

Beethoven: Sonata for Piano and Cello in A major, Opus 69

By Jeffrey Solow

1996 marked the two-hundredth anniversary of Beethoven's invention of the cello sonata. One might ask: what about earlier examples, such as cello sonatas by Boccherini and Vivaldi? But these are actually arrangements for cello and piano of what were originally sonatas for cello and basso continuo, that is, for solo cello with harpsichord and another cello.

Beethoven's cello sonatas, as did Haydn's piano trios (the forerunners of Beethoven's), evolved from solo piano sonatas. Mozart seems to have initiated this development with his sonatas for the forte-piano with violin *ad libitum*, followed by his sonatas with violin *obligé*. In 1796, Beethoven met and was greatly impressed by the celebrated French cellists Jean-Pierre and Jean-Louis Duport. It is likely that Mozart's violin *obligé* sonatas inspired Beethoven to try something similar to play with one or both of them.

As Beethoven did not compose his first violin sonata until 1797 and his last is from 1813, his five cello sonatas (six, if one counts Beethoven's cello version of his Horn Sonata, Op. 17) completely bracket his ten violin sonatas. Thus, Beethoven's exploration of the concerted sonata began in 1796 with the Cello Sonata in F, Op. 5, No. 1 and reached its culmination in 1815 with the Sonata in D major, Op. 102, No. 2, which he wrote for cellist Josef Linke and the Countess Marie von Erdödy—the dedicatee of the Ghost Trio. (The Op. 102/2 sonata is notable for being the first chamber work to be published in modern style with a cello part and a piano/cello score. Previously, all chamber music piano parts were printed without the other instrument or instruments' notes included in smaller type above the piano's notes.)

Composed in 1807-8, just before the *Pastoral* Symphony, Op. 68, the A Major Sonata was dedicated to Beethoven's close friend, and amateur cellist, Baron Ignatz von Glichtenstein although it is not clear if the Baron was a good enough cellist to perform it. (Beethoven's favorite performers of the sonata were cellist Nicolaus Anton Kraft and Beethoven's student, Baroness Dorothea von Ertmann.) Plagued, as usual, by misprints and mistakes in the editions of his works, Beethoven wrote to the sonata's publisher, Breitkopf & Härtel, in 1809: "Laugh at my anxiety as a composer. Just imagine, I discovered yesterday that when correcting mistakes in the violoncello sonata I, myself, had made fresh ones...From this you will gather that I am really in such a state that all I

can say is, 'Lord, into Thy hands I commend my spirit.' ”

The A Major Sonata has become the most popular of all of Beethoven's cello sonatas, and with good reason. Not only is it the only cello sonata from his most ingratiating Middle Period, but it is one of his most inspired chamber works.