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BEETHOVEN
Complete Piano Sonatas
MARTIN RASCH

A Cosmos in Movement
Beethoven's thirty-two piano sonatas

In the beginning, there was the triad. Striving upward but still soft, the right hand taps it out on the keys before bringing it to a halt with a rapid turn. The motif presses higher, is compressed and condensed, culminating in an explosive chord. The following rest pulsates with tension...

At the end, everything is dissolved in pure and luminous sound. Hovering in cosmic spheres, the melody follows its course and vanishes. The beginning and end of Beethoven's thirty-two piano sonatas. Spanning the poles of Beethoven's art – motoric drive and calm, passion and transcendence –, the sonatas seem almost to form an organic cycle. Yet between Op. 2 and Op. 111 lie twenty-eight years of creative work and search, thirty-two remarkably varied compositions.

"The pianist's New Testament," as Hans von Bülow called them, though this does not take into account their vibrant richness, formal upheavals, and emotional depths. "Cosmos" remains a more fitting characterization: here we encounter worlds upon worlds, strange constellations, collisions, destruction and creation, coherent laws and mysterious forces. The cosmos is in movement, a "work in progress," or as Beethoven's favorite philosopher Immanuel Kant wrote, "always occupied with bringing forth new things and new worlds." Beethoven internalized this revolutionary, dynamic new world view, and it also forms the basis for his creative aesthetic: "The aim in the art world, as indeed in the whole of creation, is freedom." Martin Rasch is also fascinated by the developmental forces in this cosmos, "these upheavals, these revolutionary innovations that are not imposed, but arise from each other completely naturally. One thing develops from another, just as the ruptured fabric of the late works is announced in the early works." Viewed from this angle, Beethoven's piano sonata oeuvre as a whole adheres to similar principles as one of his individual sonata movements. Thus for Rasch it is perfectly natural, particularly with Beethoven, to approach the music as a whole. After many years of living with the sonatas and successfully performing the complete cycle, presenting this cycle on CD is a project that is particularly close to his heart.

When Beethoven put together his Op. 2 in 1795, he knew exactly what he was aiming to achieve. The three sonatas dedicated to Haydn are rooted in the Classical tradition, and the extremely concise exposition of the first Sonata in F minor, which fits onto a single page in the original edition, is an exemplary model of the form. At the same time, with its succinctness and forward-driven dynamism, it is also a kind of "calling card" for Beethoven's totally unique musical personality. The impetuosity that reveals itself here is unleashed fully in the Finale, perhaps to Haydn's dismay, but not without hearkening back motivically to the first movement. It is followed by works of a completely different character: the humoristic and lyrical Sonata in A major and virtuoso, concerto-like C-major Sonata. Their slow movements, deeply-felt songs that unfold in an expansive sound space, would become Beethoven's trademarks just as much as the brisk and novel Scherzo of the third sonata. With his Op. 2, Beethoven offers a sort of "exposition" of his sonata oeuvre as a whole. The abundance of characters and textures, packed into highly individual works, reflects the cosmic scale of his creative ambitions.

These ambitions are also shared by the conceptually-related set of three sonatas, Op. 10. Beethoven presents the characters here, however, in even sharper relief and with still greater contrast and concision, as the jagged first theme of Op. 10, No. 1 announces at the outset as it hurtles upward. In Op. 10, No. 3 Beethoven only amplifies his propensity for extremes: the racing Presto first movement is followed by the Largo e mesto which, beyond mere sadness, gives expression to a veritable depression, turning in circles within itself and consumed with gnawing, crippling emotion. Such an existential tone raises the sonata as a whole to a new aesthetic level. The individual works designated as "Grande Sonate" also play a key role in Beethoven's development. Before turning to the famous *Pathétique*, Op. 13, with its dramatic, elemental power, let us mention the E-flat major Sonata, Op. 7, which Rasch also regards as a "milestone." With its "pregnant rests," a profound and mysterious atmosphere opens up in the slow movement that we will only encounter again in the late works. The sonata, on an unusually large scale, unfolds its richness of ideas in a mostly narrative manner – providing splendid counterevidence to the common cliché of Beethoven as a dramatist. This applies equally to the B-flat major Sonata, Op. 22, a virtuoso, humoristic work that also plays with the forms and inflections of Classicism with a certain hint of nostalgia. Thus with a retrospective glance at the past, the thirty-year old Beethoven takes stock of what has preceded him – before setting out for new shores.

For Rasch, the sonatas Op. 26, Op. 27, and Op. 28 form a single coherent "poetic island" before the larger middle-period set. Here Beethoven calls into question the very idea of the "sonata": is the formal framework really what sustains the genre? Or is it rather the idea, the fantasy, the inner content? The latter is already suggested by the subtitle of the two Op. 27 works, *Sonata quasi una Fantasia*. With its unorthodox succession of interconnected movements, the E-flat major Sonata, less well-known than the so-called "Moonlight" Sonata, does particular justice to this title. The Sonata, Op. 26, which is dominated by the dramatic funeral march, even does without a

sonata movement altogether. The entire set – even Op. 28, which is structured once again along traditional lines – is unified by the lyrical opening movements that forgo dialectical tension. The "poetic" Beethoven is distrustful of standardized sonata logic.

"With each day I am coming closer to my goal, which I feel but cannot describe," Beethoven writes in late 1801. He counters his despair over his hearing loss with a surge of creative energy, breaking new ground in another trio of piano sonatas, Op. 31 (among other works). Beethoven has found a new way of combining fantasy with logic, feeling with intellect, freedom with order. He continues to make use of the general framework of sonata form, but reinvents it, so to speak, with every piece – with particularly spectacular results, of course, in the celebrated "Tempest" Sonata, and less conspicuously but with considerable ingenuity in the other two works of the set as well. Thus Op. 31, which begins with eccentric humor and concludes with a frenzied whirling dance, once again combines an overarching idea with three very autonomous works.

From this point on, however, each later opus, individually crafted and carried by a strong idea, is completely a work of its own, comparable with Beethoven's symphonies from the "Eroica" onward. The "Waldstein" Sonata, Op. 53, for example, stands before us like a monumental work of architecture, with its clear-cut form and structure, expansive and novel sound spaces, pulsating motoric energy, vibrant colors, and brilliant keyboard virtuosity. Its dark counterpart is the so-called "Appassionata," Op. 57; in terms of emotion, this is Beethoven's most extreme piano work to date, full of impassioned outbursts and driven desperately forward in frantic despair. And yet precisely here, Beethoven maintains the (sonata) form, as if he were striving to keep this inner storm under control... In the shadow of these giants, we must take care not to neglect the smaller sonatas of this period, which are almost as boldly conceived and formally freer. Beethoven himself thought especially highly of the F-sharp major Sonata, Op. 78, whose succinct, lyrical first movement has the complexity and concision of a sophisticated poem. Here Beethoven is announcing himself as a "Romantic," and even more so in the Sonata, Op. 81a ("Les Adieux"), which combines a poetic, associative richness of ideas with the character of a virtuoso piece. Schubert, Chopin, and Schumann already seem close at hand...

On the adventure – filled journey through Beethoven's pianistic cosmos, we are approaching the "late works," which are often described as visionary. Op. 90 in E minor/E major couples a very freely-structured sonata movement with a "song without words" in rondo form. The A-major Sonata, Op. 101, is even more striking; virtually Schumannesque in character, its highly unique cyclical form forces together very disparate elements, from the "most ardent feeling" to fugal technique. Beethoven is now striving for a virtually utopian totality of stylistic and expressive elements, the merging of past with future, the abolition of all limitations of the piano sonata genre. We are reminded of Friedrich Schlegel's idea of a "progressive universal poetry" which "embraces everything that is purely poetic, from the greatest art systems, which contain within them still more systems, all the way down to the sigh, the kiss that a poeticizing child breathes out in an artless song." For this goal of a subjective creation of the world, there was nevertheless "no form yet that would be suitable for expressing the spirit of the author fully," as Schlegel already realized. In effect, Beethoven's textures and formal procedures do seem incohesive at times. But new forms are coming into being, a very important aspect for Martin Rasch's interpretation: "For me, Beethoven is the musical architect par excellence who, with all the ruptured fabric of his works, nevertheless creates stable structures that are sustainable and coherent as a whole. The form and content join together in perfect balance." This formative will expresses itself most clearly in the Sonata, Op. 106 which, as Beethoven said, "is going to be my greatest." *The Große Sonate für das Hammerklavier* returns once again to Classical form. But technically and expressively, in both the details and overall structure, it is conceived so boldly and on such a monumental scale that it transcends all boundaries, culminating in an almost preposterously difficult fugue. After this über-sonata, it is almost impossible to imagine what the next step could be...

In April 1820, Beethoven promised his publisher "a work of three sonatas at 120 ducats." Though the sonatas, completed in early 1822, were given their own opus numbers (Op. 109, Op. 110, and Op. 111), they are also united, beyond the business-related aspect, by a spiritual bond: Beethoven's oeuvre for piano sonata ends just as it began – with a set of three. Here the features of his late style are concentrated, with the most radical consequences to date. We once again encounter poetic, free-floating forms, "Baroque" polyphony, a traditional but eccentrically-constructed sonata movement. In addition, a central role is given to a form that had always held a place of special importance for Beethoven: the theme with variations. In Op. 109, the theme already dissolves in a sound space in which the trills virtually lift the music to a transcendental realm. And even further, in the final movement of Op. 111, the "artless song" of the *Arietta* undergoes a unique process of rhythmic transformation in which it seems to be completely liberated from time and space. Here even the critic Adolf Bernhard Marx, who was sympathetic to Beethoven, was no longer able to follow, but still found the fitting words for this final point of culmination, where "at the end of the finite, the eternal reveals itself."

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Translation*: Aaron Epstein*

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MARTIN RASCH

A fondness for complete cycles became apparent early on in the artistic career of Martin Rasch (born 1974). With a broad repertoire as his basis, the works of Ludwig van Beethoven developed into a special focus. He has often dedicated long phases to the five piano concertos and thirty-two piano sonatas, studying them in depth and performing them in highly-acclaimed concert series – a decades-long experience that is now documented in this complete recording.

Rasch has also presented concert cycles featuring both books of *The Well-Tempered Clavier* by Johann Sebastian Bach, the complete piano sonatas by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, the twenty-four Etudes by Frédéric Chopin, and a large selection of works by Franz Schubert, Robert Schumann, and Franz Liszt. He has presented the complete piano works of Arnold Schoenberg in lecture concerts and recorded them for the Bayerischer Rundfunk, and has also championed the piano sonata by brilliant Liszt pupil Julius Reubke. Alongside his solo career, Rasch performs regularly with a number of chamber music partners. His awards include First Prize at the Calabria International Piano Competition (1996), the E.ON Culture Award (2002), and the Bavarian Award for the Advancement of the Arts (2004).

Since 2002 he has taught a piano class at the University of Music and Performing Arts Munich, where he studied himself with Rainer Fuchs, Hugo Steurer, and Gerhard Oppitz.

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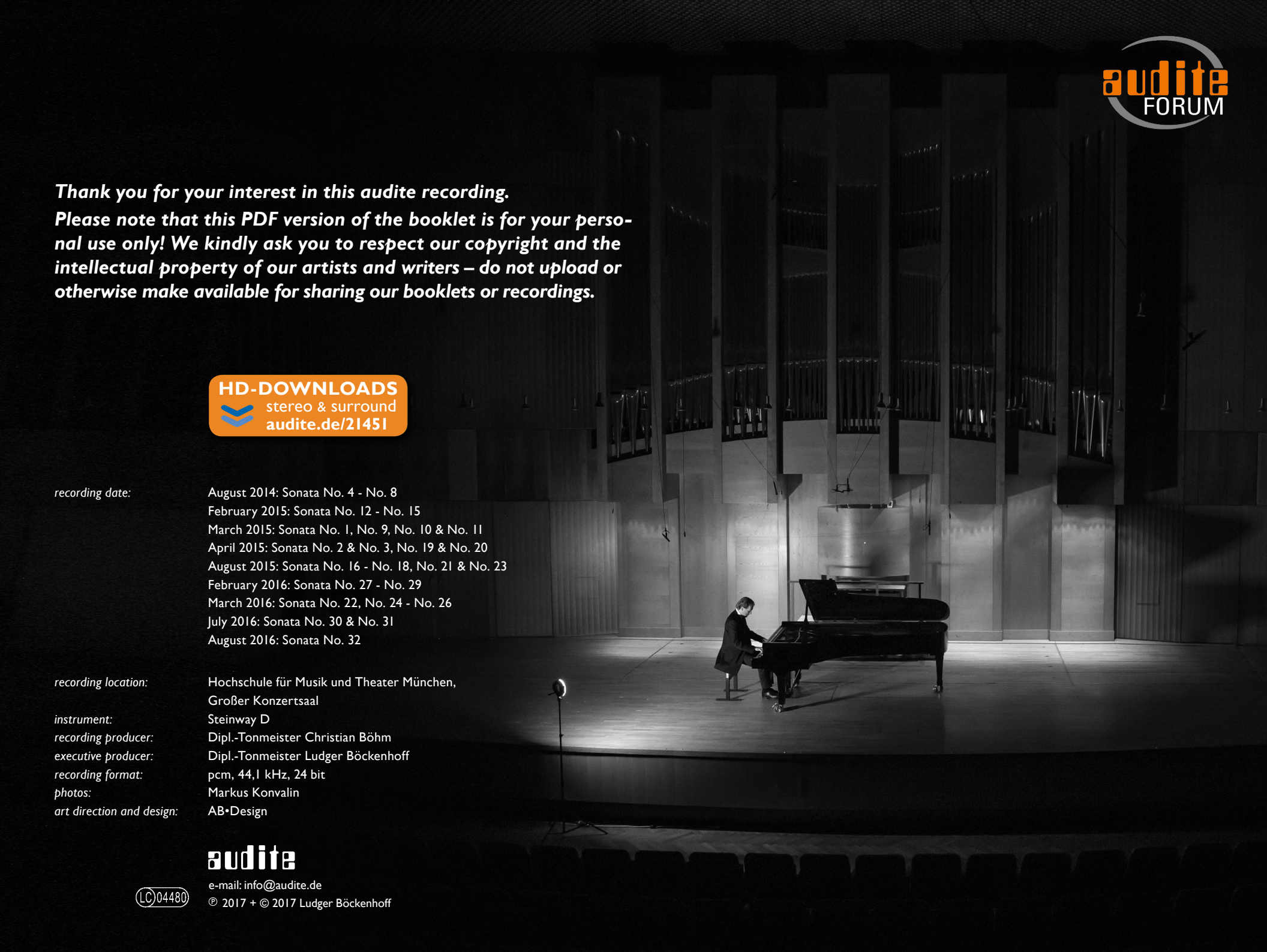

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