Alessio Bax plays Beethoven
Hammerklavier & Moonlight Sonatas
The Ruins of Athens
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HAMMERKLAVIER & MOONLIGHT SONATAS
THE RUINS OF ATHENS

Sonata No.29 in B-flat Major, Op.106 “Hammerklavier”  
Ludwig van Beethoven
1. Allegro   [10.59]
2. Scherzo: Assai vivace   [2.31]
3. Adagio sostenuto, appassionato e con molto sentimento   [18.50]
4. Largo - Allegro risoluto   [11.25]

Sonata No.14 in C-sharp Minor, Op.27, No.2 “Moonlight”  
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)
5. Adagio sostenuto   [5.04]
6. Allegretto   [2.07]
7. Presto agitato   [7.06]

From Die Ruinen von Athen, Op.113 (The Ruins of Athens)  
Beethoven, arr. Bax
8. Chorus of the Whirling Dervishes   [2.29]
9. Turkish March   [1.46]
Total timings:   [62.20]

RECORDING THE “HAMMERKLAVIER”

For my new all-Beethoven recording I chose the monumental Sonata Op.106 “Hammerklavier” as the centerpiece and paired it with another sonata very dear to me, Op.27 No.2 “Moonlight”. The latter is an all-time favorite for good reason, and I played it on my very first piano recital when I was eight years old. For “encores”, and in keeping with the tradition of including a few of my own arrangements on my albums, I transcribed two enticing works from The Ruins of Athens, Op.113: the famous Turkish March, where I have tried to bring out the lightness and exoticism of the original score, and the lesser known, but stunningly evocative, Chorus of the Whirling Dervishes.

What can I say about the “Hammerklavier” that has not been said before? It is, with no fear of exaggeration, one of the great achievements of humankind. It is Everest for a pianist. I have lived with this work for nearly twenty years now and it has singlehandedly deepened my knowledge of Beethoven, piano technique and music. This piece is a being that seems to continually evolve, although as I look at it on paper, so beautifully and perfectly crafted, I know what is evolving is my understanding of it. The longer I live with it, the more it amazes me — and this is not a piece that gets “easier” with time. I have come to terms with the challenges of the “Hammerklavier,” and with the joy of overcoming one obstacle only to discover five more!

Because it is such a demanding piece, it enables me to work simultaneously on its intellectual and pianistic aspects — and more importantly, on the tools to make it accessible to an audience. Each time I play the “Hammerklavier” in concert, it is like leading a group of climbers to new vistas in uncharted territory. And that is incredibly exciting.

There is a structural and rhythmic drive to the first two movements, and then a depth and desperate inner beauty of the Adagio. In this 20-minute-long movement, I try to convey the soul-searching Beethoven poured into it, delving, layer after layer, into its secrets.

The modest connections between movements are genius, and the complex layers and discourse of the Fugue awesome and humbling. Take the introduction of the Fugue, for example:
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a seemingly improvised passage, where Beethoven sends the performer and the audience on a search in the dark. That a human mind could create it is as puzzling as the Fugue itself. We can theoretically explain every little line, subject entrance, inversion and juxtaposition, but who can explain how the incredible buzz of energy that the Fugue generates and its obsessively winding character magically glue this structure together?

In any other profession it would be frustrating to seek something as elusive as an understanding of the “Hammerklavier”, but for an artist, it is a great gift. I am forever grateful to be in such close contact with Beethoven’s genius – to touch and feel it day after day, year after year at the keyboard – and I continue to be humbled, moved, and inspired by the daring of his music.

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Ludwig van BEETHOVEN
Born Bonn, baptized 17 December 1770; died Vienna, 26 March 1827.

The piano was Beethoven’s instrument. It was the emblem of his musical identity when, a formidable young virtuoso, he took Vienna by storm in 1792, thrilling audiences, by contemporary accounts, with his “tremendous power, character, unheard-of bravura and facility.” Over the coming three decades, the piano served as the catalyst for the evolution of Beethoven’s compositional language, and his thirty-two piano sonatas arguably represent the central nervous system of his complete oeuvre. It is a catalogue that charts the course of his entire artistic development, the laboratory in which he fine-tuned the innovations realized on a larger scale in his string quartets and symphonies. And, until the end of his life, the piano represented Beethoven’s most intimate means of self-expression. “The moment he is seated at the piano,” noted Sir John Russell on visiting Beethoven in 1821 (by which time the composer was stone deaf), “he is evidently unconscious that there is anything in existence but himself and his instrument.”

The virtuosity, creative vision, and deeply felt personal resonance embodied for Beethoven by the piano are powerfully in evidence in the Sonata No.14 in C-sharp Minor, Op.27, No.2. Beethoven dubbed the Sonata (like its sibling, the Sonata in E-flat Major, Op.27, No.1) ‘quasi una fantasia’ – almost a fantasia, or in the style of an improvisation; its nickname of far greater notoriety, Moonlight, comes from the German poet and critic Ludwig Rellstab, for whom the Sonata’s remarkable first movement evoked “a boat visiting, by moonlight, the primitive landscapes of Lake Lucerne.” Beethoven’s own designation is surely more apt: the Sonata, adherent only tenuously to Classical convention, is instead given over to rapturous flight of imagination; a dreamlike, stream-of-consciousness quality permeates its sequence of three movements, played without pause, suggesting a powerful narrative, albeit an elusive one.

We cultural consumers like the ease of nicknames, and so while the equally excellent Sonata ‘quasi una fantasia’ in E-flat Major must accept the fate of the Prodigal Son’s elder brother, the Moonlight Sonata is ubiquitous, with renditions on record by Kobe Bryant and Charlie Brown’s pal Schroeder to complement those of Horowitz, Richter, and now, Bax. But its standing among classical music’s most beloved clichés must not obscure the Moonlight Sonata’s startling psychological and expressive depth. Indeed, as Beethoven’s hearing worsened – the Opus 27 Sonatas date from 1801, just as the onset of the composer’s deafness went from concern to crisis – he seems to have become only more particular about how his music should sound. He took especial pains in the piano sonatas, whose tempo and expressive markings are qualified by emotive descriptors (appassionato, molto espressivo, Etwas lebhaft und mit der innigsten Empfindung – “somewhat lively and with the most intimate feeling” – and so on) more than in any of Beethoven’s other works. Here, si deve suonare questo pezzo delicatissimamente – “This piece should be performed in the most delicate manner.”

“You can scarcely believe what an empty, sad life I have had for the last two years,” Beethoven wrote to a friend in 1801. “My poor hearing haunted me everywhere like a ghost; I avoided all human society. I was forced to seem a misanthrope, and yet I am far from being one. This change has been brought about by a dear charming girl who loves me and whom I love … and for the first time I feel that marriage might bring me happiness. Unfortunately she is not of my class.” Neither of his class, nor quite old enough, was the Countess Giulietta Guicciardi, Beethoven’s sixteen-year-old student and the dedicatee of the C-sharp
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Minor Sonata. Too much has been made of this star-crossed infatuation’s supposed import on the work. (Guicciardi married a younger, and lesser, composer, Wenzel Robert Gallenberg, in 1803.) More instructive of Beethoven’s mindset in 1801 and its influence on his output is the defiant tone of another letter: “I will seize Fate by the throat; it shall certainly not crush me completely.”

We discover the hero thus seizing Fate in this Sonata. The work’s dramatic climax comes in the thunderous finale (Presto agitato): gripping in its own right, but more significantly so as a fiery transfiguration of the moonlit Adagio sostenuto. Both movements are in C-sharp minor; both rely on the alchemy of melodic simplicity propelled forward by stylized arpeggios, yielding a whole profoundly greater than the sum of its parts. But the distance traveled from first to last movement is vast. And in the closing material of the finale’s exposition, the first movement’s simple, hymn-like theme – evocative first of tolling bells, then of plaintive sighs, and intensified by that quietly obsessive accompaniment – re-emerges, transformed.

We are left with an unmistakable sense of journey, but one taken via a curious route. Franz Liszt referred to the Sonata’s winsome second movement (in D-flat Major: the parallel key to the outer movements, but for the enharmonic change) as “a flower between two abysses.” This charming Allegretto is not so remarkable on its own, but pregnantly enigmatic in context. It complicates the journey, suggesting a rich multidimensionality to the hero’s triumph.

That multidimensionality takes on epic proportions in the Sonata No. 29 in B-flat Major, Op. 106, the famed *Hammerklavier*, composed between 1817 and 1818: a monumental work, analogous among the piano sonatas to the *Eroica* Symphony and the first of the *Razumovsky* Quartets in its audacity and breadth. “The work is distinguished among all other creations of the master,” observed the *Wiener Zeitung* in 1819, “not only by virtue of its richness and greatness of imagination but because, in its artistic completeness and use of strict style, it signals a new period in Beethoven’s keyboard works.” (It must be added that the *Hammerklavier* is distinguished too by its monstrous technical demands; Beethoven noted to his publisher, “Now there you have a sonata that will keep the pianists busy when it is played fifty years hence.”)

The Opus 106 Sonata stands as Beethoven’s most emphatic glorification of the piano from its first measure to its last, and even, indeed, from its title page. The work was published as “Sonate für das Hammerklavier” – *Hammerklavier* simply specifying the modern piano (played by striking the strings with hammers) rather than the harpsichord (plucked strings) – following Beethoven’s patriotic determination in 1817 that “henceforth all our works on which the title is in German shall, instead of ‘pianoforte,’ carry the name of ‘Hammerklavier.’” Of course, each of the thirty-two sonatas is decidedly for the piano – although his Opus 2 was published, so as to not preclude sales to keyboard players yet to upgrade their salons with modern instruments, as “TROIS SONATES pour le Clavecin ou Piano Forte”; but to play even these early sonatas on the harpsichord is ridiculous – and the title page of Beethoven’s previous Sonata, Opus 101, bore the same German designation as his Opus 106. However, for musicians and music-lovers, *Hammerklavier* can and will forever mean only this magnificent B-flat Major Sonata. The word itself, with its suggestion of
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The tension established between these contrasting humors is drawn out as the movement unfolds, especially in the thoughtful counterpoint of the development section, itself a prefiguration of the fugal finale. Meanwhile, Beethoven makes purposeful use of the piano’s expansive range and broad color palette, as the music forays courageously into remote harmonic terrain.

The pithy Scherzo is the shortest among any of the piano sonatas: a puckish postscript to the Allegro (and in the same key), punctuated by a strange trio section. A heartrending slow movement follows, to be played appassionato e con molto sentimento. Beethoven here makes use of the una corda pedal, softening the instrument’s timbre, and instructs the pianist to play the theme in a hazy mezza voce. This, the longest of the Hammerklavier’s four movements, is an inspired expression of pathos and tenderness.

An extended Largo introduction prefaces the massive fugue that concludes the Sonata. Here, Beethoven’s lifelong fascination with Bach—dating from his childhood mastery of The Well-Tempered Clavier, and resurgent in his later years—is given voice with the force and the enormity of fate, aptly reflects the Sonata’s immensity, and the score illustrates Beethoven’s assiduous attention to register, dynamics, and color in custom-fitting this Sonata for the instrument. (Lewis Lockwood adds that Beethoven composed the Sonata after receiving a new six-octave grand piano from the English maker Broadwood; “If the Broadwood tone was perhaps less brilliant than that of Viennese pianos, its capacities for a wide range of dynamics and tonal shading compensated well. And modern performances of Beethoven’s later sonatas on a restored Broadwood should convince anyone that tonal shading, subtlety of dynamics, and beauty of sonority, were now more vital than ever in Beethoven’s conception of keyboard writing.”)

The Hammerklavier Sonata makes its mission statement clear straightaway in the exposition of the first movement Allegro. Its first theme foreshadows Robert Schumann’s Romantic alter-egos, the virile Florestan and the sensitive Eusebius, in its integration of starkly contrasting ideas: clanging fortissimo chords, answered by gentle lyricism (see opposite page, figure 1).
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muscularity of his “heroic”-period works. The fugue subject itself is a sprawling utterance, betraying the movement’s grand aspirations before its contrapuntal treatment has even begun (see previous page figure 2).

The exhaustive fugue that follows marks one of Beethoven’s most staggering contrapuntal accomplishments. “There is in this finale, as in the Grosse Fuge, an element of excessiveness,” writes Martin Cooper, “an instinct to push every component part of the music… not just to its logical conclusion but beyond.” The obsessive exploration undertaken in this finale reveals simultaneously a completist impulse and a transcendent artistic vision, calling to mind Gustav Mahler’s view of the symphonic form that it “must be a world. It must embrace everything.”

Alessio Bax complements the hallowed sonatas on this disc with his arrangements for piano of two theatrical selections: the Chorus of the Whirling Dervishes and Turkish March from Beethoven’s Die Ruinen von Athen, Op.113, incidental music to August von Kotzebue’s play. This, along with Beethoven’s incidental music to von Kotzebue’s König Stephan (celebrating Hungary’s founding monarch), was commissioned for the opening of the new imperial theater in Pest in 1812 by the reigning Emperor Franz. The Ruins of Athens tells the story of Minerva, daughter of Zeus, awakening from a two thousand-year slumber to find Athens occupied by the Turks; ancient Greece is no more, but — praise ye gods! — the spirit of its enlightened culture lives on in Pest, preserved by the benevolent Franz.

Aside from the blatant sycophancy, the obvious cultural problem, specifically pertaining to the Chorus of the Whirling Dervishes and Turkish March, should not be swept under the rug. This is musical Orientalism, and it was hardly a novelty. The Western fascination with “Turkish” music around the turn of the nineteenth century was a sufficiently real phenomenon that pianos were manufactured with Janissary stops; hits like the Rondo alla Turca from Mozart’s Piano Sonata in A Major, K.331, could be enhanced by a pedal that rang a bell and struck the soundboard with a padded hammer, imitating a bass drum. Witness, too, Mozart’s “Turkish” Violin Concerto, K.219, and comic opera Die Entführung aus dem Serail, set in a Turkish harem. Even the “Ode to Joy” from Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, that utopian vision of universal brotherhood, has its share of Turquerie.

But accepting the distinction between historical context and sheer compositional imagination, we can appreciate the magnitude of the latter in this music. The Chorus of Dervishes — essentially, Opus 113’s bad-guy music — is, in any event, a thrilling conception. The strings surround the chorus’s martial proclamations (“In the folds of your sleeves / you have carried the moon and shattered it. / Ka’abah! Mahomet!”) with rapid triplet figures, evocative of the well-known whirling dance associated with the Sufi Dervishes. The Turkish March, probably one of classical music’s most universally familiar melodies, is much more benign in character, and equally appealing. Beethoven got much mileage from this irresistible tune: three years prior, it had served as the basis for his Six Variations on an Original Theme for piano, Op.76.
The fugue subject itself is a sprawling utterance, betraying the movement’s grand aspirations before its contrapuntal treatment has even begun (see previous page figure 2).

The exhaustive fugue that follows marks one of Beethoven’s most staggering contrapuntal accomplishments. “There is in this finale, as in the Grosse Fuge, an element of excessiveness,” writes Martin Cooper, “an instinct to push every component part of the music… not just to its logical conclusion but beyond.” The obsessive exploration undertaken in this finale reveals simultaneously a completist impulse and a transcendent artistic vision, calling to mind Gustav Mahler’s view of the symphonic form that it “must be a world. It must embrace everything.”

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Pianist Alessio Bax creates “a ravishing listening experience” (Gramophone) with his lyrical playing, insightful interpretations, and dazzling facility. First Prize winner at the Leeds and Hamamatsu international piano competitions – and a 2009 Avery Fisher Career Grant recipient – he has appeared as soloist with over 100 orchestras, including the London and Royal Philharmonic orchestras, the Dallas and Houston symphonies, the NHK Symphony in Japan, the St. Petersburg Philharmonic with Yuri Temirkanov, and the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra with Sir Simon Rattle.

After a summer residency debut at the Santa Fe Chamber Music Festival, Bax launches the 2014-15 season with the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center, playing two Mozart piano concertos for the society’s opening-night gala. Upcoming orchestral engagements include Beethoven’s “Emperor” Concerto and Rachmaninov’s Second Piano Concerto with London’s Royal Philharmonic on a UK tour, as well as appearances with orchestras in Denmark, Finland, and the U.S. With violinist Joshua Bell, Bax embarks on three extensive tours of Europe and the United States, crowned by dates at London’s Wigmore Hall and L.A.’s Disney Hall.

Among recent highlights are Rachmaninov and Mozart with the St. Petersburg Philharmonic under Temirkanov, Barber with the Dallas Symphony under Jaap van Zweden, Mozart with the Los Angeles Chamber Orchestra under Hans Graf, and debuts at Washington’s Kennedy Center, New York’s Carnegie Hall, Metropolitan Museum of Art, and 92nd Street Y, and the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires. Besides giving solo recitals last season at Lincoln Center, in Atlanta, Dallas, Minneapolis, and Tokyo, Bax partnered with pianist Lucille Chung in the U.S., Canada, and Hong Kong, and Joshua Bell in South America. In 2013, he received the Andrew Wolf Chamber Music Award and Lincoln Center’s Martin E. Segal Award, which recognizes young artists of exceptional accomplishment.

Bax’s acclaimed discography includes Bax & Chung (Stravinsky, Brahms, Piazzolla), Alessio Bax plays Mozart (Piano Concertos K. 491 and K. 595), Alessio Bax plays Brahms (Gramophone “Critic’s Choice”), Rachmaninov: Preludes and Melodies (American Record Guide “Critics’ Choice 2011”), and Bach Transcribed; and for Warner Classics, Baroque Reflections (Gramophone “Editor’s Choice”).

At age 14, Bax graduated with top honors from the conservatory of his hometown, Bari, Italy, and after further studies in Europe moved to the United States in 1994. A Steinway artist, he resides in New York City with his wife, pianist Lucille Chung. www.alessiobax.com
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