**It’s Never Too Late for Beethoven—An Interview with Cellist Toke Møldrup**

**By Jerry Dubins**

*I see that back in our May-June, 2018 issue (41:5), I reviewed your release of Bach’s solo cello suites, which I found exceptionally absorbing—spellbinding, really—for both the beauty of your playing and your penetrating insight into the music. But if that wasn’t enough, a coda to the set was added in the form of the Suite No. 1 in a version realized as a Baroque trio sonata, largely the work of Viggo Mangor, which sounded as convincing as if Bach had written it himself. Here and now you’ve turned your attention to Beethoven and his sonatas and variations works for cello and piano. The two-disc set has only just arrived for our interview and review in the March-April, 2021 issue (44:4), three months past the end of festivities for the 250th anniversary of Beethoven’s birth year, but you recorded the set in 2019, and as the above interview title makes clear, “It’s never too late for Beethoven.”*

*Now, it would be a silly question to ask what brought you to Beethoven’s cello sonatas. That would be like asking what Mohammed what brought him to the mountain. Sooner or later, all cellists pay homage to what are arguably the first of the really important and consequential mainstream sonatas composed for cello and piano. What’s extraordinary is how early in Beethoven’s career the first two of them were written, two years earlier than his first three sonatas for violin and piano. So, let me begin by asking you to characterize the first two cello sonatas, and compare and contrast them to the third sonata, which dates from the composer’s middle period, and the last two sonatas, which come at the tail end of his middle period and stand on the threshold of his late period.*

*First of all, thank you so much for the kind words on my Bach recording, and also for the elaborate review that you gave in Fanfare April/May 2018. Yes, this Beethoven recording was very much intended to be released in the spring of 2020, but the pandemic closed down Italy, and delayed everything in the production - Aulicus, my label, is working in Rome. I’m applauding your headline, it is true on so many levels! It is never too late for Beethoven nor playing his music for his 250th anniversary or adding a millennium to that as well – we will see! And yes, as a cellist “the Mountain” – Beethoven’s entire production, does come to you all by itself – it is inevitable, and many musicians seem to have a good understanding of Beethoven! In my case, this understanding was particularly formed by playing the quartets, that I performed many of and recorded a few of with the Paizo Quartet, the trios that I played a lot with The Danish Piano Trio, and with Copenhagen Phil and Lan Shui I recorded the symphonies and regularly performed all the other standard works for orchestra/orchestra and soloist. As a result, playing the sonatas and variations has always been sort of a spin-off of playing the rest of his production. Especially understanding the role of the cello in the string quartets was a direct link into the piano/cello works. Because what is the cello’s role here? We are second in line – it is even indicated in the titles: “for piano and cello” – not the other way around as is customary in later cello/piano works. But obviously, we move virtuosic in and out of that role. Playing Beethoven in a quartet teaches you so much about moving around in the voicing. Sometimes bass, sometimes accompaniment, sometimes responsible for the tune – and a thousand subtle variations of those roles. The sonatas are full of that as well, and to play them well really requires that you understand those roles on a deep level. String quartet players will know what I am talking about here, but you might find others who will describe it better in words.*

*Let’s return to your question about the first three sonatas. Historically composers have been very specific about which keys to set their music in. According to the Canadian musicologist Rita Steblin’s impressive work “A History of Key Characteristics in the Eighteenth and Early Nineteenth Centuries”, every key has its individual character, and Steblin articulates how this knowledge has been important to all composers of that time. I am completely convinced about this theory, and surprised how much sense it makes when looking at, for instance, the first two sonatas in F-major (complaissance and calm) and G-minor (discontent, uneasiness)*

*The F-major sonata is a perfect example of how the description of the key matches with the basic character of the piece. The entire slow opening, and the first theme of the allegro is wonderfully calming, yet content. Second movement opens with a true example of a complaisant theme. About the 2nd sonata, we set out in grave darkness which will eventually move to a bright, lighting G-major, which happens to be the key of gentle and peaceful emotions! The Rondo is a second to none show off in the piano part, and we, the cellists, are just enjoying how the material unfolds. First editions of these sonatas was published as for piano and violoncello obligato, so it is very obvious that the cello really starts out in this part of the works, as number 2. We are getting some beautiful themes to work with (sometimes surprisingly difficult!) but somehow it is evident that the composer will have more to show us later in his life – here he is definitely showing us how the piano should be played! I think that for both of these works you need a world class pianist to ensure a safe journey – the piano part is just incredibly hard, somewhat similar to the difficulties of the piano concertos - but when played successfully both these sonatas usually leaves the audience gasping.*

*So, as I mentioned, and realizing that it might come out the wrong way, but it is really the thought of a very humble cellist here: playing the sonatas after experience with the rest of Beethovens production might be sort of a spin off project for me, but I think cellists, scholars, audience all agree that all of these works show no sign of a spin off set of mind from the composers hand! The individual voice of each sonata is very strong, and I am having a hard time to compare them directly other Beethoven chamber music, symphonies, concertos. The exception might be the “spring” violin sonata, and the 3rd cello sonata in A.*

*In the A-major sonata, Op. 69 – a veritable world hit, probably one of Beethoven’s most popular works (read: one of the world’s most popular works) together with the violin concerto and the 5th and 6th symphonies, written more or less during the same period - the cello immediately takes a more dominant role, introducing some of the most ground-classical themes in existence. What a joy to be a cellist here! Somehow the role distribution is simpler in this sonata; successful performances of the first 2 sonatas are not really possible unless we have the above mentioned experience and deep understanding of our ever changing roles, but somehow, playing the 3rd sonata our voice is a little more obvious, it is easier to establish what is what, so to say. Technically, it is a lot harder on the cello though, and it is clear that Beethoven had reached a whole other understanding of string instruments – very evident when you see the writing here. It is for me the most idiomatic of the sonatas, dare I say that I think he finds his way to the soul of the cello here. As a result, this is our single most popular sonata in the world. If you want to balance a classical program, always, always play the A-major sonata.*

*Obviously, as Beethoven’s style and manner of musical speech evolved over time, so too did the technical demands he made on the instruments he wrote for. His later works aren’t necessarily more difficult in a virtuosic sense—a member of the Alexander String Quartet opined that Beethoven’s early quartets are actually physically more difficult to play than his late quartets, as contrary as that may seem when we listen to them—but how does that comport with your understanding of the composer’s writing for the cello, and for the piano as well, for that also play a crucial role in the quite evident change in musical content and means of expression?*

*Simple is difficult… matching the piano sound…. The strong approach to motifs, playing motifs in perfect balance*

*How has the cello itself evolved as an instrument since Beethoven composed these works? The assumption is that you are playing on a cello the specs and setup of which would have differed somewhat from the cello Beethoven would have known. Certainly, that was true of the piano as well, though the modifications and improvements the piano underwent in the decades after Beethoven were surely more extensive and far-reaching than anything string instruments were subjected to. But the question is, given your knowledge of the cello then and now, to what extent have you altered your approach to fingering, bowing, phrasing, and vibrato in the now to accommodate the then?*

*I’m happy you take up this issue, since it is something that used to keep me awake all night! On this recording I am using my 1697 David Tecchler cello in its usual, beautiful shape. As many of my colleagues I have done experiments with different setups, gut strings, baroque bows and so on. I have great interest in listening to what others are getting out of their efforts in this field – great examples are Pieter Wispelwey’s Bach recording, Steven Isserlis’ classical recordings, and of course wonderful period ensembles such as Concerto Copenhagen. In my own music making however, I have realized that changing the frame of my instrument doesn’t really pay off artistically the way I would want it to. I don’t really feel that it brings me to a better place, so to speak. To me the cello, or any musical instrument, is really “an instrument” - a wonderful machine, that we use to channel our understanding of the composers works. And this for me has turned out to be the most important. On YouTube there is a small sequence of the late Danish bassoonist Peter Bastian – one of the most musical moments I can recall, and he is playing only on a straw! I mean, of course certain details of sound and style would change if I sat down with another setup or even a different instrument for each main period, but who would I be doing a favor? Beethoven? Audience? Scholars? Myself? Eventually this simple line became my approach and also advise to others: Feel good about what you are doing.*

*Maybe some would call my approach to the matters you mentioned here pretty conservative: It’s all based on good old, grounded cello technique – as described vividly by Navarra, Feulliard, Grützmacher and other great masters. I have had the luck to study with many different teachers who were all able to explain music making on the cello down to the smallest detail. Lessons with the Alban Berg Quartet pointed me in the direction of Leopold Mozarts teatrise on violin playing, where most things about playing music around the time of his son is explained.*

*A core example of the thinking I use when playing Beethoven is from his string quartet Opus 18 No 4 in c-minor, 1st movement. In bar 2, according to the classical school and L. Mozart, we should release tension. Impertinent Beethoven writes us a “sforzando” here instead, accenting the release instead of just letting the musician perform his good school. Creating a small revolution right there, one of many in his oeuvre. Key message of this example: Understanding the school, and then understanding when Beethoven breaks the rules and then: Making an art out of playing the wrongdoing 100% criminal - as if it was a new school! If fingering, bowing, phrasing, and vibrato follows this scheme, we are already quite far: I am constantly asking myself how to avoid unintended accents, glissandos, crescendos, diminuendos, portato etc. But this is – however a wonderful approach – what I think (and hope!) most musicians out there approaches classical/classical romantic music, so it is… pretty conservative. Although it does feel very modern and very present right there when you are in the middle of it*

*Then… we have the third layer, which is the personal layer, and something that the world is very concerned with in arts here in 2020/2021. Do the artists have something important to tell the world…? Accordingly, I would really love to add something of beautiful meaning here, but actually, on this recording, we are sort of trying to do what it says in the score. And it has been fun, exciting, difficult, self-destructing, and well… wonderful*

*Did you use your 1697 David Tecchler cello for these recordings, and if so, did you make any changes to the instrument’s setup we should know about?*

*All above…*

*As I’m sure you know, the five numbered sonatas and the three sets of variations are not the sum total of the works Beethoven composed for cello and piano. There’s an early sonata for horn, composed around the same time (1800) as the first three violin sonatas. It was written for the virtuoso hornist Giovanni Punto, and premiered by him with Beethoven at the piano on April 18 of that year. As was customary practice at the time, the sonata was printed in versions for violin and for flute, probably made by the publisher, for the purpose of potentially increasing sales. But Beethoven himself is believed to have had a hand in the edition that was published as* Sonate pour le Forte-Piano avec un Cor ou Violoncelle. *Only two or three cellists I’m aware of have included the “Punto”* *Sonata in their integral Beethoven cello works surveys. Why is that?*

*The honest answer to this question is, that I have never felt that this sonata had a a particular need to be played on the cello – changing the instrument is not making it better, in other words. I enjoy very much on the horn, but maybe Beethoven’s idea for transcribing this piece was more monetary than artistic – how many hornplayers at that time were able to play the piece? Yes, even our greatests masters have to answer to that kind of critic once in a while!*

*Has your association with pianist Yaron Kohlberg been a long one? How and where did you first meet, and when did you decide to perform together as a cello and piano duo? Are the Beethoven sonatas your first recording together?*

*Your biography indicates that you have been performing now for two decades across Europe and in the U.S., South America, Australia, Asia, and Middle East, and that you have also taken a special interest in modern repertoire for your instrument, having premiered a number of contemporary cello works, among which was the European premiere of the cello concerto by John Williams. What are some of the other works you’ve premiered, and have you collaborated directly with any of their composers?*

*I note too that until recently you served as principal cellist in the Copenhagen Philharmonic, but that you gave up that position due to your busy schedule and in order to concentrate on your solo performing career and also your teaching duties at the Royal Danish Academy of Music. What advice do you have for students who are thinking of pursuing careers as orchestral players, as members of a string quartet or other chamber ensemble, or even as concert cellists?*

*What can we expect next from Toke Møldrup? Recording projects planned or currently in progress? What are the three cello concertos you would most like to record? Any interest in conducting?*