



IGOR LEVIT BEETHOVEN - COMPLETE PIANO SONATAS

His New Studio Recording
Available September 13 on Sony Classical

Official Video for Beethoven's "Moonlight" Piano Sonata, Mvmt. I
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“One of the essential artists of our time” – *The New York Times*

New York, NY – Igor Levit’s work on the 32 Beethoven Piano Sonatas has been the most important endeavour of the past 15 years of his life. Available for pre-order now, his new studio recording of the complete sonata cycle represents the recorded testament to almost half his life spent in the study and performance of these sonatas. One of the most eagerly awaited recordings for the 250-year Beethoven anniversary, Sony Classical will release the momentous 9-album cycle on September 13.

No other composer has had such an important influence on Igor Levit’s life as that of Ludwig van Beethoven. He admits that this composer’s music is around him practically every day and in almost everything he does. The profound impact of Beethoven’s music - since his first emotional point-of-no-return with the *Missa solemnis* at age 13, followed by his first dedicated work on Sonata op. 2/2—has subsequently shaped Levit’s approach to almost all music, whether he is playing Liszt, Shostakovich or Rzewski.

Naturally Beethoven features prominently in Levit’s upcoming calendar – the summit being his performances over the next two seasons of the complete sonata cycle in Luzern’s KKL (launching in August), Hamburg’s Elbphilharmonie (launching in September) and Stockholm’s Konserthuset (launching in January 2020). Levit will also present all-sonata recitals, amongst others, at New York’s Carnegie Hall, Washington’s Kennedy Center, Chicago Symphony Center and San Francisco Symphony’s Davies Hall in May 2020.

What are 250 years anyway? Beethoven is the composer of the here and now, a classic composer and a contemporary. At least that is how he sounds when played by Igor Levit, born in 1987. No other pianist of our time breathes such life into the scores of the master, evokes such a vitally physical, emotional and intellectual presence. Levit opens up completely new perspectives on Beethoven in this new studio recording of the 32 Piano Sonatas, one of the most important international releases to mark the anniversary year of the composer. Performed by him the pieces seem so much more approachable and tactile than would be expected from their status in the canon.

“The New Testament of piano literature?” Of course, Igor Levit is familiar with Hans von Bülow’s overused *bon mot* about Beethoven’s 32 piano sonatas. But he is not likely to utter the words himself. The 32-year-old – nimble, in top form, unpretentious, full of humour – is essentially the opposite of a devout interpreter of Scripture, a priest who studies the most profound truths of a sacred text in deep and solemn silence. Not that von Bülow was wrong: Since Bach’s *Well-Tempered Clavier*, no other cycle has ever encompassed such universal musical riches. Nowhere else can the compositional development of Beethoven be studied as comprehensively as in this group of works spanning a thirty-year period. There are no repetitions of tried and trusted patterns in it, and there are no weaker, less inspired sonatas among them.

Levit is aware of all this. Yet his approach is different. “Of course, I practise like mad. I immerse myself in the score, seeking to understand him better and better. But the crucial thing happens out there, with the people in the concert hall,” says the pianist. “These are pieces where so much happens in such a confined space; that’s exactly what suits me. Life is so rich, and I experience so little of it! The incredible compression of these sonatas, their sheer density of events, gives me a sense of being part of it all. Beethoven offers me the opportunity for an exciting interpretation. I’m never just a performer. No, I play: with the audience, with the piece and with myself.”

Levit is said to possess “the art of taking listeners by the hand and escorting them on a musical and spiritual journey between shadow and light.” The reviewer Christian Merlin wrote this in May 2019 in the French daily *Le Figaro* after a recital in the Paris Théâtre des Champs-Élysées. The program included Beethoven’s Sonatas, opp. 109 and 110, as well as the imposing *Diabelli Variations*. “Sometimes he smiles as though he is discovering Beethoven’s inspirations for the very first time and is amazed by them, although he has of course spent many hours with them,” says Merlin. “The contrast, typical for Beethoven, between petal-soft tenderness, playful fantasy and lightning-like eruptions of force suddenly take on a very concrete dimension. His [Levit’s] relaxed posture at the piano conceals an extreme concentration which, despite the appearance of improvisation, never allows the thread to be lost. What an artist!”

The committed contemporary who regularly expresses his opinions on political events and presents himself as a “citizen, European, pianist,” expresses the compositional fascination of the works as clearly as their high ethical standard. As an entirely “modern” performer, he makes no distinction between purportedly marquee works such as the *Pathétique* or the *Appassionata* and lesser-known sonatas such as op. 31/1 or op. 54. The last one in particular is played with considerable charm, intellectual acuity as well as technical brilliance. “His” Beethoven invites listeners to listen from beginning to end, to get to know the entire cycle – and be astounded over and over again.

Born in Nishny Novgorod in 1987 and having lived in Germany since he was seven, the pianist has studied the works of Beethoven for 15 years. Beethoven was easily the most important composer in his early years. Basically, not a single day goes by on which he does not think about the piano works, says the pianist. The *Diabelli Variations* have been among his pièces de résistance for a long time. In the highly praised 2015 “hat-trick” production released on Sony Classical, he recorded the *Diabelli Variations* with Frederic Rzewski’s “People United” variations cycle and Bach’s *Goldberg Variations*.

From his earliest years, Levit has immersed himself in the vast dictionary of Beethoven’s language. The *Missa solemnis*, which he experienced in concert with John Eliot Gardiner, became one of his most loved works from earliest youth. While he was a teenager, for more than four years his teacher in Hannover, the famous piano pedagogue Karl-Heinz Kämmerling (1930–2012), had him repeatedly explore and perfect one single Beethoven sonata: the virtuoso and filigree early A major Sonata, op. 2/2. This continued until the youthful student had genuinely mastered all aspects of the score and its musical and pianistic nuances and had made the DNA of the music his own.

Everything characteristic of Beethoven is said to already be found in this dauntingly difficult to perform work, says Igor Levit. In all the years since this first intensive study of op. 2/2, Beethoven has been the ubiquitous constant shaping the repertoire of the pianist, who within a relatively short period emerged from being a highly gifted student to become one of the most prominent piano soloists of our time. Levit performed the first complete sonata cycle at the Tonhalle in Düsseldorf in the 2015/16 season. “At the time it was still so formal. In the time since then I feel I’ve rid myself of a lot of inner ballast. My approach has become much freer and probably more personal.” Further complete cycles – such as at London’s Wigmore Hall or the Prinzregententheater in Munich followed.

Levit's recording debut with Sony Classical in 2013 with the five late Beethoven piano sonatas, which have become part of the complete cycle, already earned highest praise and enthusiastic approval. This was remarkable insofar as beginning with the late sonatas, given their reputation as impenetrable, was not exactly a modest way to go about it. Andrew Clements of *The Guardian* wrote that "it takes a lot of self-belief to begin your recording career with one of the world's leading classical labels" with this repertoire, but concluded his review with: "It's all hugely impressive."

"Revelatory experiences like this don't come often in a lifetime," said Michael Tanner of *BBC Music Magazine* about Levit performing late Beethoven. "Alongside this command of tone is a grasp of structure on the grandest scale, which puts one in mind of supreme interpreters such as Wilhelm Furtwängler and Sviatoslav Richter, who would surely have applauded this recital." And the jury of the German Record Critics' Award used lofty comparisons when selecting him as a laureate of its annual award in 2014: "With this achievement Levit equals the legendary stroke of genius by Artur Schnabel in the last century and also creates a milestone of our time in the interpretation of Beethoven in the 21st century." The *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* emphasized: "Levit concentrates on the most minor details and figures and embeds them in the overall formal layout. The precision of his playing, his flawless runs, dynamic outbursts in crescendos and sforzandos are coupled with a lyric prowess of enormous bel canto quality."

The complete recording of all 32 piano sonatas by the pianist who was, as coincidence would have it, exactly 32 years old when the recording was released, numbers among the few new recordings for which the world has genuinely been waiting. Studio productions of work groups of this size have become few and far between in the record market and none of the top international concert pianists have concentrated their efforts so completely on one segment of the repertoire the way he has. Igor Levit, there is no doubt about this, is the man of the hour when it comes to Beethoven. The 2019/20 season places the Beethoven sonatas front and centre with Levit starting three new complete cycles – at Hamburg's Elbphilharmonie, the Lucerne Festival and the Konserthuset Stockholm. To conclude the concert season he will go on a US tour performing only the Beethoven sonatas, including recitals in New York's Carnegie Hall, Washington D.C., Princeton, Chicago and San Francisco.

Find the *Beethoven: Complete Piano Sonatas* here: <https://igorlevit.lnk.to/BeethCompSonpr>

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