

SONATAS  
OPUS 10 NO.3  
OPUS 57 'APPASSIONATA'  
OPUS 110

Naum Grubert *piano*

BEETHOVEN

# LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN (1770-1827)

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SONATA OPUS 110



## NAUM GRUBERT

Naum Grubert (1951) was born in Riga. His principal studies were with the famous professor Gutman in Moscow. He was a prize-winner in the Tchaikovsky Competition in 1978, after having won the 2nd prize at the International Piano Competition in Montreal the year before. He toured extensively the Soviet Union and other European countries before he emigrated from Russia and became a Dutch resident.

His many impressive recitals, as well as concerts with among many others the London Symphony Orchestra, the BBC Symphony Orchestra, the Concertgebouw Orchestra, the Köln Philharmonic, the Tonkünstler Orchestra Vienna, the Orchestre de la Suisse Romande, the Helsinki Philharmonic, the Kirov Orchestra St. Petersburg, the Dutch Radio Philharmonic Orchestra, the Rotterdam Orchestra, the Residential Orchestra, have earned him a reputation of superb musicianship:

*“For all his virtuosity, he interprets the music as a philosopher or a thinker...”*

FRANKFURTER ALLGEMEINE ZEITUNG

*“Grubert’s lyricism is balanced with his power and intellect”*

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He took part at the Lichfield Festival (Great Britain), the Cadaqués Festival (Spain) the Lockenhaus Festival (Austria) and the Gergiev Festival (Holland), among others. Naum Grubert has performed with conductors such as Paavo Berglund, Sergiu Commissiona, Jean Fournet, Horst Stein, Christopher Seaman, Vernon Handly, Matthias Bamert, Ernest Bour, Ed Spanjaard, Vassili Sinaiski, Thomas Sanderling, Valery Gergiev, Claus Peter Flor, Aldo Ceccato, Evgeny Svetlanov, Stanislav Skrovachevsky.

His CD-recordings contain works of Schubert, Liszt, Mussorgsky, Rachmaninoff, Schumann, Beethoven and Chopin.

Naum Grubert holds professorships piano in the Amsterdam Conservatory. Among his students are many prizewinners of national and international competitions.



## A FEW THOUGHTS ON THIS BEETHOVEN RECORDING

This Beethoven release serves the same purpose as my previous one: to record the sonatas from all three periods of Beethoven's oeuvre. This highlights not only the features specific to each period, but also the ideas running through all of Beethoven's works written as a sonata cycle. Pondering all his sonatas, one can trace a clear vector of development. If one were to define it, it would perhaps emerge as incessant striving for unity, with some central idea binding the details of the entire cycle together. A whole universe appears to unfold within each sonata, arranging the infinite variety and drama of life in a rigorous and cohesive order.

### SONATA OP. 10, NO 3

Each one of the early ten Beethoven sonatas is as beautiful as it is already idiosyncratic. Two features set the Sonata Op. 10, No 3, apart from the others: the broad sweep of ideas and images on a scale remarkable even by Beethoven's standards and, at the same time, the total conceptual unity. I often feel that, among all the sonatas of the early period, and perhaps also of the middle ones, it is this work that presages some aspects of late Beethoven. This is the first sonata in which Beethoven does not seem to follow a clearly contrasted separation between the movements. And, although in the opening two movements the dynamism and buoyancy of the first are followed by the extreme poignancy and sorrow of the second, the sonata then begins to unfold in a different direction.

It is worth singling out the unique feature of the first movement. The music's joyous energy, its incessant *presto* dynamism springing largely from its thematic unity, are at times unexpectedly interrupted – by the fermatas in the main subject and the suddenly arriving pastoral stillness and contemplativeness of the closing space. The pauses are very short, but they cast a new light on the whole movement. It is as if, yanked out of the fleet-footed race of time, we find ourselves face to face with a question that will have to be answered at some point. This, however, is but a fleeting sensation,

and moments later the music carries us further along in its rapid current. Nevertheless that question gets stuck somewhere in the subconscious.

The second movement is a poem of sorrow, indescribable in words. This is one of Beethoven's most tragic works.

Then comes the 'Menuetto', and here the music transforms its mood from the second movement to the third... One wonders what can actually come after that utter hopelessness, that ineluctable oblivion. Yet even the opening notes of the minuet sound as if the first rays of the morning sun are lightly touching the impenetrable darkness of the night.

The rondo finale is unquestionably the most unusual finale of the early Beethoven sonatas. Developed here are the probing questions asked in the earlier pauses of the first movement.

The rondo theme itself consists of a recurring insistent question and a slightly confused reply that comes nowhere near to resolving the question. It is this endless sequence of questions, interspersed with whimsical, somewhat disjointed episodes, that creates an eerie picture of a world in flux, touched tangentially by gaiety, pain, extravagance and true drama. Beethoven appears to be quoting from his own works here, past and future. The sonata ends with a passage seemingly heading towards infinity. This forms an amazing whole, leaving us with the ultimate question, that of the meaning of existence.

### SONATA OP. 57, 'APPASSIONATA'

Friedrich Schelling described architecture as music in stone. That perceptive adage can be turned around to say, somewhat less precisely but still usefully, that music is architecture in time.

Though music contains aspects of other arts as well, mainly painting and drama, it is this architectural quality that is one of the most sublime manifestations of Beethoven's genius. Each of his sonatas is unique, built to its own individual design.

In the Appassionata Beethoven returns to the traditional three-movement form, with the middle movement contrasting sharply with the other two. The

outer movements are dominated by a febrile, tumultuous atmosphere, the same 'Beethoven spirit' that largely determined the development of Western music up until the twentieth century. The work of any major composer of the subsequent generations is hardly imaginable without the influence of Beethoven's dramatic sense.

The inner rhythmic life of the Appassionata's first movement shapes its whole architecture. Keeping that in mind, it is interesting to see how the exposition is put together.

Steady rhythmic reliance on dotted crotchets dominate the rhythmic premise of the primary theme, opening the sonata with a sense of anxious foreboding. And only the 'fate motif' appearing towards the end of the primary theme injects the triplets that will be so important to the structure of the whole first movement.

After a small cadenza, an ensuing repetition of the primary theme follows the same pattern, but with an important difference. Its long notes seem to explode into a *fortissimo* upsurge of triplet chords, hinting for the first time at the irreconcilable conflict evoked by this music. On the other hand, thanks to this outburst of chords, the triplets originating in the 'fate motif' gain a more dominant stature. And, due to the natural acceleration (caused by triplets), the purposeful flow of the music, its *agitato*, increases significantly. The entire first subject, with its reliance on the dotted crotchets, forms the first rhythmic phase of the exposition.

Against the backdrop of the *ostinato* triplets (from the 'fate motif') comes a restless, anxious connecting theme. In its wake, the *ostinato* triplets naturally blend into the broken triplets of the accompaniment in the first theme of the secondary subject, with a hymnal theme soaring overhead. This first theme of the secondary subject is closely linked with the theme of the first subject both melodically (based as it is on broken triads) and rhythmically (the same dotted rhythm).

Thus, the continuous triplets of both the transitional passage and the first secondary subject form the second phase in the rhythmic development of the exposition. The restless *ostinato* triplets play a fundamental role in the

architecture and atmosphere of the rest of the movement. Everything seems to rotate around it.

The next phase is formed by the sudden intrusion of the menacing, overtly dramatic second theme of the secondary subject, with its continuous development leading to the culmination of the exposition and its ensuing codetta, losing strength and petering out on the last *pianissimo* note. This phase is wholly based on almost incessant semiquavers, and we can doubtless discern in the semiquavers the rhythmic reliance on triplets.

It is this rhythmic premise of fractured lengths (from  to  and from  to ), aided by the uncanny thematic cohesion, that binds the exposition together, as if creating in the music a single wave of faster motion and greater tension.

The first movement of the Appassionata has five such waves: the exposition, development and recapitulation, followed by a 'faux coda' (a mighty groundswell of development with its ensuing mystical version of the 'fate motif' shrouded by the pedal), and then the real coda.

The coda *piu allegro* starts with a dramatic effect of an inverted 'fate motif' in *fortissimo*. The coda is based on the first theme of the secondary subject in minor (the only such case in the first movement) and the truncated 'fate motif'. The powerful developmental coda, its outburst followed by a rapid decline, passes through every register, before descending into the lowest register, and dying in the *pianississimo* of the final chord.

This *allegro* is perhaps the most monumental in all Beethoven sonatas, except for the Hammerklavier, Op. 106, and definitely the most dramatic and tragic. Yet this is but one example of Beethoven's incomparable 'architectonics'.

The second movement transports us away from human trials and tribulations and into another world just as vital to Beethoven, that of metaphysical reflection.

This relatively short slow movement consists of a chorale theme, followed by three variations and recapitulation. The variation form was among Beethoven's favourites, and his mastery of it was as limitless as

his imagination was inexhaustible. Beethoven used this form many times in his sonatas: first in the middle movement of Op. 14, No 2, in the first movement of Op. 26, in the middle movement of the Appassionata, whereas in the subsequent Ops. 109 and 111, sublime variation cycles make up the final movements of, respectively, those three-movement and two-movement sonatas.

One feature stands out in the Appassionata's second movement. Its chorale theme, reserved, laconic and extremely expressive, while at the same time being rhythmically active, evolves in a low register, that of a male choir. And, though the first variation continues in the same register, the tender, ornamental second variation shifts into the middle register; and the airy, ecstatic third variation into the upper one. Beethoven also applies the same principle of natural acceleration as in the first movement to create an illusion of the Gothic upward reach, evoking an ascending soul. A descending passage brings back the theme, which is this time divided between the lower and upper registers. This creates a remarkably expressive dialogue of two motifs in two registers, the feeling of total reconciliation, of heavenly harmony – which is then instantly destroyed by two 'diabolical' diminished sevenths, one *pp*, the other *ff*, impelling the music into the calamitous world of the finale.

When we pianists work on the Appassionata, an inevitable question must arise: when all is said and done, where does the real 'storm' break out, in the first or final movement? This question is critical to the whole interpretation of the sonata. One would think that Beethoven's tempo markings, *Allegro assai* in the first movement, *Allegro ma non troppo* in the third, unequivocally tell us that the dramatic accent falls on the first movement. Yet I think this is simply impossible psychologically. In spite of the vast scale of the dramatic collision in the first movement, it is nonetheless dominated by a pre-storm atmosphere. The real catastrophe must befall in the finale. I believe that by his '*ma non troppo*' Beethoven was trying to warn us against too virtuosic a tempo, which might threaten the melodic expressivity of the semiquaver passages.

The finale – with the vortex, blizzard, maelstrom, *moto perpetuo* of its semiquaver passages – paints a terrifying picture of the vexation of the soul, with the whole Dantesque image of the Inferno held together by the iron grip of Beethoven's rhythm. Towards the end of the movement, the tempo, as if unable to withstand the inner tension, accelerates and bursts into a *presto* coda. A madcap dance breaks out on the crest of the wave, and the music tumbles into the abyss.

### SONATA OP. 110

Beethoven's last three sonatas, on which he worked almost simultaneously, are among the greatest creations of man's genius. Beethoven was 51 at the time, and he only had about six years left to live. He never returned to sonatas after that: his life's work in that genre had been done.

Interestingly, whenever in his earlier life he had written several works of the same type within a relatively short time, he had always given them the same opus number: Op. 2 (three sonatas), Op. 10 (three), Op. 14 (two), Op. 24 (two), Op. 31 (three). Did he perhaps wish to emphasise that the last three sonatas were so significant that they could not share the same opus number? We do not know.

They do, however, have much in common. True enough, we have here three completely different narratives, each with a form all its own. Yet Beethoven himself realised that he had arrived at some new, intricate compositional techniques, those he needed for conveying a different, somewhat novel content. One would be hard-pressed to name in the entire history of music another composer who underwent a similar evolution, with his late works being so different from the early ones both conceptually and stylistically. Scriabin may be the only name springing to mind. As to the aesthetic transformation of Schönberg and Stravinsky, that was largely caused by a rapidly changing world, by the ruthless onslaught of the twentieth century bringing devastation to both life and art.

Op. 110 is structured as a three-movement sonata, although in reality things are more complex than that. In the first movement, both themes of

the main subject group – the first slightly chorale-like, the second song-like – are particularly close both stylistically and thematically. The second one is especially lyrical, permeated with light and that distinctive warmth that is so characteristic of Schubert's music. In the transitional section, the slightly abstract-sounding arpeggiated passages gradually defy gravity. They then fly up into the uppermost register, where the stalactite drippings of a new theme, seemingly suspended in the rarefied air, create a feeling of total spiritual detachment, reminiscent of some episodes in the *Arietta* of Op. 111. We are quickly taken out of that state, so typical of late Beethoven, and into the theme of the secondary subject, strong-willed and imperious, in a restrained sort of way. The exposition ends peacefully on a short, polyphonic, quartet-like codetta. This relatively brief exposition reveals an astounding sweep of various spiritual states, conveyed in an uncannily eloquent, concise and logical manner. It is as if the whole exposition was written in one breath.

The *Allegro molto* ruthlessly destroys the peace and harmony of the first movement, as if flinging a window open and letting the din of the crowd, the vulgarity of real life, barge in on this idyll. The music, based on the inflection of folk song, sounds deliberately forthright and unrestrained. The more astonishing then is the sudden impression of a hopeless question in *ritenuto* arising from that material. Yet it is then immediately interrupted by two *fortissimo* chords, only then to retrace its steps.

The middle episode of this movement explodes without the slightest transition. This music is so strange that it is hard to describe in words. In general, the modifier 'strange', or perhaps rather 'detached', applies to much of Beethoven's late music, especially in the scherzos (or scherzo-like movements), such as the one in the second movement of Op. 110, the *alla marcía* from Op. 101 or the scherzo from Op. 106. This sense of estrangement and unreality directly presages the twentieth century. The second movement of Op. 110 shapes that sense as some kind of a dreamlike balancing act. Such imagery fits organically into Beethoven's late period, what with its growing inclination towards the transcendental world.

The sonata's third movement is the most complex and expansive of the three, both in its content and conceptual development. It consists of five sections, laid out as A-B-C-B<sub>1</sub>-C<sub>1</sub>. In the context of this sonata, musicologists often make biographical references. This is dubious and apparently unsupported by the sources, although the idea of *Durch Leiden zu Freude* is indeed discernible. Even though the first and second movements stand rather apart, all the movements are so interlinked conceptually and psychologically that the whole sonata may perhaps be seen as a single movement.

The most striking feature of the third movement is its psychological intensity, conveying the thorny path trodden by the soul through various stages of its development, trials and suffering. However, when the end seems to have come, the soul, as if touched by God, begins to revive. Joy and light return to the world.

The first section of the third movement is a mournful chorale. This is interrupted by an extremely expressive recitative, whose sorrow evokes the recitative from the Sonata Op. 31, No 2. Sounding in its final part is a repeated note, first imploring insistently, and then feebly kneeling onto the ground. This section ends with a sorrowful question, entirely in the spirit of Bach's St Matthew's Passion.

The next section, the first *Arioso dolente*, is a poignantly sad melodic line accompanied by rhythmic chords in the left hand. It ends with a sorrowful base motif, the hopeless reply to the question preceding the *Arioso*.

The fugue follows immediately. This juxtaposition of two worlds – that of the suffering *Arioso* and of rational polyphony – is highly typical of Beethoven's late style. This fugue's theme is already outlined in Beethoven's earlier sonatas (the A flat major episode in Op. 13, main subject in Op. 109). The fugue, a striking example of Beethoven's mastery of polyphony, never wavers in its forward motion. It has two culminations, and, once the second one, the 'triumph of the will' (if one can use that expression after Leni Riefenstahl) has been reached, the music suddenly 'tumbles' by shifting into G minor and introducing the second *Arioso dolente*, even more despondent and hopeless.

The second *Arioso*, a sequence of descending seconds articulated with bated breath (how was it possible to convey that spiritual agony with so much power?), ends in the same motif as the first one. The only difference is that all its sounds are separated by pauses, which further sharpens the foreboding of an impending end. Yet at the very moment when the soul's journey is about to reach a full stop, comes the *pianissimo* G major chord, sounding as a mysterious bell tolling from heaven. This repeated bell-like chord expands into a powerful climax, after which the ascending arpeggio melts away, ushering in the D of the second octave. There the fugue, now inverted and barely audible, restarts as if out of nothing.

The way Beethoven conveys resurrection in the second fugue is phenomenal, unfathomable. Having begun on a dying breath, it now seems to obey a 'Lazarus, come forth' command, gathering strength barely perceptibly. And then begin the strettas, the compression and expansion of the theme. Finally, the theme sounds in a trumpet-like base and then moves into the high register, where it sings a cantabile hymn and continues to expand until it reaches the point of triumph in the final bars.

It is interesting to juxtapose the finales of these sublime spiritual achievements, Ops. 109, 110 and 111. Whereas the Ops. 109 and 111 are revelation and resignation in death, Op. 110 is a triumph, perhaps a transient one, of life.

Naum Grubert

translation from Russian: Alexander Boot



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SONATA OPUS 10 NO.3

SONATA OPUS 57 'APPASSIONATA'

SONATA OPUS 110

## SONATA OPUS 10 NO.3

- 1 *Presto*
- 2 *Largo e mesto*
- 3 *Menuetto, Allegro*
- 4 *Rondo, Allegro*

## SONATA OPUS 57 'APPASSIONATA'

- 5 *Allegro assai*
- 6 *Andante con moto*
- 7 *Allegro, ma non troppo*

## SONATA OPUS 110

- 8 *Moderato cantabile, molto espressivo*
- 9 *Allegro molto*
- 10 *Adagio, ma non troppo – Arioso Dolente – Fuga. Allegro, ma non troppo*