

To listen to and enjoy the complete cycle of Beethoven piano sonatas in a single day is a both a rare treat and a challenge of concentration; to perform them is all the more so. Julian Jacobson's Beethoven Marathon, held in the ambient surrounds of St John's Church, Waterloo on 12 November 2022 was a phenomenal feat of pianistic prowess, memory, and sheer stamina. One might marvel that any pianist could achieve the level of intensity, accuracy and artistry displayed during the three extended concert sessions held between 9am and 10pm, yet what is especially remarkable is that such marathons are not new to Jacobson. Indeed, this was his fourth, the earlier ones being in 2003, 2004 and 2013, performed in aid of various charities. Jacobson, one of the leading British pianists of his generation and a talented composer and arranger in his own right, is also Chairman of the Beethoven Piano Society of Europe, which presented a multi-pianist sonata cycle during the 250th Anniversary year (some of which is available on the society's website). This marathon cycle, livestreamed as well as live, benefitted in its artistic achievement from those years of experience. Indeed, as a reviewer of two of the earlier cycles, I was impressed here with a clear deepening of both expressive character and sonorous beauty in Jacobson's cycle. At times, the piano's sound reminded one of the indubitably unique Beethovenian 'klang' associated with great masters of the past such as Kempff, Schnabel or Serkin.

Part of the 'marathon experience' was in the preparation, both of the performer and also the audience for what was an immense, spiritual journey. Jacobson's series of short articles on the now-popular blog by pianist-composer Melanie Spanswick, highlighted both the joys and perils of the adventure. He explained the sheer thrill of delving into these masterpieces, and admitted to practicing them in short groups, and never playing the programme all through before the actual event. In that context one could appreciate all the more the groupings into three concert sessions, morning, afternoon and evening, the first of which traced the development from Op 2 upto the A flat sonata op 26, with the second group spanning the two 'fantasy' sonatas Op. 27 through to 'Les Adieux', Op. 81a. This monumental session included many of the famous 'titled' works. The evening combined the two lyrical sonatas of the 'experimental' period, Opp. 90 and 101, the 'Hammerklavier' Op. 106 and finally, the last three sonatas.

I attended from the second part of the afternoon, which began with an intrepid elegant rendition of the two movement Op. 54 sonata, distinctively shaped to highlight details in the first movement and with a fleet-fingered swoop through the finale. It formed an apt preamble to the exciting drama of Op. 57, the 'Appassionata', where Jacobson's own impassioned intensity was tellingly communicative, clearly projecting structural landmarks. As well as the usual bravura outbursts one sensed a linear integrity throughout, and each idea assigned sounding space. Twenty-three sonatas in to the cycle, the level of concentration was by now infectious, and in the

fluid, precisely articulated variation movement, we were drawn deeply into the textural detail and sheer enchantment of the harmony. The finale unfurled with furious impetus driving passionately, and with a theatrical command of gesture, towards its climax. Jacobson jokingly compared the gentler Op. 78 sonata as an 'apology to the instrument', after the treatment received in op.57. Here one appreciated the classical restraint, a light, delicate touch, also in the whimsical second movement, with its syncopated leaps. The often overlooked sonata Op.79 in G regained Romantic resonance, with an especially poignant slow movement, all the more effective for its simplicity, and a finale inflected with subtle wit. To hear the sonatas chronologically reinforces one's sense both of how each sonata is individual and unique and yet how some sonatas reach beyond towards symphonic expression. After op 57, the next work to tap the full intensity of the form is op. 81a, 'Les Adieux', conventionally interpreted as being about the Archduke Rudolph leaving and returning to Vienna to avoid the French occupation. Recent scholarship has reinterpreted it as being, rather, about the Austrian soldiers in the Napoleonic wars with Austria, and even as a veiled love letter. Here Jacobson shaped the evocative first movement beautifully, highlighting the subtle phrasing of moments of transition, and the glowing high notes of the first movement's conclusion. The searching slow movement was eloquently shaded, contrasting darker depths with illuminated high textures anticipating the late period. The finale flowed with scintillating splendour.

For the final session that followed an hour's pause, Jacobson emerged to the stage fighting fit to lead the now enlarged audience, through the experimentalism of Beethoven's opp 90 and 101, and the gigantism of Op. 106, to the visionary peaks of opp. 109, 110 and 111.

We were not disappointed. There was perhaps a slight hint of breathlessness in the first movement of Op. 90, contrasting the clear articulation of staccato and slurred motives of some readings with a richness of tone that enhanced the high textures all the more, especially the climactic overlapping motives just before the reprise. The luminescent, song line E major movement flowed with constancy to its poetic close, which Jacobson had noted leads seamlessly into the opening of Op. 101, which here duly followed without applause, deliberately intended to highlight the connection. Again the piano's sonority and tempo well suited the intimate expression of the first two movements, notably the contrapuntal textures of the second movement's trio, whilst there was power to the finale's joyous, revivifying fugue, the first of several to come in the ensuing sonatas.

That of the 'Hammerklavier' Op.106 was a tour de force, taken at a blazing pace, thrillingly projecting the swirling intertwining of subjects and answers towards the

stunning final climax, yet also responsive to the lucid beauty of the lyrical slow theme introduced half way through. For Op. 106 Jacobson had recourse to the score, the only use of music in the entire cycle, yet it was merely as an insurance, in a reading that excelled in power and colour. The initial fast movements were forthright in tone, especially in the emphatic high registers, whilst the slow movement lingered expansively in a mood of mellow, fragmentary meditative, the sonorous resonance of Beethoven's wide spacing especially suited to the acoustic spaciousness of St John's, Waterloo. So too did the masterly accounts of the last three gems exploit the acoustical richness of the hall to convey the piano's boundary stretching resonances and colours. The resonances of the timeless trills in the variations of both Op 109 and Op. 111, the cumulative power of the repeated chords in the Arioso of Op. 110 leading to the fugue, delicate pizzicato effects in the variations of Op 109, and equally delicate filigree arpeggios of the opening movement of Op. 110, and the almost Shakespearean rhetorical grandeur and depth of the first movement of Op. 111. Jacobson here drew us into Beethoven's emotional world with intense focus and concentration. When he emerged from the Arietta's saturated trilling textures to the final cadence, the elongated silence attested to the awe one sensed, both at Jacobson's superhuman feat and indeed that of Beethoven – whose creative vision spanning the decades around the 1800s forged was haven become pillars of the canon of canons, still relevant some 250 years later.

At last the standing ovation began, soon to be quelled by what Jacobson described as 'the only encore possible', Bach's C major Prelude from the WTK Book 1, whose rippling arpeggios allowed us to continue to muse on the phenomenal marathon, from the very start of the marathon – a marathon for both artist and his audience.

In his series of ten blogs mentioned earlier, Jacobson observes that he would not want to repeat the marathon, however he does not rule it out. "Immensely fulfilling as it has been, I'm looking forward to resuming normal life and a normal musical diet, with many pieces I still want to learn as well as writing, composing and teaching projects. But one must never say never!" Indeed, this cycle was followed by another six days later in Uruguay, to mark Jacobson's 75th birthday. While congratulating him on his pianistic accomplishment as well as his special birthday, we hope for many more creative projects to come, with similar feats to challenge and inspire us all!

Malcolm Miller