

ASTONISHING PERFORMANCE

*All of Beethoven's piano sonatas
played in one day by Julian Jacobson,
heard by ROBERT ANDERSON*

It is always the greatest joy to enter the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields, and be reminded of the statue in the south aisle commemorating St Martin and the beggar. Down-and-outs used to doss down in the crypt by the score. But in the upper reaches the strongest of us were to hear on 15 October 2013 all the Beethoven piano sonatas played from memory by the far mightier Julian Jacobson. It soon became clear that the pianist's mastery of Beethoven's idiom was such he could easily have improvised himself out of any momentary difficulty. Not that any such occurred. In the myriad of notes played during what was far longer than a normal working day, there may have been errors to be reckoned on the fingers of one hand; they mattered not a jot.



Julian Jacobson

Of course the most impressive pilgrimage of all was not ours (it was a good moment when I discovered that hassocks were being lent at £1 a piece to mitigate the hardness of the pews), or even that of the pianist,

who changed his clothes twice during the course of his astonishing performance. It was Beethoven's. To follow his development over a period of some twenty-seven years, during which he was presented with a fine instrument by Erard of Paris, had to cower in his brother's cellar during the Napoleonic bombardment of Vienna just after completing the 'Les adieux' sonata, and received an even more splendid instrument from Broadwood of London, allowing the use of both higher and lower notes in his future works.

Half an hour permitted a gobbled sandwich and concentration on the church's east window, of which the baffling central feature most resembles a primeval egg, perhaps symbolic of original creation. It was only now that Jacobson deviated from a strict chronological order of the works, and treated the lunchtime crowd to a performance of the mighty 'Hammerklavier' sonata. By then Beethoven often preferred to give his musical instructions in German rather than the Italian that had been Napoleon's native language, even if that troublesome character was already locked up at St Helena. The new piano from London suggested to Beethoven such refinements as 'una corda' and 'poco a poco due ed allora tutte le corde'. Jacobson's Steinway suggested likewise, but not precisely so.

A half-hour slice of cake and idle inspection of the now paying audience made me wonder if the church had suddenly become a synagogue, as my attention was riveted by a man with hat firmly shoved down over his head. But as things go, it is more likely to end up as a mosque. Meanwhile seven more sonatas to come, and Jacobson now with a bow tie. As the evening wore on, it became more and more clear that Beethoven was determined to expire and enter the gates of heaven upon a trill. Such fiendish technical problems as this involved were as nothing to Jacobson, for whose achievement no praise is too high. Many of the early sonatas I had tried over on my splendid Stodart grand of 1799. These included the little pair of Op 49, which Jacobson had managed to make sound wonderfully fresh and innocent in the midst of the surrounding torrents of notes. Those who survived from 9.15am to 10pm had a group photograph. Perhaps we deserved it. Jacobson deserves now whatever is his heart's desire.

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LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

JULIAN JACOBSON

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