



Friday, April 21, 2017, 8pm
Hertz Hall

Saleem Ashkar, *piano*

PROGRAM

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770–1827) Sonata No. 6 in F Major, Op. 10, No. 2
Allegro
Allegretto
Presto

Sonata No. 23 in F minor, Op. 57, *Appassionata*
Allegro assai
Andante con moto —
Allegro ma non troppo

INTERMISSION

Sonata No. 26 in E-flat Major,
Op. 81a, *Les Adieux*
Les Adieux: Adagio—Allegro
L’Absence: Andante espressivo—
Le Retour: Vivacissimamente

Sonata No. 31 in A-flat Major, Op. 110
Moderato cantabile molto espressivo
Allegro molto
Adagio, ma non troppo – Arioso dolente –
Fuga: Allegro, ma non troppo –
L’istesso tempo di Arioso – L’istesso tempo
della Fuga poi a poi di nuovo vivente –
Meno allegro—Tempo primo

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Ludwig van Beethoven

Sonata No. 6 in F Major, Op. 10, No. 2

In November 1792, the 22-year-old Ludwig van Beethoven, bursting with talent and promise, arrived in Vienna. So undeniable was the genius he had already demonstrated in a sizable amount of piano music, numerous chamber works, cantatas on the death of Emperor Joseph II and the accession of Leopold II, and the score for a ballet, that Maximilian Franz, the Elector of Bonn, his hometown, underwrote the trip to the Habsburg Imperial city, then the musical capital of Europe, to help further the young musician's career (and the Elector's prestige). Despite the Elector's patronage, however, Beethoven's professional ambitions quickly consumed any thoughts of returning to the provincial city of his birth, and, when his alcoholic father died in December, he severed for good his ties with Bonn in favor of the stimulating artistic atmosphere of Vienna.

Among the nobles who served as Beethoven's patrons after his arrival in Vienna was one Count Johann Georg von Browne-Camus, a descendent of an old Irish family who was at that time fulfilling some ill-defined function in the Habsburg Imperial city on behalf of the Empress Catherine II of Russia. Little is known of Browne. His tutor, Johannes Büel, later an acquaintance of Beethoven, described him as "full of excellent talents and beautiful qualities of heart and spirit on the one hand, and on the other full of weakness and depravity." He is said to have squandered his fortune and ended his days in a public institution. In the mid-1790s, Beethoven received enough generous support from Browne, however, that he dedicated several of his works to him and his wife, Anne Margarete, including the Variations on "Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen" from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte* for Cello and Piano (WoO 46), three Op. 10 piano sonatas, B-flat Piano Sonata (Op. 22), and three string trios of Op. 9. In appreciation of these dedications, Browne presented Beethoven with a horse, which the preoccupied composer promptly forgot, thereby allowing his servant to rent out the beast and pocket the profits.

The three sonatas of Op. 10 were begun during the summer of 1796 and completed by July 1798, when the Viennese publisher Joseph Eder issued them as a set. The Sonata in F Major, Op. 10, No. 2 is one of Beethoven's most compact such works, and one of his sunniest. The scampering melodic fragments tossed off at the outset not only provide thematic material for the ensuing movement but also establish its playful mood. These little motives pop up throughout the movement, intruding upon the longer melodic lines that bear a family resemblance to them—rather like a six-year-old barging into his parents' conversation. Junior throws things completely askew when he speaks up near the end of the development to announce that it is time to start the recapitulation—but in the wrong key. Some lyrical admonitions and a few pointed corrections set things back on the expected course, and the movement proceeds to its happy, bustling close. Though the second movement is titled *Allegretto*, it is really a scherzo, more reserved than Beethoven's later examples of the form but nevertheless sharing their rhythmic energy and romantic nature. If the reports are true that Beethoven loved rough practical jokes, then that aspect of his personality finds its musical analogue in the finale. A little ditty of *opera buffa* jocularity is proposed as the subject for learned fugal treatment, but proves that it can support nothing more than some flying scales and clangorously repeated chords. The ditty, having shown itself impervious to fuge in the exposition, gets toured through a variety of keys in the development section before the pretense of erudition is abandoned in the recapitulation in favor of a simple, boisterous romp to the end.

Sonata No. 23 in F minor, Op. 57, *Appassionata*

Beethoven spent the summer of 1804 in Döbling, an elegant suburb of Vienna nestled in the foothills of the Wienerwald north of the central city. He wrote to his brother Johann, an apothecary in Vienna, "Not on my life would I have believed that I could be so lazy as I am here. If this is followed by an outburst of industry, something worthwhile may be accomplished."

The country air and fizzy *Heurigen* wine of Döbling must have been true inspiration to Beethoven, because during the following three years he produced a stunning series of masterpieces simply unmatched anywhere in the entire history of music: the *Waldstein* Sonata (Op. 53), F-Major Piano Sonata (Op. 54), *Eroica* Symphony (Op. 55), Triple Concerto (Op. 56), *Appassionata* Sonata (Op. 57), Fourth Piano Concerto (Op. 58), three *Razumovsky* Quartets (Op. 59), Fourth Symphony (Op. 60), Violin Concerto (Op. 61), and *Coriolan Overture* (Op. 62). The three piano sonatas were all apparently largely formed in Döbling, because Beethoven offered them on August 26th to Breitkopf und Härtel for publication as a set, but was refused. The *Waldstein* and Op. 54 sonatas were thereafter finished quickly, but knowledge of the full gestation of the *Appassionata* is sketchy. That much of the material for the work was fixed before he returned to Vienna that fall is confirmed by an anecdote attributed to his student Ferdinand Ries, who presented himself in Döbling for his regular lesson one summer day in 1804: “[We went on a walk] so far astray that we did not get back to Döbling until nearly eight o’clock. He had been humming and sometimes howling, always up and down, without singing any definite tones. [Beethoven’s hearing had become a serious problem by that time.] In answer to my question what he was singing, he said: ‘A theme for the last movement of the sonata has occurred to me.’ When we entered the room, he ran to the pianoforte without taking off his hat. I took a seat in the corner, and he soon forgot all about me. Now he stormed for at least an hour with the beautiful finale of the sonata. Finally he got up, was surprised to see me, and said: ‘I can’t give you a lesson today. I must do some more work.’”

The next definite reference to the *Appassionata* does not occur until the summer of 1806, when Beethoven was visiting the ancestral Hungarian estate of his patron and friend Count Franz von Brunswick at Martonvásár, where the Count’s sisters, Therese, Josephine and Caroline, were also in residence. Thayer, in his pioneering biography of the composer, spread the rumor that Beethoven and Therese

got engaged that May, and, indeed, the lady did present him with a fine oil portrait of herself which she inscribed, “To the rare genius, the great artist, the good man, from T.B.” She would almost certainly have accepted a proposal of marriage from him at that time (the thought of Beethoven as a husband threatens the moorings of one’s presence of mind!), but he seems also to have harbored strong feelings for her sister Josephine, recently widowed at age 26, and a woman who exerted a strong sensual appeal for the composer very different from the spiritual attraction of Therese. Beethoven, as always, was stymied in this affair of the heart and remained a bachelor, throwing himself into his work. “There could be room enough in his life for only one of the two things he most cared for: music and love. And, being the most purposeful of composers and the most vacillating of lovers, can we wonder that his decision went in favor of his art?” observed Eric Blom.

That the *Appassionata* was completed by September 1806 can be deduced from a fascinating and characteristic shred of Beethoveniana that attaches to his visit that month to the castle of Prince Karl Lichnowsky at Grätz in Silesia. Lichnowsky, in the spirit of international cooperation and self-preservation, was entertaining a group of French officers (whose comrades had spent several months occupying Vienna the previous year and would do so again in 1809—their presence in 1805 spoiled the premiere of *Fidelio*), and asked Beethoven if he would honor them with some of his piano selections, jokingly threatening to place him under house arrest if he refused. Beethoven, whose sense of humor was more gruff than sophisticated, took offense at the suggestion, angrily gathered up his things, and stormed out of the house and back to Vienna in a torrential rain storm. His luggage, which contained the finished manuscript of the *Appassionata*, became soaked. When he got home, Beethoven fired off a letter to Lichnowsky proclaiming, “Prince, what you are, you are by accident of birth; what I am, I am through myself. There have been and will be thousands of princes; there is only one Beethoven.” The rain-stained copy of the sonata in Beethoven’s hand can still

be seen at the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris. The *Appassionata* was published by the fashionably titled Bureau des Arts et d'Industrie in Vienna in February 1807 and dedicated to Count Brunswick. Its sobriquet was applied not by the composer but by the Hamburg publisher Cranz when he issued a two-piano version of the work in 1838.

The Sonata in F minor is in three movements: two massive sonata-form essays anchor it at beginning and end, and surround a short, rapt set of variations in which Beethoven tried to make time itself stand still. When Glenn Gould's recording of the *Appassionata* was issued in 1974, he provided for it a surprisingly curmudgeonly set of liner notes that, nevertheless, penetrate straight to the essence of Beethoven's creative procedure in the outer movements of this composition: "The *Appassionata*, in common with most of the works Beethoven wrote in the first decade of the 19th century, is a study in thematic tenacity. His conceit at this period was to create mammoth structures from material that, in lesser hands, would scarcely have afforded a good sixteen-bar introduction. The themes, as such, are usually of minimal interest but are often of such primal urgency that one wonders why it took a Beethoven to think them up." Sir Donald Tovey noted exactly the same abundance of inspiration derived from a paucity of material in the nearly contemporary Symphony No. 5, about which he counseled the listener that the power of the music is not contained in its themes, but rather in the "long sentences" that Beethoven built from them. It is this sense of inexorable growth and change, of driving toward the next goal, of constantly seeking, that places the *Appassionata* Sonata upon the highest plateau of Beethoven's achievement.

Sonata No. 26 in E-flat Major, Op. 81a, *Les Adieux*

The year 1809 was a difficult one for Vienna, and for Beethoven. In May, Napoleon invaded the city with enough firepower to send the residents scurrying and Beethoven into the basement of his brother's house—the bombardment was close enough that he covered his sensitive

ears with pillows to protect them from the concussion of the blasts. On July 29th, he wrote to the publisher Breitkopf und Härtel, "We have passed through a great deal of misery. I tell you that since May 4th, I have brought into the world little that is connected; only here and there a fragment. The whole course of events has affected me body and soul. ... What a disturbing, wild life around me; nothing but drums, cannons, men, misery of all sorts." Austria's finances were in shambles, and Beethoven was placed in a precarious pecuniary predicament when the annual stipend he had been promised by several noblemen who supported his work was considerably reduced in value. As a sturdy tree can root in flinty soil, however, several significant musical works grew from those unpromising circumstances—by the end of that year, 1809, Beethoven had completed the *Emperor* Concerto, String Quartet in E-flat Major (Op. 74), Op. 79 Sonatina and Op. 77 Fantasy for Piano, and piano sonatas, Op. 78 and Op. 81a (*Les Adieux*). Indeed, the Op. 81a Sonata was not only composed during the French invasion of Vienna in 1809—it was prompted by it.

On May 4, 1809, as the French forces swept inexorably toward Vienna, the imperial family, including the 20-year-old Archduke Rudolph, Beethoven's student and patron, was evacuated to safety in the distant countryside. That very day, Beethoven began a piano sonata "written from the heart on the occasion of the departure of His Imperial Highness, Archduke Rudolph," as he recorded on the title page. (When Breitkopf und Härtel published the score in July 1811, they changed Beethoven's preferred German titles to more easily marketable French. The sonata is still most widely known with its French sobriquets, though Beethoven did not like them.) The slow movement was written before the French withdrew from Vienna on November 20th; the finale was begun when Rudolf and his royal clan returned to the city, on January 30, 1810.

The comings and goings of 18th-century carriages were customarily signaled by blasts on the postilion's horn, and the sound of the post horn was taken over into cultivated music as a

symbol for parting. *Les Adieux* opens with just such a musical gesture, here enriched with the open-interval harmony of the old valveless instruments (“horn fifths”) and inscribed with the phrase “Lebewohl”—“Fare Thee Well.” An upward leaping motive immediately balances the descending horn fifths, and is transformed into the movement’s main theme when the arrival of the fast tempo marks the beginning of its sonata form. The descending scale notes of “Lebewohl” are recalled in the second theme, and are combined with the leaping motive in the compact development section. A full recapitulation and a reflective coda round out the movement. Beethoven summarized the emotional essence of the Andante with its title with its performance instruction: “with much expression.” A sudden shift of mood and tempo (“as fast as possible”) indicates the start of the exuberant sonata-form finale, which is based on a main theme of joyous naïveté and a second theme whose fast, rocking rhythms may be intended to evoke the swaying of the coach heading home.

Sonata No. 31 in A-flat Major, Op. 110

Beethoven’s painful five-year court battle to secure custody of his nephew Karl from his brother Caspar’s dissolute widow finally came to an end early in 1820. He “won,” but lost the boy’s affection (Karl, half crazed from his uncle’s overbearing attention, tried, unsuccessfully, to kill himself); the case also exploded his pretension that he was of noble blood. Beethoven was further troubled by deteriorating health and a certain financial distress (he needed a loan from his brother Johann to tide him over that difficult period), so it is not surprising that he composed little during the time. With the resolution of his custody suit, however, he returned to creative work, and began anew the titanic struggle to embody his transcendent thoughts in musical tones. In no apparent hurry to dispel the rumors in gossipy Vienna that he was “written out,” he produced just one work in 1820, the Piano Sonata in E Major, Op. 109. The A-flat Sonata (Op. 110) was dated on Christmas Day, 1821, and his last piano sonata, Op. 111, appeared just three weeks later. The year 1822

was the most productive he had known in a decade: the *Missa Solemnis* was completed, as were the *Consecration of the House Overture*, most of the *Diabelli Variations*, and a few smaller works, and substantial progress was made on the Ninth Symphony and the Op. 127 String Quartet. It was in the three piano sonatas that launched this burst of creativity that Beethoven first realized the essential technique—the complete fusion of sonata, variation, and fugue—that fueled the soaring masterpieces of his last period.

The Op. 110 Sonata, one of the very few of Beethoven’s major works to have been published without a dedication (though Anton Schindler, the composer’s companion and eventual biographer, claimed that the intended inscription to Antonie Brentano, whom Maynard Solomon in his study of Beethoven convincingly identified as the “Immortal Beloved,” was omitted through publisher’s oversight), is one of the towering peaks of the piano literature. Or, perhaps more appropriately, one of its sublimely peaceful Alpine valleys, since its essence is halcyon rather than heaven-storming. In his fine book on Beethoven’s last decade, Martin Cooper noted that in this music the composer moved away “from the dramatic principle of contrast with its implicit idea of struggle. In its place we find a unified vision where music borrows nothing from the theater ... and aspires to its own unique condition. ... The listener is taken as a friend whose interest and understanding can be taken for granted, rather than an audience to be captured, dazzled, touched or excited. In this work, the rhetorical element is virtually non-existent.” In place of the dramatic gesture, which he had used so successfully in his middle-period works, Beethoven here posited a language of pure music, one impenetrable by mere words and upon which even the most learned technical analysis seems little more than an inquisitive flea upon an elephant. Cooper: “However we regard it, we can hardly avoid the impression that Beethoven’s [goal] is the contemplation of a harmonious world whose laws are absolute and objective, neither subject to human passion nor concerned with anything beyond themselves.” The forms and

balances of the movements of Beethoven's late works were no longer subject to the traditional Classical models, but grew inexorably from the unique qualities and potentials of each individual composition.

The opening movement of Op. 110 is technically in sonata form, but one so seamlessly made and so consistently sun-bright in mood that unity rather than contrast is its dominant characteristic. Next comes an energetic movement in the spirit (though not the meter) of a scherzo whose thematic material was apparently inspired by two Austrian folksongs for which Beethoven had provided simple piano accompaniments in 1820. Closing the work is a musical essay whose lyricism and ultimate gentleness belie its stupendous formal concept. A mournful *scena*, an *arioso dolente*, is given as the opening chapter, and leads without pause to the life-confirming retort of a tightly argued fugue. This fugue is not, however, one of those mighty, gnarled constructions that Beethoven employed elsewhere in his last years, but a pellucid, songful, joyous example of the form. The *arioso*, with its thrumming, chordal accompaniment, intrudes itself upon the undulant flow of the fugue, and is again answered by Beethoven's celebratory counterpoint, marked, on this last appearance, to be infused by the pianist "more and more with new life."

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Saleem Ashkar (*piano*) made his New York Carnegie Hall debut at the age of 22 and has since worked with many of the world's leading orchestras, including the Vienna Philharmonic, Concertgebouw Amsterdam, London Symphony Orchestra, Leipzig Gewandhaus, NDR Hamburg, Maggio Musicale Firenze, Santa Cecilia Rome, Mariinsky Orchestra St. Petersburg, and Danish Radio Orchestra. He appears regularly with conductors such as Zubin Mehta, Daniel Barenboim, Riccardo Muti, Riccardo Chailly, Fabio Luisi, Lawrence Foster, Philippe Jordan, Nikolaj Znaider, Pietari Inkinen, and Jakub Hrusa.

Following a highly successful debut with Christoph Eschenbach and NDR Hamburg, Eschenbach invited Ashkar to play the Schumann Concerto with the Dusseldorf Symphony Orchestra in the

special Schumann birthday concert in June 2010. The pianist toured extensively with Riccardo Chailly and the Gewandhaus Orchestra, performing Mendelssohn's First Piano Concerto on a tour celebrating the bicentennial anniversary of the composer's birth. Chailly re-invited Ashkar for concerts and to record the Mendelssohn concertos for Decca.

A dedicated recitalist and chamber musician, Ashkar's current focus is a complete Beethoven sonata cycle presented by the Konzerthaus Berlin, which spans the current season. He will perform the cycle in parallel in Prague, Osnabrück, and his home country of Israel. Ashkar has appeared in venues including the Concertgebouw (Amsterdam), Wigmore Hall (London), Mozarteum Salzburg, and Musikverein Vienna; at festivals including Salzburg with the Vienna Philharmonic, the Proms with the Gewandhaus Orchestra, and Tivoli with the Israel Philharmonic and Zubin Mehta; and in Lucerne, Ravinia, Risor, Menton, and the Ruhr Klavier Festival, collaborating with artists including Daniel Barenboim, Nikolaj Znaider, and Waltraud Meier.

Highlights of the current and future seasons include performances with the Bamberg Symphoniker (Eschenbach), Orchestre Philharmonique du Luxembourg (Znaider), Spanish National Orchestra (Ono), Orchestra della Toscana, and a three-week tour to Australia including a third consecutive re-invitation from the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra. Ashkar will also travel to North America for a re-invitation to the National Arts Centre Ottawa with Alexander Shelley, and a residency at Brown University.

Ashkar's second Decca CD, released in the spring of 2014, features both Mendelssohn piano concertos with Riccardo Chailly and the Gewandhaus Orchestra. His first Decca release included Beethoven's First and Fourth Piano Concertos with Ivor Bolton and the NDR Hamburg Orchestra. Saleem Ashkar is Ambassador to Music Fund (www.musicfund.eu), which supports musicians and music schools in conflict areas and developing countries.

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