Notes for Recital No. 7

Sonata No. 5 in C Minor, Op. 10, No. 1
The first two sonatas of Opus 10 (of which there are three) are markedly different from the grand proportions of the preceding two sonatas, in that they are not only two of his shortest, but most concise and compactly written sonatas as well. This little C minor sonata is quite similar in temperament to the other two sonatas in the same key: the well-known Pathetique Sonata (No. 8) and the very last Sonata No. 32, rhythmically and harmonically very powerful, with quick changes between vigorous outbursts and longer lyrical periods. It was published when Beethoven was 28 years old and dedicated to a favorite Viennese patroness, Countess von Browne. The sonata does not require a virtuosic technique, but must be played with utmost energy and careful articulation to bring out the composer’s finely detailed intentions. The second movement is a darkly serious adagio in A-flat, whose constant use of four-part writing suggests that Beethoven is never very far from string quartets in his creativity. Prestissimo marks the tersely written final movement, which goes by in a blink of the eye. The few contrasting themes are soft but highly articulated, and the mock seriousness throughout the movement is more molehill than mountain.

Sonata No. 6 in F Major, Op. 10, No. 2
The very good-humored second sonata of Opus 10 is a favorite among student pianists for its reasonable technical demands and the easy comprehension of its musical expressions. It has many coy surprises with timing and dynamic changes, crossed hands, and sudden flurries of fast notes. Like its companion Sonata No. 5 the music material is very concisely written and the playing out of ideas is kept as compact as possible. One unusual feature is a false return to the beginning in D major instead of F. The pretense is carried through for two full phrases before slipping back into the tonic key of F major. The tuneful second movement is marked Allegretto – rather than minuet or scherzo – which Beethoven liked to use with minor key movements. The last movement is a joyous Presto that delights in pure speed and surprise. It moves quickly through the keys of F, C, A-flat, B-flat minor, c minor, g minor, before alighting on D major halfway through. The two hands are put through a wringer of opposition playing and broken octaves in the development section, and soon settle back into the repeated note theme in F major to finish the movement. If performed correctly, the pianist should fall down exhausted when finished.

Sonata No. 28 in A Major, Op. 101
Beethoven used the key of A major for his sonatas only twice: the second sonata, which is one of his least well-known, and this one. He certainly favored the acoustical qualities of particular keys for their innocence (G major, 4 sonatas), nobility (Eb major, 4), or romantic storminess (c minor, 3), having the heightened sensitivity to key colors that any composer has. He may also have felt that Bach’s use of A major in the Well-Tempered Clavier was especially suitable for the type of personal statement he wished to make with.
this new sonata. Op. 101 is uniquely intimate and full of close friendship in the opening
movement, and the three sharps of A major paint the intertwined and continuous phrasing
with bright colors and clean edges.

This sonata is the first of the five “late sonatas,” showing clearly Beethoven’s inwardly
focused creative force, his unconcern for creating what we would call accessible music.
His total deafness in 1816 at age 46 was an embarrassment to him, and he would not put
himself in public situations where it could be viewed and discussed. He accepted visitors
to his living quarters, but otherwise kept isolated from society despite his great fame and
popularity. The convergence then in his life of deafness and aloneness, fame and many
commissions for new works, and the full maturity of his creative and structural abilities
allowed him to accept commissions without any promise of what the finished work
would sound like, and the knowledge that his patrons would pay well for him to explore
the most extreme realms of his imagination. In his piano works, Op. 101 is the point of
departure for this period of total creativity.

The first movement is overall in sonata form, that is ABA, but the phrases glide and
overlap so smoothly from one to the next, that the listener can only detect the
reoccurrence of themes well after they have passed. The tempo marking translates as
“rather quickly, but with most intimate feeling,” and allows the performer great freedom
of tempo and phrasing that could easily be mistaken for Schumann. After a quiet ending,
the second movement explodes with the march-like chords and unceasing dotted rhythms
of F major. The abundance of nearly crazy ideas and key changes are hard to grasp on
first hearing, and it helps that each section of the march is heard three times total. A
shorter trio section features simple two-part writing in canon, although it is a
harmonically strange canon at that.

The great finale is preceded by one of Beethoven’s favorite sonata features, a short but
very slow adagio movement in A minor. Through the use of a brief cadenza in the right
hand, and slow release of the soft pedal, we hear a return to the opening theme of the first
movement in A major, and bringing us full circle emotionally back to the key of high
energy and good cheer. The middle portion of the finale is a fugue that is both a great
technical challenge and very exciting even upon first hearing. The sonata has a humorous
ending, letting the clock wind down before crashing through the final, clanging chords.

-- John Walker