

A3

Isserlis & Levin Reviews

Beethoven: Cello Sonatas Review by James Manheim

AllMusic Review Rating: 4 1/2*/5*

With numerous available recordings of **Beethoven's** music for cello and piano available, one might wonder what British cellist **Steven Isserlis** has to add on this Hyperion release, which includes not only the five **Beethoven** cello sonatas but three entertaining early sets of variations and a transcription, by **Beethoven** himself, of the Horn Sonata in F major, Op. 17. The answer lies in **Isserlis'** decision to record the works with a fortepiano, in this case an instrument built by American-Czech maker **Paul McNulty** and based on a Viennese Walter model of 1805. It's hard to imagine a more appropriate instrument, and the conception by **Isserlis** and **Levin** here is of music that pushes the rapidly developing piano to its limit. Sample the Adagio introductions to the early Op. 5 sonatas in F major and G minor, where the fortepiano adds a murky atmosphere of mystery that accords perfectly with the ways in which **Beethoven** was pushing beyond Classical form. The two late Op. 102 sonatas are truly impressive here, catching the two works' quality of compact abruptness without adding a savagery that for **Beethoven** was in all likelihood not there. In the middle-period Cello Sonata in A major, Op. 69, and in the long central movements of the Op. 5 sonata, traditionalists may miss a broadness in the melodies, but they should spend some time attuning their ears to the instruments here to find an intimacy (not really well-supported by the engineering this time out) that really engages with the muscle and thinking of **Beethoven's** compositional process. Highly recommended.

Isserlis-Levin - Beethoven Cello Sonatas BBC Music Magazine

Helen Wallace

February 2014

PERFORMANCE: 4*/5* RECORDING: 5*/5*

This set contains some of the finest Beethoven performances you are likely to hear. Steven Isserlis is on blazing form: every note lives, every movement is characterized with infectious relish; his range is breathtaking. The ensemble with Robert Levin is dynamic, intimate, often electric. There's a sense of two powerful

minds intensely engaged in Beethoven's dialogue, even though Levin is restricted by his replica 1805 Walter & Sohn fortepiano.

At its best, it's unbeatable: highlights include a crazily impetuous finale to the Sonata Op 5 No. 1; Sonata Op 5 No 2's limping introduction; a radiant opening to Op 69 which ends in an Allegro vivace of festive fire; the dreamy wildness of Op 102 No 1's 'improvised' slow movement and a Op 102 No 2 of tragic violence. The fortepiano comes into its own in the delightful sets of Magic Flute Variations. And in the Op 69 Scherzo, Levin repeats the cross-bar tied notes as Beethoven indicated, an effect that would be too emphatic on the piano. When the texture is open and linear, the blend of sounds is finely balanced, but when it thickens it's strained and tinny. In the cello's volcanic passages in the first Allegro of Op 69 we miss the piano's underpinning depth. The accompanying figures in the Allegro of Op 5 No 1 chug murkily, in contrast to Isserlis's elegance. Sometimes Levin doesn't quite match Isserlis's vitality, particularly in the finale of the Op 102 No 1.

DuoLeonore Reviews

BEETHOVEN Cello Sonatas Nos. 1–5 • DuoLeonore • SOLO MUSICA 210 (2 CDs: 110:40)

It has been awhile now since the seemingly endless parade of new Beethoven cello sonata releases has passed the reviewing stand, but here comes a late marcher bringing up the rear guard.

First, let me offer a mild rebuke to Maja Weber and Per Lundberg for failing to include in their two-disc set of Beethoven's cello sonatas the three sets of cello and piano variations that are virtually obligatory discmate fillers to the five sonatas. Of the 17 sets I've reviewed in the last nine years, only one contained nothing but the five sonatas, and that was by Li-Wei Qin and Albert Tiu in 35:2. Another one by Guido Schiefen and Alfredo Perl omitted the variations but compensated by including Beethoven's cello transcription of the Horn Sonata, op. 17, he'd composed for Giovanni Punto. With so many outstanding versions of Beethoven's cello works in the catalog, to omit the variations does not make for a competitive edge.

Now, having issued that reprimand, I need to retract it because in this case there is good reason for not including anything but the sonatas, though it's a reason that will amaze you in more ways than one. These are brand-new recordings made between December 2013, and January 2014; yet the record label, Solo Musica, has produced these CDs in parallel versions—not, mind you as SACDs, DVDs, or Blu-ray discs; that wouldn't be unusual or in the least bit amazing. No, Solo Musica has

made these recordings available on virgin vinyl pressings, aka LPs.

Some labels have recently begun pressing and issuing older historical recordings on high grade vinyl LPs—I recently reviewed a Melodiya LP of David Oistrakh's Brahms Concerto with Kirill Kondrashin and the Moscow Radio Symphony Orchestra—but only a very few high-end audiophile companies (Reference Records, I think, is one of them) issue brand-new recordings on LP, and then only two or three per year and in very limited quantities. So amazement number one is that Solo Musica has released the Beethoven set simultaneously on both CD and LP. This explains why only the sonatas are included. More simply can't fit in the grooves of those 12-inch platters.

Amazement number two is that if you're a vinyl enthusiast, and a wealthy one to boot, you can purchase the LP set from Amazon's UK site for £399.58, which at today's (11/21/2014) exchange rate of £1 British sterling = USD \$1.26, will set you back \$503.47, and that doesn't include shipping. For us po' folk, the cost of the set on CD is \$26.94, which actually makes this a mid-price twofer.

Maja Weber was born into a musical Swiss family (is there any other kind?) in 1974 and began playing the cello at age four when the instrument was bigger than she was. Study at the Winterthur College of Music was followed by further cello lessons in Cologne with Frans Helmerson and coaching in chamber music by the Alban Berg Quartet. Chamber music is Weber's passion, and in 2007 she formed the Stradivari Quartet, which made its debut tour to critical acclaim in Munich, Berlin, Vienna, Budapest, and Prague. At the same time, though, Weber has also continued to play with pianist Per Lundberg for over 20 years in a duo they named DuoLeonore. Weber plays the 1717 Bonamy-Dobree Stradivari cello, once owned by famed Portuguese cellist Guilhermina Suggia.

Stockholm-born Per Lundberg (b. 1962) admits to not coming from a musical family, the only instrument played in the house being a phonograph, on which his father listened to a lot of jazz. Lundberg's interest in the piano was sparked by an LP his mother had inherited from her brother; it was Van Cliburn's live April 11, 1958, Moscow competition recording of the Tchaikovsky Concerto. From there, the odyssey took Lundberg to the small, exclusive music college in Edsberg, then to Vienna for additional study, and eventually back to Sweden, the country he calls home. In 1997 Lundberg gave the first Swedish performance of Lutoslawski's 1989 Piano Concerto with the Gothenburg Symphony Orchestra.

It's not disputed that while in Berlin in 1796, Beethoven composed his first two cellos sonatas for the pleasure of the cello-playing King of Prussia, Friedrich Wilhelm II. What isn't 100 percent clear is whether Beethoven wrote the sonatas for Friedrich to play himself or to simply enjoy as a listener. What is known is that the works were performed at court by Beethoven at the keyboard and one or the other of the two Duport brothers—Jean-Pierre or Jean-Louis—taking the cello part, with the King presumably in attendance. Perhaps they had him turn pages. The sonatas may simply have been beyond Friedrich's technical abilities to play, but given my warped sense of humor, it amuses me to think that he died trying, for

it wasn't long before he took his leave for the celestial kingdom, where it's reported he's still annoying the inhabitants trying to master Beethoven's scores. Joking aside, the two op. 5 Sonatas are technically difficult and remarkably advanced, considering how early they come in the composer's catalog of works. Happily, Maja Weber exhibits no technical shortcomings; indeed, her execution is scrupulously clean in bowing and precisely on pitch in fingering. Moreover, the sweet-toned midrange and firm, tight bass she draws from her magnificent Stradivari cello is perfectly suited to these works. Per Lundberg engages Weber, not as an accompanist, but as a more than equal partner in sonatas, which, after all, still place the piano ahead of the cello on the title page. Tempos are quite fleet, lending a great deal of propulsive drive and energy to these performances. Of the many versions of these sonatas I've reviewed, I'd put Weber and Lundberg at or very near the top.

It has been noted that Beethoven's five cello sonatas span almost the entirety of his musical output; they are both the first and last sonatas he wrote for piano with another instrument, and they surpass in scale, boldness of conception, and range of expression, with the exception of the "Kreutzer" Sonata, the violin sonatas that were bunched up between 1797 and 1802. For whatever reason, Beethoven found the cello a more promising candidate for communicating the musical ideas he wished to voice.

When Beethoven turned to the cello once again in 1808 to compose his Third Sonata, op. 69, he was not yet 40, but he was now at the height of creative powers. The sentence of increasing deafness was taking its physical, emotional, and psychological toll on him, but it was this period—the years between 1803 and 1809—that saw the creation of many of his greatest masterpieces: the "Waldstein" and "Appassionata" piano sonatas; the "Eroica," Fourth, Fifth, and "Pastoral" symphonies; the "Razumovsky" and "Harp" string quartets; the violin concerto; the Fourth and "Emperor" piano concertos; the "Ghost" Trio, and the first and second versions of *Fidelio*, then titled *Leonore*.

The A-Major Cello Sonata comes towards the end of that feverish period of activity and its style of writing and musical character have much in common with the two op. 70 Piano Trios that were composed in the same year. The score does have one thing in common, though, with the two earlier op. 5 Sonatas; once again, Beethoven dedicated the work to a musical amateur, this time to one who didn't even play the cello: Baron Ignaz von Gleichenstein, one of the composer's personal physicians. No doubt there was a *quid pro quo* of monetary remuneration attached to the dedication; Gleichenstein helped to secure an annuity of 4,000 florins for the composer. The sonata was first performed by the distinguished professional cellist Josef Linke, who subsequently joined the renowned Schuppanzigh Quartet.

Regarding the A-Major Sonata, cellist Steven Isserlis wrote in a 2007 article for *The Guardian*, "It is also the first equal sonata for cello and piano. Previous cello sonatas had either been cello solos with continuo accompaniment or, like

Beethoven's first two, piano sonatas with cello obbligato. Here, every theme is perfectly conceived for both instruments; Beethoven had invented a new genre." Except for the "club-footed" scherzo—one of those movements where it's hard to know whether Beethoven is being humorously grim or grimly humorous—the character of the music is basically of good cheer—sunny, warm, outgoing, and uplifting in spirit; no scowling Beethoven here. Weber and Lundberg bring those qualities and more to their performance. It's filled with a sense of exuberance and joy, and even the evil-intentioned goblin in the scherzo gives up his nasty ways to become a harmless, happy gnome in this reading.

The final two cello sonatas, like the first two, were dedicated as a set; this time the dedicatee was Anna Marie Gräfin Erdödy, a close friend and confidant of Beethoven. The sonatas in C Major, op. 102/1, and D Major, op. 102/2, were composed in 1815, a year which saw remarkably little in the way of significant output from the composer except for these two works. The only other scores to bear a composition date of 1815 are the secular cantata *Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage*, op. 112, the *Namensfeier Overture*, op. 115, and the collection of *Scottish Folksongs*, op. 108. It was a year during which Beethoven was preoccupied with the guardianship of his nephew Karl and concerns about money. This is reflected in exchanges between the composer and Charles Neate, pianist, cellist, composer, and founding member of the London Philharmonic Society. Beethoven gave Neate a number of works, including these two cello sonatas, to take back to London with him and to find an English publisher for them. In a letter to Neate, Beethoven instructs his envoy to negotiate appropriate payment, telling him, "the more the better." When it comes to the "greats" in music history, we tend to place them above and beyond the worldly affairs of ordinary human beings, but a reading of Beethoven's letters and journals reveals just how much of a concern financial transactions were to him, and how cynical, manipulative, and even venal he could be when it came to money matters.

It was in this state of distraction that Beethoven composed his two last cello sonatas. The first of them, in C Major, is highly unusual in form, consisting of two fast movements, each preluded by a slow introduction. The writing, too, now has a freely associative improvisatory style to it that anticipates that in the final three piano sonatas to come. The second of the two sonatas, in D Major, reverts to a more normal, three-movement, fast-slow-fast layout, but its last movement, a fugue of great technical difficulty for the cello, points the way to the fugal writing that would so occupy Beethoven in the "Hammerklavier" and last piano sonatas and, of course, the late string quartets.

Maja Weber and Per Lundberg unite probing intellectual insight and profoundly felt emotional expression with playing of impeccable—dare I say, perfect?—execution to achieve performances of these sonatas which, in my experience, are second to none. Urgent recommendation. **Jerry Dubins**

This article originally appeared in Issue 38:4 (Mar/Apr 2015) of *Fanfare*

Magazine.

BEETHOVEN Cello Sonatas Nos. 1–5 • Duo Leonore • SOLO MUSICA 210 (2 CDs: 110:40)

Years ago, when no one was watching but everyone was listening, at least in the Soviet Union, Rostropovich and Richter recorded what is to this day widely considered the definitive account of Beethoven's five sonatas for cello and piano. Few would deny that they brought to these elegant works a visceral intensity that has remained unmatched to this day.

As remarkable as those readings are, that is no reason to turn one's nose up at no less compelling performances, no matter that the musicians may not be as well known. What a pleasant, and frankly unexpected, surprise to find that Maja Weber, an exceptionally able cellist, and Per Lundberg, a first-class pianist, have so admirably tackled these often daunting sonatas. Weber and Lundberg have collaborated in chamber music for more than 20 years, and it shows. Not only is the ensemble playing exemplary throughout, but like the Richter-Rostropovich coupling, they value an equal partnership.

That said, Weber, who performs on a rare 1717 Stradivari that has made the rounds among a number of famous scholars and cellists, sails through the first two sonatas, in F Major and G Minor, which are far more than Rococo confections served up to an 18th-century Prussian King, Friedrich Wilhelm II, himself an amateur cellist. In these works lurks the Beethoven who was just beginning to turn the music world on its head, and had already turned more than one head with the bold declamations and rude accents that informed his First and Second symphonies.

By 1796, the year the first two cello sonatas were composed, Beethoven had inaugurated another significant innovation, exploding the expectations of his colleagues and listeners alike. He defiantly dismissed the role of the cello as a mere accompaniment to a more complex piano part—which had been merely *de rigueur*, as a matter of compositional procedure, until that time—and invested it instead with absolute autonomy. Henceforth, each instrument was charged with speaking for itself, albeit in tandem with each other so as to make a single statement. Weber moves elegantly through the *adagios* that inaugurate the opening of each work, bringing to each a modicum of restraint astride a studiously adjudicated lyricism. Periodic phrases glide and taper, dovetail and recede just as they should, and without a hint of the sort of rhapsodic gluttony that less gifted players sometimes see fit to indulge, which would turn them into late Puccini. Lundberg, who is among the most impressive pianists and chamber players I have ever heard, elaborates the complexities of his part without ever interfering, nor playing second fiddle to Weber's authority. Both artists understand, and moreover

convey, the subtle influence that affective inflection has on rhythm, thus foreclosing an approach awash in brutal accents and exaggerated dynamic effects more appropriate to music composed nearly a century later.

Perhaps the most famous of these works is the abundantly lyrical Third Sonata in A, written more than a decade later. This was a particularly productive period for Beethoven that also saw the composition of the Fifth and Sixth symphonies. Here, though Weber's reading more than adequately satisfies the work's concept, she seems less comfortable in its musical shoes. Certainly, the rhetorical dimensions that inform this sonata reveal themselves immediately in the quiescent hush of the opening notes and their subsequent variants. And as Weber correctly intuits, judging from her cautiously sustained entry, they do indeed suggest an offstage presence. However, what those opening intonations do *not* imply is a passive observer waiting alone in the wings, mumbling to himself. Rather it is a voice compelled to quiet but ever so desirous of shouting, as if it had some profound secret it could no longer keep to itself. In this reading, Weber backs away from that challenge, preferring to paint a polite conversation rather than exploring, in compositional categories, its implicit uneasiness and immanent conflicts. Even in the household of harmonic invention, that uneasiness discloses itself in the first movement as a prescient affair that hovers precipitously, and to an unusual degree, in the subdominant and dominant, as if it were a giant upbeat to the following scherzo. If there is anything wanting in this performance, it is a willingness to soar, with near improvisatory fervor, to the top of a given phrase. Absent that, the telling linear prolongations, which inform both the sonata's formal structure and lend its rhythmic trajectory compelling cumulative power, are compromised.

In the mellifluous if brief Fourth Sonata in C Major, Beethoven returns to the formal organization of the first two sonatas: a slow, elegiac introduction followed by a lively romp. This sonata, and the one that follows, enjoyed a particularly long gestation period, and formed the objects of Beethoven's attention from 1812 to 1817. To this sonata the players are to the manner born, investing it from first note to last with an easygoing yet engaging lyricism that betrays intimate familiarity and ample experience.

Many years ago, when I was only 15, I had a most entertaining experience with the Fifth and final cello sonata, in D Major, published in 1817, splendidly realized here. At that time, a young and not particularly talented pianist, whose name translated as "the rebirth of a cow," asked me to turn pages for her one evening when she and her husband performed it. There is an especially thorny passage in the last movement where Beethoven has written an ascending litany of double notes in sixths for the right hand, while a long and ominous trill accompanies it in the left. For a virtuoso pianist, this would hardly be a challenge. For the enthusiastic but technically compromised young pianist performing that evening, however, it was next to impossible. Just as the performance was about to begin, she asked me if I wouldn't mind reaching over at the appropriate moment and playing the trill, thus

freeing her to use both hands to execute the double sixths. That is precisely what I did, to the amusement of the onlookers.

Though nothing of the sort is going on in this recording, given the players' virtuosity, theirs is a restrained approach that eschews bold statement as it attenuates rhetorical declamation. While the piano's opening octave leaps, ornamented by a kind of inverted *port de voix*, are certainly set forth firmly enough by Lundberg, who plays magnificently throughout with a command of articulation second to none, Weber's playing wants for intensity, especially in moments of climax; her realization of the all too short, bucolic second theme, for example, is thin and tenuous, rather than warm and reflective. While I suppose that is nit-picking, it is one of several small details that contribute to a fine, but not a great performance. In the following *Adagio con molto sentiment d'affeto*, both players bring refined solemnity and dignity, though even here, there is an emotional distance and a lack of affective intensity that some listeners may find less than satisfying. The concluding *Allegro*, a spirited fugue that includes the aforementioned double notes, emerges unfazed and with remarkable, unhurried clarity.

This is an eminently worthwhile recording that will not disappoint. Kudos, too, to the engineer, who captures, with exceptional clarity and a perfect balance between the instruments, an unusually warm ambiance. **John Bell Young**

This article originally appeared in Issue 38:4 (Mar/Apr 2015) of *Fanfare Magazine*.

Ludwig van BEETHOVEN (1770-1827) - MusicWeb Review

Cello Sonata No. 1 in F major, Op. 5 No. 1 [24:30]

Cello Sonata No. 2 in G minor, Op. 5 No. 2 [26:12]

Cello Sonata No. 3 in A major, Op. 69 [28:10]

Cello Sonata No. 4 in C major, Op. 102 No. 1 [15:33]

Cello Sonata No. 5 in D major, Op. 102 No. 2 [19:41]

Duo Leonore (Maja Weber (cello); Per Lundberg (piano))

rec. 9-12 December 2013, 27-30 January 2014 Ref. Kirche, Seon, Switzerland

SOLO MUSICA SM210 [78:52 + 35:14]

In one respect cellists might appear to have the best deal where Beethoven is concerned. Orchestral conductors have his epic nine symphonies to contend with, pianists the monumental thirty-two piano sonatas, and even violinists aren't let off lightly with the composer's ten works with piano. So having just five sonatas for cello and piano and a few sets of variations to play might, on paper, seem far more attractive a proposition, and eminently more manageable to deal with.

As far as recordings go, an average dealer's catalogue will probably include over forty CDs, ranging from complete sets of the Cello Sonatas, the Sonatas and

Variations together, some instances where the piano is replaced by a fortepiano, to a number of individual discs featuring just two or three selected sonatas at a time, or perhaps coupled with a compatible work from another composer.

Even discounting all the latter CDs above, it's still a pretty competitive and extensive market where sets of the Five Cello Sonatas on their own are concerned. Not only that, but most, if not all the great cellists for many decades, together with their choice of equally-talented pianist, have all made their mark here, starting with one of the earliest, yet arguably still one of the greatest collaborations ever, that of Mstislav Rostropovich and Sviatoslav Richter back in the heady vinyl days of 1963. This is followed very closely, both chronologically and in depth of perception by Pierre Fournier and Wilhelm Kempff two years later. Although the remit of this present review is not to come up with the definitive all-time No. 1 choice, it would be wrong not to list here some other fine recordings since the late 1960s, by Isserlis and Levin, Casals and Horszowski, Du Pré and Barenboim, Muller-Schott and Hewitt, Onczay and Jandó and Maisky and Argerich – and still more besides.

Duo Leonore – Maja Weber and Per Lundberg – has been playing chamber music together for more than twenty years, mostly in piano quartets and quintets, so the idea of forming a duo was a natural outcome. The subsequent choice of name – Leonore – reflects the duo's feel for passion in artistic expression, something which Beethoven's music particularly exemplifies. For Weber and Lundberg, Leonore, heroine of his opera *Fidelio*, seems the perfect antagonist and example.

That their first CD release together should be the German master's Five Cello Sonatas comes, therefore, as no surprise in one respect. Equally it's the boldest of choices, considering that there's more opposition out there already than perhaps for any other mainstream works in the repertoire. Such opposition is arguably from all the greatest exponents of their generation for the last fifty years or more.

Performing the sonatas and especially the early ones on a modern concert-grand piano can additionally throw up all sorts of balance problems that would not have existed in Beethoven's time. Playing them on a fortepiano can bring the listener much closer to the sound-world the composer knew. Indeed, following the practice of his time, Beethoven actually called his cello-piano duos 'Sonatas for Piano and Cello', and not the reverse. Even those pianists who are also soloists in their own right, always seem to show sufficient deference to the cello soloist, regarding the works as sonatas for piano and cello, but on at least an equal footing. This tends, therefore, to negate, somewhat, any advantage or indeed disadvantage of using a fortepiano.

Many CD collections may already include a set of the Cello Sonatas, so the task

facing Duo Leonore is either to convince those existing owners perhaps to try another, chronologically-newer examination of the works, or to entice new collectors to choose Duo Leonore's set over the rest of the opposition – quite a daunting proposition either way.

Returning briefly to the opening paragraph, unlike the symphonies, piano or violin sonatas, there is just no way that all the works in their respective genres could ever be programmed at one single sitting, with just one interval. The Cello Sonatas can be programmed in this way, and there is a real difference in including just one or two in a recital, than all five as a dedicated single-work event. Collectively they represent each of Beethoven's three major creative periods – in fact rather like a biopic of his life, through his music.

So one key point in appraising any set of all five sonatas is to feel that both players can present each work within its historical context in Beethoven's creative life, as well as part of an organically-developing process – in a sense rather like tackling Beethoven's three piano sonatas in his favourite key of C minor (Op. 10 No. 1 – Op. 13 (Pathétique) – Op. 111); yes, the tonality might be the same, but Op. 13 and particularly Op. 111 are light-years apart.

A second and very important point is that the playing from both performers should seek to create that same sense of evolution. It should reflect the stamina needed to play all five works in one programme, even where the recording might be achieved over a number of days – the kind of vital continuity to be expected in any feature film, if credibility is to be maintained.

Finally there must be a real sense of wanting to record all five Sonatas for their intrinsic value and musical integrity, rather than it just being a mountain that any self-respecting climber would feel obliged to have under his belt.

Just put on the start of *Sonata No. 1 in F major* – a work written at a time when the composer was forging a career for himself as a virtuoso pianist in 1796, when he was just 25 years old, and not yet suffering from the deafness that would later transform his whole existence. There's not yet a great deal here in this short slow introduction to make you sit back and take notice, but as the ensuing *Allegro* kicks in, things definitely start to happen from both players. This and the second sonata are real concert-pieces, full of novel instrumental effects for the time and clearly still more orientated towards the piano, which is surely happy to get the lion's share of the virtuoso action, leaving the cello contented to investigate some high registers at time. Things really take off, though, with the first sonata's exhilarating *Rondo-Finale*, and nowhere more so than in its short and rapid conclusion.

Once again *Sonata No. 2 in G minor* opens with a slow introductory movement, this

time far more substantial than its predecessor, but where Weber and Lundberg easily hold the listener's attention throughout, until the following *Allegro* starts. Here they wisely conserve their efforts so that, when the closing rondo begins, it by no means appears an anti-climax, despite its simple, yet rustic main theme.

The *Sonata No. 3 in A major* is a different animal altogether, which Beethoven worked on between 1806 and 1808, by which time his deafness was acute, if not quite complete. In his Heiligenstadt Testament, written in 1802, the composer admitted he had harboured suicidal thoughts, yet this sonata, in common with several other pieces from the same period, seems unnervingly positive in attitude, the work radiating serenity, humour and joy from the very first bar; shades of Schubert come to mind here when in a similar mind-set some few years later. For the first time cello and piano appear on equal terms, and here Beethoven has ensured that each theme fits both instruments like a glove – in fact the emergence of an essentially new genre. That is not to say that virtuosity is never far away. The pair perfectly recreate the gruff humour of the second-movement before giving a quite sublime reading of the short but emotionally-charged *Adagio cantabile*, arguably one of many little jewels on the CD. This leads seamlessly into the crisply-articulated finale, where bravura moments are finely contrasted with those of gentle repose, before reaching the joyous conclusion.

Beethoven's 'late' period is generally considered to have begun around 1815, meaning that the final two sonatas on the CD – Op. 102 Nos. 1 and 2 – would be among the first pieces in this final group of masterpieces. They are both significantly shorter than their predecessors, since everything is now far more concentrated, and where mere gesture is kept to a bare minimum. Thematically, for example, in the *Sonata No. 4 in C major*, virtually the whole sonata develops organically from the unpretentious two-bar phrase that opens the work. The key reverts to C major – often considered a 'basic' key because of the absence of necessary accidents, but one which sits perfectly with the cello, its two bottom open strings being C and G respectively – the tonic (1st note) and dominant (5th note) of the C major scale. If the challenge of the first two sonatas was virtuosity, the third homogeneity, then perhaps the fourth and fifth would be intellectual approach, and especially so in the respective finales, where counterpoint is much more to the fore, along with some strangely enigmatic moments at times.

In the *Sonata No. 5 in D major*, Beethoven returns to the earlier three-movement design, and, for the first time, writes a full-length slow movement, and one which must surely rank amongst the best of its kind in the repertoire. Here the players show great spiritual empathy with the music in a truly lovely performance which never once loses momentum, ending quite sublimely, before launching into the fugal finale. Despite the academic nature of the beast, Weber and Lundberg can clearly be heard enjoying every note, while finely pointing and dynamically

balancing each fugal entry or reference – great erudition allied with an overarching sense of performance, all culminating in a taut yet succinctly-argued close.

So does this new release by Duo Leonore actually hit the spot – or each of three spots, to be more precise, mentioned above?

It certainly ticks all the boxes as far as presenting each of the Five Sonatas as part of a developing musical context, rather than as mere separate pieces. The playing and artistic approach audibly reflect the period of the composer's life when each work first appeared.

Secondly there is a clear sense that even if these five works weren't recorded in one sitting – effectively there's over a month's gap between each three-day recording session – the players have skilfully appeared to 'age' each performance to achieve this effect. It should also be noted here that while the superb playing from both performers is virtually faultless throughout, if there is, for example, the very tiniest occasional intonation blemish, this has been left in the performance, but never obtrusive enough to trouble the listener. This helps to create, in effect, all the advantages of a 'live' performance, but equally without any of its disadvantages – something which gives a unique cutting-edge to what we hear.

As for the final point, whether it be in the spirited youthfulness of the first two sonatas, the considered maturity of the third work, or the quite individual sound-world and overall conception of the final two sonatas, there can be absolutely no doubt that Weber and Lundberg are simply enjoying every minute of what they're doing. This is irrespective of the emotional, intellectual or purely physical demands of the music at the time.

We will all have our favourite exponents for each musical genre we listen to and in many cases these will perhaps be artists we have grown up knowing over many years. Consequently if you already have your favourite pairing of Beethoven's Cello Sonatas, you may or may not be tempted to add this contemporary new take to your collection. If you've yet to commit to a version for yourself, you could certainly do no better than making this version by Duo Leonore your first choice. It may not be quite up there at the very pinnacle – remember, it's competing with a virtual Who's Who of Cellists over many years – but equally it can't be very far from the summit either.

The recording is simply first-rate, with Steinway Grand and Stradivari Cello Bonamy Dobree (1717) captured to absolute perfection right across the full dynamic and pitch range. The extensive booklet is comprehensive, though perhaps more anecdotal and factual than analytical and academic.

In every respect a highly-desirable new look at Beethoven's definitive works for cello and piano, and something which very definitely whets the appetite for more to come from this highly-accomplished and dynamic duo. It is also available on a double vinyl.

Philip R Buttall

Dinnerstein & Bailey Reviews

BEETHOVEN Cello Sonatas: Nos. 1–5. *Variations on a Theme by Handel. Variations on "Ein Mädchen oder ein Weibchen."* *Variations on Mozart's "Bei Männern"* • Zuill Bailey (vc); Simone Dinnerstein (pn) • TELARC 80740 (2 CDs: 147:32)

With such a surfeit of really excellent recent entries in this repertoire, it's difficult to recommend one over another, especially when one could easily live happily ever after with any one of them. As recently as 32:3, I reviewed a brand new set from Antonio Meneses and Menahem Pressler on Avie, and had a hard time choosing between it and a set from Miklós Perényi and András Schiff, reviewed back in 28:3, concluding that both were equally valid and satisfying, M& P taking a slightly more intimate chamber music approach where P& S were a bit more dramatic in thrust. In between those two entries came Bion Tsang and Anton Nel in 30:1 and Emanuel Gruber and Arnon Erez in 30:5, both of which earned high marks, but didn't quite measure up to either M& P or P& S. Then, just when I thought I'd settled the matter to my own satisfaction, there came Suren Bagratuni and Ralph Votapek on Blue Griffin in 32:4 to upset once again my sense of certitude at having sorted it all out. But if that wasn't one siege of sonatas too many, there came in the same issue Daniel Müller-Schott and Angela Hewitt on a single disc containing the first three sonatas in performances I opined made all others dispensable, stating that "if I were allowed only one recording of these works, this would be the one I'd choose."

With the arrival of this new Bailey/Dinnerstein set, all hope for some semblance of order in my universe has vanished. These performances are of an interpretive breadth and depth that pose a challenge even to Müller-Schott and Hewitt. But before elaborating on the good, let me dispense with the one aspect of Bailey's playing that gives me some pause. In my Tchaikovsky review in 32:4, I complained of Bailey that "when the going gets rough, so does his bowing." To a lesser degree in these works, but still enough to be noted, Bailey's tone turns a bit abrasive when

he digs into the string with his bow, something that only seems to happen in passages that are technically taxing. These moments, however, are few and far enough between and so counterbalanced by miles and miles of gorgeous playing that I do not wish to make a big deal of a bump or two in the road every now and then.

Admittedly, Bailey's and Dinnerstein's Beethoven is big-boned and large-scaled—one might call it hyper-Romantic—but not in a way that smacks of braggadocio or pretentiousness. Rather, I'd call it magnanimous and munificent. They convey the sense, even in the early op. 5 sonatas, that Beethoven had more to say than what initially greets the ear. And that's what I meant above in referring to the breadth and depth of these performances. Everywhere there is probing. The potential of no note, no dynamic or expressive marking, is left unexplored. Listen, for example, to the tone of utter peacefulness and repose Bailey draws from his cello at 36 seconds into the slow introduction to the F-Major Sonata, followed by Dinnerstein's staccato chords at 1:00, warning that not all is well.

The exchange comes across as more than just a musical dialogue. It has about it the feeling of a heightened emotional exchange between two actors in a stage play. Am I leading up to saying that there is in these performances an element of the theatrical? Yes, but the players in this particular play never overreach or overstep the bounds of the script, or, in this case, the notes on the page. The example I've given is not an isolated incident. The "interpreting"—i.e., finding the meaning—in every note, every measure, and every phrase is thoroughgoing. Some might call it fussy, possibly even meddling; but it depends on how one hears Beethoven and what one wishes to take away from an encounter with his music. Not to ignore Simone Dinnerstein, let me say that she is no shrinking violet. I've heard her recording of Bach's *Goldberg Variations* that was favorably reviewed in a feature article in 31:2 by James Reel, and I would have to say that as with Angela Hewitt, Dinnerstein is well served in Beethoven by her rigorous contrapuntal discipline. I had not realized, however, before checking the *Fanfare* archive, that she had previously recorded the Beethoven sonatas with cellist Simca Heled for the Classico label as far back as 2001 (see 24:5), or that she and Bailey had previously recorded the "*Bei Männern*" *Variations* on Bailey's debut album in 2003 for the Delos label (see 27: 2). I've not heard either of those entries, so I'm unable to compare Dinnerstein/Heled with Dinnerstein/Bailey, or the Delos "*Bei Männern*" with the current Telarc version. I can only say that Dinnerstein makes her presence felt in this new set as a Beethoven interpreter to contend with, and that she and Bailey together make a formidable team.

I know there are lots of Beethoven cello sonata sets out there to choose from, and you may already have two or three of them on your shelf; but this one is a worthy addition to the collection, and Telarc's in-your-room sound is visceral. Strongly recommended. **Jerry Dubins**

This article originally appeared in Issue 33:2 (Nov/Dec 2009) of *Fanfare*

Magazine.

Beethoven: Complete Works for Piano and Cello Review by Uncle Dave Lewis AllMusic Review Rating: 5*/5*

Anyone who professes to be a cellist has to come to terms with the five sonatas and three variation sets **Beethoven** wrote for cello and piano. These eight works -- or at least the five sonatas -- have been recorded as complete sets so often, and by such big names -- **Casals, Fournier, Rostropovich, du Pré, Maisky, Ma**, and on down the line -- that you might wonder what the advantage would be in recording them again. No doubt some classical music know-it-all would promptly respond that there is no point in such an exercise. Moreover, cellist **Zuill Bailey** seems like the kind of player who would serve as a virtual magnet of criticism for those within the classical establishment most interested in preserving the status quo; he'll make you wonder if he's secretly wearing Birkenstocks behind his 1683 Gofriller cello. For those who take the time to close their eyes and open their ears to **Bailey**, however, they would find him a deeply committed, serious player with a big tone, generous resonance, interpretive sensitivity, and a natural manner of playing that's as easy as breathing. At least they will on Telarc's Beethoven: Complete Works for Piano and Cello, where **Bailey** is paired with young, white-hot virtuoso **Simone Dinnerstein**. **Dinnerstein** is an excellent choice as accompanist given her fundamental understanding of classical tempi, keen touch, and her general abilities in **Beethoven**, so aptly demonstrated already in **Dinnerstein's** recording of the C minor Piano Sonata Op. 111 on the Telarc release The Berlin Concert. There are many passages in the course of this two-disc set that **Dinnerstein** basically "owns," and in those places, **Bailey** never gets in her way; he hangs back and lets **Dinnerstein** take the driver's seat for awhile. The two make for a great team, and there's no question that Telarc's Beethoven: Complete Works for Piano and Cello is a great recording; beautifully engineered, played with a sense of artistic purpose and professionalism.

One very satisfying aspect of this recording is that **Bailey** and **Dinnerstein** do not treat the variation sets as throwaway junk; many artists who have recorded the sonatas complete don't even include them, as they are all early pieces that relate more to the first two sonatas than to the meatier last three. However, there are some listeners who prefer the "Judas Maccabeus" Variations -- once beloved of **Casals** and often played by him -- to the whole set of sonatas; nevertheless, desultory readings of this piece on recordings are not unknown. **Bailey** and **Dinnerstein** play "Maccabeus" attentively and accord it with the special respect it deserves; however, they really make something magical out of the variations on "Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen" from **Mozart's** Magic Flute, a work recognized

as having some confluence with romantic style but not seen as overtly related to it; listening to **Bailey** and **Dinnerstein** play it might change your mind about that. Conversely, the drive, drama, and push and pull of the Sonata No. 5 in D major, Op. 102/2, will have you on the edge of your seat; like dedicated actors learning their roles, **Bailey** and **Dinnerstein** have worked out their portrayals of these pieces in detail. Certainly they are not the first to do so, but the listener can really tell that this has been done; each effect is calculated toward a specific dramatic end and there's no sense here of making **Beethoven** do most of the work.

Telarc's recording is present, focused, and direct; the performances are fabulous; and there is a thoughtful and interesting liner note by composer **Daniel Felsenfeld**. No matter how many complete recordings there have already been of **Beethoven**'s music for cello and piano, this one is a contender.

Piano and Cello: Sonatas Nos 1-5; Variations in G, F & E flat - BBC

Our rating: 4*/5*

By **[BBC Music Magazine](#)**

Published: January 20, 2012 at 4:28 pm

COMPOSERS: Beethoven LABELS: Telarc

WORKS: Complete Works for Piano and Cello: Sonatas Nos 1-5; Variations in G, F & E flat

PERFORMER: Zuill Bailey (cello), Simone Dinnerstein (piano)

CATALOGUE NO: CD 80740

This recording marks the tenth anniversary of Zuill Bailey and Simone Dinnerstein's partnership, and it's certainly a birthday worth celebrating. Their ensemble is almost miraculously tight, seamless and instinctive. The sheer quality of musicianship is up there at the top, but have they anything new to say about these fascinating works?

Theirs is a largely old-fashioned, full-blooded approach compared with, say, the readings of Anner Bylsma or even Pieter Wispelwey. However, there is no lack of lightness, and phrasing is beautifully detailed.

I loved the youthful ardour and brio in the F major *Allegro*, and we can truly hear the smiles in the witty Variation sets, and the finales of both A major and C major sonatas. Rhythmic vitality and an arch sense of timing more than make up for lack of swift speeds in fast movements (such as the G minor *Allegro*).

The A major Sonata unfolds with authoritative coherence; perhaps more bow

articulation would have lightened its irresistible Scherzo. Only in the two late Sonatas Op. 110, I felt not every potential was unlocked. Bailey displays deft bowing in the triplets, and tunes each chord beautifully in the No. 1; and they discover a magic moment of sudden innocence cradled between the crashing accents of the *Allegro vivace* in its first movement.

The knotty D major fugue is brilliantly handled, but I missed the really eery, ominous atmosphere in both of these strange *Adagios*. Overall, highly impressive.
Helen Wallace