

 BEETHOVEN Piano Sonatas: No. 30; No. 31; No. 32 • Penelope Crawford (fp) • MUSICA OMNIA 0308 (64:30)



Beethoven's Last Piano Sonatas

Audio CD

Musica Omnia



Although Ann Arbor-based Penelope Crawford is widely regarded as one of the leading American fortepianists, she has made relatively few recordings for an artist of her stature. Blame it on the vicissitudes and dog-eat-dog nature of the record business, I guess. Her reputation is built largely upon live concerts, both solo and chamber music, also as a result of her many years of teaching at the University of Michigan and at the summer Baroque Performance Institute in Oberlin, Ohio. Rare as the concerts are, they are eagerly awaited events attended by her many friends, fans, and former students.

Aside from Crawford's chamber-music recordings, I know of only two solo discs on the Titanic and Loft labels, and these appeared as long ago as the early '90s. Since 2002, Boston-based Musica Omnia and its director, Peter Watchorn, have been quietly rectifying that situation by recording Crawford and the Atlantis Ensemble —Jaap Schroeder is the violinist of this group—in performances of Beethoven, Schubert, Schumann, and Mendelssohn. The present CD is the first newly recorded solo disc from Crawford to be issued on Musica Omnia, and it's a winner.

I don't normally take notice of cover art, but in this case the painting reproduced on the booklet cover (Der

Watzmann by Caspar David Friedrich) is worth mentioning. In the spirit of Friedrich's fanciful Alpine landscape, the title *Magnificent Landscapes* has been appended to the CD, and this is an apt description of both the music and the playing. Beethoven's three final sonatas are some of the densest, thorniest music around; they require a pianist with flawless technique and consummate interpretative skills. Penelope Crawford has these qualities in spades, as we shall see.

The instrument used in this recording has a fascinating story. The six-and-a-half-octave grand piano was built by Conrad Graf of Vienna around 1835, presumably for a noble Swedish family. That's where it turned up at auction in 1940; a retired schoolteacher was motivated to outbid another family when she heard that the instrument was going to be converted into a dining room table! Eventually the piano made its way to the United States, where it was acquired by Edward Swenson, who restored it to playing condition. Crawford purchased the instrument in 1994.

The instrument has a wonderfully warm, well-balanced sound, with nary a trace of action noise—at first, you might not recognize it as a fortepiano. The upper treble is voiced down ever so slightly, which shifts the tonal balance toward the middle and lower registers. The characteristic crisp dampening and treble woodiness of a Viennese fortepiano are there; some find these qualities objectionable. I prefer to think of it as furnishing the ideal tonal characteristics for late Beethoven. Just as the brilliance of a Steinway is ideal for Ravel, Prokofiev, and Rachmaninoff, the subtle richness of a Graf is the exact quality needed for Beethoven (and Schubert and Schumann).

Just for fun, I compared Crawford's rendition of the three last sonatas with that of Ronald Brautigam on BIS, not yet reviewed by *Fanfare* as of this writing. Usually one associates American pianists with fire and brilliance, European pianists with warmth and *Innigkeit*—to make a sweeping generalization for which there are many, many exceptions. But in this case the tables are tuned: Brautigam's characteristically fast tempos and brighter-sounding fortepiano gloss over the deeper aspects of the music at times, whereas Crawford achieves the kind of depth of expression that one expects from a Wilhelm Kempff or Artur Schnabel. A perfect example is the final movement to op. 109, marked by the composer *Gesangvoll, mit innigster Empfindung*. You know that when Beethoven demands "the most heartfelt expression," the pianist must deliver, and Crawford achieves some of the most deeply considered, soulful fortepianism that you're likely to hear. Using subtle modifications of dynamics and articulation, plus the Moderator stop at one point, she provides a finely shaded example of how late Beethoven should be played. The amiable A \flat -Major sonata and the dramatic C Minor benefit in equal measure—simply stunning.

The piano is recorded fairly close up but quite believably. Handsome packaging, including an excellent essay on the music, completes the picture. If you haven't guessed by now, this is my preferred version by a country mile. Christopher Brodersen

This article originally appeared in Issue 35:1 (Sept/Oct 2011) of *Fanfare* Magazine.

Music Web International review of the first Crawford recording of the last Beethoven Piano Sonatas:

This has been a very good year for Beethoven piano sonata aficionados who prefer the sound of the period pianoforte. [Alexei Lubimov](#)'s idiosyncratic but mostly engaging account of the final three sonatas appeared early in 2011, joining two previous accounts of the last three well worth recommending: Ronald Brautigam's fast, fleet, comparatively 'classical' approach and Paul Komen's warm, rich reading on the Globe label. And now Penelope Crawford, maybe the leading American fortepianist, weighs in with her interpretation - arguably the best of all. It's closest to Komen's in its lyricism, poetic demeanor, and spiritualism. I wouldn't want to miss any of Crawford, Komen, or Brautigam, but then I'm mad about this music.

Penelope Crawford actually jumps into Op. 109 with abandon and virtuosity, and there is not much relenting in the drama or the fine percussive attack of the Conrad Graf 1835 instrument until the slow movement unfolds over thirteen expansive minutes. A few of the variations here really do have the healing magic that distinguishes the very best performances: just listen to the extraordinary muted tones of the Graf instrument at around 7:25. Op. 110 follows a similar pattern: there is no short-changing any of the moods Beethoven

strikes, nor an attempt to homogenize them; if Crawford has a leg up on the speedy Brautigam or the warm Komen, it is that her approach to the music cannot always be packed up in a single adjective. The fugal sections of the work are played with a Bach-like coolness and objectivity which melt away in the adagios (the transition from 5:40-5:55 is masterfully done), and in the triumphant final climax.

The final sonata lacks, in its opening pages, the extra savagery which is so compelling in Brautigam's reading; one misses the fiery drama which can tie the first movement to the mood of Beethoven's past struggles in C minor. But the arietta is something altogether different, and here Crawford offers as lucid and transcendent a reading as you can hear anywhere. I've long felt that the fortepiano sound is irreplaceable in some of the variations of the movement: they still sound alien on a modern concert grand, but they are really daring, especially magical on the more alien variations at the topmost registers of the instrument. If you know the sonata only from performances on a Steinway, you'll know there are variations of somewhat mystical, esoteric tinkling: but on this instrument, with its extraordinary muted sonorities, those passages sound dangerous, new, startling, and chillingly beautiful.

Even setting performance aside it's an attractive package: the sound is ideally welcoming, the pianoforte a marvelous warm instrument (as mentioned) tuned as scholars estimate the keys would have been tuned at the time, and the booklet essay, by Jeremiah McGrann, is really an outstanding (and in-depth at 14 pages) look at these works. I prefer my Opp. 109-111 to be spiritual exercises, and in the first two it hardly gets better than Gilels/DG for me; Penelope Crawford comes from this tradition and she is a rare fortepianist who could stand up to direct comparison to Gilels or Pollini. She is clearly a major artist able to find both classical backbone and poetic blood in the lives of these works, and the Graf instrument is one of the best to ever be deployed in these sonatas.

When I got this disc for review, I was still working on a write-up of Alexei Lubimov's disc, covering the same sonatas and on an Aloiss Graf instrument; I thought, "oh, no, not another one". My reaction would have been much different had I known. This disc is special.

Brian Reinhart

Read more: http://www.musicweb-international.com/classrev/2011/Nov11/Beethoven_Sonatas_mo0308.htm#ixzz3WGVH2kNA