NOTES ON THE PROGRAM
By Jonathan Biss

LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN
Baptized in Bonn, Germany, December 16, 1770
Died in Vienna, March 26, 1827
PIANO SONATA NO. 30 IN E MAJOR, OP. 109
Composed in 1820; 21 minutes

The Sonata Op. 109 is not without grace, but its grace is never the point: this awe-inspiring work is all about the metaphysics. Written two years after Beethoven completed the "Hammerklavier," a self-portrait of the composer at his most belligerent, Op. 109 manages to be every bit as profound while simultaneously being surpassingly, almost unbelievably beautiful. And Beethoven achieves this in less than half the time taken by the "Hammerklavier"; never has infinity been so economical.

In the first two movements, the economy is the point: this is Beethoven showing us sonata form stripped down to its very essence. In no more than 6 minutes, Beethoven gives us not one, but two examples of the psychological power of this form. (By contrast, the first movement of the "Hammerklavier" is 10 minutes long, and really just a warm-up act for the rest of the piece.)

The first movement of Op. 109 is defined by the absolute opposition of its two themes: the first is flowing in tempo, concise, rhythmically and harmonically stable, possessed of an easy beauty; the second is broad, discursive, rhythmically various and in constant state of harmonic search, and hugely fragile. These musics, improbably, make perfect sense together: a further demonstration of the magic of sonata form. The second movement is even more stripped down: it is not just the shortest, but the tersest sonata movement Beethoven ever wrote. One idea follows another without elaboration, and when the movement comes to an end (two minutes after it started!), there is no air left in the room.

Having demonstrated—twice—how much emotional meaning can be packed into a short space, Beethoven now goes to the other extreme. In one of his greatest sets of variations (which is to say: one of the greatest sets of variations), Beethoven shows us what happens when you take a theme and explore its every crevice, its every expressive possibility. Unlike his earlier variation movements, which are primarily about embellishment, what the theme undergoes here is more like psychoanalysis; Mozart, and Shakespeare, would be proud. The theme itself is both beautiful and awe-inducing – filled with love, but with the simplicity of a hymn – and with every variation, it undergoes a dramatic transformation: it becomes first a landler (an Austrian dance), then a sort of child's game, and then a romp.

Each of these variations finds the mood lightening and the pulse contracting; with the fourth variation, this pattern reverses, with not just the pulse but the universe itself expanding to accommodate Beethoven's ambitions. This variation, a sort of tapestry woven between three voices, is the point at which this movement goes from philosophical to cosmic: in it, and in the two subsequent variations, Beethoven continually stretches or ignores the limitations of the instrument, using the extreme reaches of the piano, asking at times for a sonority that is enormous and enormously intense, yet free from duress.

Having said everything there is to be said about this sublime theme, Beethoven brings it back, as the piece comes full circle. It is both unchanged and utterly transformed: having been turned inside out and put under a magnifying glass, it has acquired meanings that it simply did not have the first time around. Among Beethoven's greatest gifts is his ability to conjure the infinite; he did so time and time again. But he may have never done so with as much simplicity as in Op. 109; it is the most unassuming of miracles.

SONATA NO. 31 IN A-FLAT MAJOR, OP. 110
Composed in 1821; 19 minutes

In the Sonata Op. 110, the astonishing sequence of events Beethoven puts forth leaves the listener in a state of awe. In none of the other 31 piano sonatas does Beethoven cover as much emotional territory: it goes from the absolute depths of despair to utter euphoria. Playing Op. 110, or even listening to it, is an experience like none other: devastating and life-affirming in equal measure.

Formally, the Sonata is a bit of a paradox: it is on the one hand a wild, woolly journey—its last movement has so many component parts, I'm not entirely sure it is properly described as a single movement. But in spite of this, it is also one of the most tightly constructed works Beethoven ever wrote. Just 19 minutes long, it is unbelievably compact given its emotional richness, and its philosophical opening idea acts as the work's thesis statement, permeating the work, and reaching its apotheosis in its final moments.

Op. 110's structure is not its only paradox. While much of its material is lofty, even exalted, it has moments of extreme earthiness—some of the second movement's themes were allegedly familiar to Beethoven from his time spent in Viennese beer halls. And while the sonata is forward-looking and was a tremendous source of inspiration to 19th-century composers, it also has a certain retrospective quality. There are numerous links to the preceding (and equally awe-inspiring) Op. 109 Sonata: their opening ideas are close cousins, and when Op. 110 reaches its most desperately dark moment, it does so with a direct quotation of Op. 109. And in many ways, Beethoven is reaching even further into the past with this work: its sprawling final movement, composed of recitatives, ariosos and fugues, is really the world of the Baroque, viewed from a 100-year distance.

"Bad composers borrow; great composers steal," Stravinsky is alleged to have said. While the forms of this last movement may come from Bach, Beethoven's theft of them is as undeniable as it is glorious—the forms themselves become almost incidental, a backdrop against which Beethoven can apply his profoundest thoughts and titanic personality. Beethoven takes one of the movement's ideas and literally turns it on its head—the second fugue's subject is a literal inversion of the first's—and this is a helpful metaphor for what he does to the Baroque forms. Bach may have loved the recitative, but he would never have repeated the same note 27(!) times in a row—a desperate, obsessive cry into the void. He may have written hundreds of magnificent ariosos, but he would never have incorporated a massive crescendo, followed by a sudden subito piano—a musical representation of a dashed hope—into one. And he may have been the greatest master of the fugue of all time, but his fugues were ends unto themselves: they did not develop and grow and strive until they turned into something else entirely – into outpourings of pure melody (pure spirit, really) at the extreme upper end of the piano, the accompanying left hand at the extreme lower end (because the piano was never, ever enough for

Beethoven—he wants more, bigger, everything). Bach is the template here, but the music is Beethoven at his most sublime: at his most Beethoven. Having stolen from the very best, Beethoven gives his very best: Op. 110 is a journey into the infinite.

PIANO SONATA NO. 32 IN C MINOR, OP. 111
Completed in 1822; 28 minutes

"What can a sonata be?" after the composition of the Sonata in E-flat, Op. 31, No. 3, Beethoven would provide a different, usually stunning answer to the question each time he wrote a piano sonata; Op. 111, his final essay in the form and thus his final answer to that question, is as astonishing—as unfathomable —today as it was in 1822. Even the shy, halting query that opens Op. 31 No. 3 was already a significant departure from classical norms; the enraged one that launches Op. 111 far from any harmonic home and sets it on its harrowing course is one of the most unsettling moments in all of music. Op. 111 has just two movements— the idea of something following the second would be unthinkable—and the two are a clash of opposites. The first is dominated by rigor, concision, rage, harmonic tension, propulsion and hopelessness; the second, by spaciousness, consolation, consonance, a freewheeling improvisatory quality and, above all, wonder. This set of variations covers a massive amount of emotional and psychological territory—it ranges from absolute serenity to an overwhelming, questing intensity—but throughout, it regards the universe with the widest of eyes.

Op. 111 is the end—the end of Beethoven's journey with the piano sonata, his last word on the genre he upended and in which he was most prolific—and therefore one of the strangest and most remarkable things about it is its inability to end. Its theme has an open-ended, inconclusive quality which always makes the next variation, and the next, and the next – each more restless than the one before—seem inevitable. When this progression from the calm to the wild reaches an improbably jazz-inflected extreme, and yet still cannot resolve, Beethoven searches for closure in other ways, mining the nether regions of the piano and the stratospheric end, in alternation. When this brings him no closer to a point of rest, he travels further still, to a distant E-flat Major oasis that chafes and bristles and struggles against the limitations of the piano, against its refusal to make a sound that sings and carries and lives forever …

The desire to live forever, and the impossibility of living forever, is really the subtext of this movement, and of Beethoven's enormous difficulty in ending it. And it is the only explanation for why this movement—the longest and in some ways most monumental of Beethoven's sonata movements—ends not with certainty, not with an affirmation, but with an evaporation into thin air. Not a question, precisely, but one final expression of vulnerability and doubt. My feeling has always been (and always will be, I suspect) that this ending is a death—a heartbeat that simply stops. No one will ever know if this was Beethoven's intention. But it is, beyond all argument, a commentary on the unknowability of the universe. It is somehow both humbling and reassuring to know that Beethoven was as uncertain of his place in it as the rest of us are. His ability to communicate that uncertainty is perhaps the greatest of all the gifts he left us.