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MUSIC REVIEW

Fellner hit all the right notes to end Beethoven sonata cycle

On Sunday afternoon, with Till Fellner's performance of Beethoven's final three piano sonatas at the Austrian Embassy, an epic journey came to its end. The Austrian pianist set out to perform the complete Beethoven sonata cycle, planned to span seven concerts, almost two years ago. The fifth recital was one of several cultural victims of February's historic snowstorms, but the sense of achievement was no less great.

Fellner did not program the concert series in chronological order, but it is difficult not to see Beethoven's last three piano sonatas as the cycle's obvious conclusion. As music scholar Charles Rosen has observed, Beethoven intended these sonatas as "exemplars of great spiritual experience," but it is dangerous to assume that we understand what that experience might be. As with some other composers' late works, there is also a sense of whimsy here — as well as formal experimentation, complication and compression.

In line with his previous performances, Fellner emphasized an ultra-refined, even restrained approach to

many of the movements, keeping the jaunty theme of Op. 109's first movement airy and rhapsodic and the energy of the second movement often bubbling below the surface. Op. 110 was just as serene and understated, the lyrical first movement followed by a mercurial second movement, with fleet metric shifts kept bouncy and vibrant. The concluding fugue had just the right amount of "not too much" in its *allegro ma non troppo* tempo marking, with each statement of the subject clearly voiced.

The concert and the cycle reached its apogee with Op. 111, a daunting piece to play and to understand. An urgent and then melancholy opening was unsettled by dark bass trills and a menacing fugal theme, only to be undone by the second movement's disarming simplicity. A calm chorale gave way to the pastoral lilt of triplets and swinging dotted rhythms, the latter just a few blue notes away from sounding like jazz. Feathery trills and a murky fog over the final section caused the piece to evaporate, until without much warning, it evaporated into nothing.

— Charles Downey