music from the *Eroica* Symphony of 1803 through the Eighth Symphony of 1813—had been exhausted, and, artistically, he was uncertain how to proceed. He was also having financial difficulties, and he was immersed in a bitter legal struggle for custody of his nephew, Karl.

Under these stresses, and with the added burden of ill health, Beethoven virtually stopped composing. Whereas the previous two decades had seen a great outpouring of music, now his creative powers were flickering and becoming nearly extinguished. In 1817, for example, he completed no new works. To be sure, there was an occasional major composition during this time—the *Hammerklavier* Sonata occupied Beethoven throughout all of 1818—but it wasn’t until 1820 that he put his troubles, both personal and creative, behind him and marshaled new energy as a composer.

When that energy emerged, Beethoven took on several massive new projects, beginning work on his *Missa solemnis*, making sketches for his Ninth Symphony, and, in May of 1820, agreeing to write three piano sonatas for the Berlin publisher Adolph Martin Schlesinger. Although Beethoven claimed he wrote these sonatas—the last ones he’d write for any instrument—“in one breath,” he actually wrote them over a longer period of time than he’d expected. He completed his Sonata in E Major (his Opus 109) immediately,

but ill health postponed the other two. Notes in the manuscript indicate that he completed the A-flat-Major Sonata (Op. 110) in December 1821 and the C-Minor Sonata (Op. 111) in January 1822, although he was still revising them the following spring prior to their publication.

During this time, Beethoven began to compose in a style that was markedly different from his heroic style. The three final piano sonatas are in his late style, which is broadly characterized by certain new features. For example, Beethoven embarks on a radical re-thinking of form, particularly sonata form. Gone is the dramatic conflict and resolution of the heroic style, which means there are now unexpected combinations and sequences of movements. Next, Beethoven deepens his lyric sense, particularly in his slow movements, and he shows a new interest in expressive and intense music. Beethoven also discovers a new attraction to variation form, the fugue, and contrapuntal music, and all these features appear in the final sonatas and make them a very particular kind of music—original, cerebral, and heartfelt at the same time.

In an expression of relief at the return of his creative energy following that long period of stasis and uncertainty, Beethoven wrote to a friend:

Thank God, Beethoven can compose—but, I admit, that is all he is able to do in this world. If God will only restore my health, which has improved at any rate, then I shall be able to comply with all the offers from all the countries of Europe, nay, even of North America, and in that case I might yet make a success of my life.

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Beethoven opens his **Sonata in E Major, Op. 109**, with a smoothly flowing theme, marked *Vivace, ma non troppo*, but he brings it to a sudden halt after only nine bars. He then introduces his second subject at a much slower tempo, *Adagio espressivo*, but, after only eight measures at that slower tempo, he returns to his opening theme and tempo.

This entire first movement of this piece is based not on the traditional exposition and development of themes (as is the case with the Classical sonata movement) but on the contrast between these two radically different tempos. The *Prestissimo* second movement, however, is somewhat more traditional. It's a scherzo in sonata form, full of the familiar Beethovenian power and filled with explosive accents and a rugged second theme.

A particular characteristic of Beethoven's heroic style is that the first movement often carries the work's emotional weight, like in the *Eroica* and Fifth symphonies. But in the Sonata in E Major, the opening two movements combined last barely six minutes—not even half the length of the final movement—and that final movement ultimately becomes the work's emotional center.

Here, the final movement, marked *Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo*, is a theme and six variations followed by a repetition of the opening theme. The form isn't remarkable, but the variations themselves are.

In his youth, Beethoven made much of his reputation as a virtuoso pianist, and one of his specialties was sitting at a keyboard and extemporizing variations on a given theme. The variation form he developed in his late period, however, is much different from the virtuoso one he employed in his youth.

In this sonata, the set of variations isn't so much a decoration of the original theme as it is a sustained organic growth, with each variation seeming to develop from what's gone before it. The theme has the greatest dignity, and, in addition to his marking in Italian—*Molto cantabile ed espressivo* ("Very songlike and expressive")—Beethoven further specifies, in German, *Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung* ("Singing, with the deepest feeling"). Curiously, Beethoven never changes keys in this movement—the theme

and all six variations remain in E Major—and, despite the wealth of invention and the contrasts generated by the different variations, the mood remains one of rapt expressiveness that's perfectly summarized by the restatement of the original theme at the sonata's close.

The last sonata Beethoven wrote, the **Sonata in C Minor, Op. 111**, is in only two movements: a powerful opening one in two parts and a concluding one in theme-and-variation form. The Australian pianist Ernest Hutcheson (1871–1951) once noted that Beethoven's performance markings for these three sections offer not just indications of speed but also the clearest possible suggestions about interpretation. The markings translate to "Majestic," "With energy and passion," and "Very simple and singing."

The brief opening section—only 16 bars long—is largely static and serves to gather energy and prepare for the *Allegro con brio ed appassionato*, which leaps suddenly out of a quiet murmur of 32nd notes. The *Allegro's* opening three-note figure sounds as if it must be the beginning of a fugue theme, but while Beethoven includes fugal elements in the theme's development, he never treats it as a strict fugue. This movement, built upon the continual recurrence of the opening three-note figure, seethes with an energy that's almost brutal and slashing.

By complete contrast, the final movement is all serenity. Beethoven marks it *Arietta* ("Little aria"), and the lyric theme that will serve as the basis for five ensuing variations is of the utmost simplicity and directness. The variations aren't so much decorations of the theme as they are the continuous development of it. Each one seems slightly faster than the one before it (although the underlying tempo of the movement remains unchanged), and the final variation—long, shimmering, and serene—serves as an extended coda to the entire movement. It also employs trills that go on for pages. Can it be that Beethoven—who'd been deaf for years when he wrote these works—used trills so heavily because they allowed him to feel the music beneath his hands?

When Beethoven's copyist sent this sonata to the publisher in Berlin, someone wrote back to ask if there was a movement missing. (They

couldn't believe Beethoven would end a sonata like this.) But this is exactly the form Beethoven wanted, and his final piano sonata ends not in triumph but in a mood of exalted peace.

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