

# Imogen Cooper

Pittville Pump Rooms

Wednesday 9 July

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Ludwig van Beethoven	Piano Sonata No. 30 in E, Op. 109
Ludwig van Beethoven	Piano Sonata No. 31 in Ab, Op. 110
Interval	
Ludwig van Beethoven	Piano Sonata No. 32 in C minor, Op. 111

## About the Programme

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Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Sonata No. 30 in E major, Op.109

*Vivace ma non troppo*

*Prestissimo*

*Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo*

The three sonatas we hear today were the last of the 32 Beethoven wrote and date from 1820-22. In 1818 he had taken delivery of a new piano sent by Thomas Broadwood of London in recognition of his outstanding achievements. This *hammerklavier* with its percussive action, which lent its name to the Op.106 Sonata, enabled the use of new sonorities, dynamics and colours of which Beethoven made full use in these final sonatas.

The Op.109 sonata was written when Beethoven was celebrating his final victory in his long-running court battles to gain full charge of his nephew Karl. Like the much earlier *Moonlight* sonata, it was referred to by the composer as quasi una fantasia. Fast and slow passages alternate in the first movement, as in a fantasia, a *Vivace* section appearing at the beginning, in the middle and at the end, separated by poetic *Andante* episodes. The *Prestissimo* is a substitute for the more usual scherzo and forms a graceful prelude to the finale. The final movement carries the weight of the whole work. It is one of Beethoven's most beautiful set of variations, with a hymn-like theme radiating compassion, warmth and love. This theme is then used in six variations, the final one being a magnificent climax to the sonata, with shimmering trills and the suggestion of tolling bells.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Sonata No. 31 in A flat major, Op.110

*Moderato cantabile, molto espressivo*

*Molto allegro*

*Adagio ma non troppo - Fuga: Allegro ma non troppo – L'istesso tempo di arioso - L'istesso tempo della Fuga – Meno allegro*

The final two sonatas seem to have been written concurrently during 1821 and are mostly referred to by Beethoven as a pair. The first surprise in Op. 110 is the very gentle nature of the first movement. Beethoven goes so far as to direct the pianist to play *con amabilità*. Short though it is, its 'sonata form' shape can be discerned, though without conspicuous sign-posting beyond the high register and two-voice duet of the secondary theme. The next movement is very abrupt, fulfilling the functions of a *scherzo* without being so called. It is in a fast two-time with a short and spectacular running middle.

The last movement is an elaborate slow-movement-plus-fugue sandwich. First, after soft introductory chords which employ a series of mysterious modulations, the right hand sings a recitative which leads into the *Arioso dolente* (sorrowing song) which is accompanied by heart-throbbing chords in the left hand. The music soon dies away and a fugue begins, the outline of its subject reminding us of the shape of the very beginning of the sonata. This fugue shortly makes a climax but then immediately disintegrates mysteriously into a repeat in a distant key of the Arioso but now marked 'worn out, weeping'. The right-hand melody is broken up as if by sobs and the left-hand heartbeats become spasmodic – a clang like a funeral knell. Out of this crisis emerges the fugue subject beginning upside down and as though from a distance. Gradually the music makes its way home into the original key with the subject the right way up, to end with the highest jubilation. What Beethoven means is made transparently clear: he marks the *pianissimo* resumption of the fugue 'little by little coming to life again'.

**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

Piano Sonata No. 32 in C minor Op.111

*Maestoso: Allegro con brio ed appassionato*

*Arietta: Adagio molto semplice e cantabile*

In 1822, when this sonata was written, Beethoven's deafness was complete and he was constantly ill, complaining of having had "gout in the chest for four months". His despair exacerbated his tempestuous moods, all of which are reflected in this, his final testimony in this genre.

The sonata is in two movements but ones which somehow encompass all the requirements of the more usual three or four movement form. A powerful, slow introduction, initially with ambiguous tonality, sets the mood, as it leads without a break into a stormy *Allegro* with fugal elements. But this is no longer the 'heroic' Beethoven of former years, rather the tormented questioning of an introvert.

The *Arietta* theme of the second movement, to be followed by five variations, brings serenity. Here we have music of a supreme visionary quality, challenging everything that has gone before, even to the limits of the traditional notational system. As unusual time signatures change through 9/16, 6/16 and 12/32, the tempo of the first three variations appears to increase. Fractionally off-beat chords in Variation 3 create a prescient jazzy feel. Great contrasts in register between the two extremes of the keyboard impart a striking effect to Variation 4. The theme takes on a broader character in the final variation until the coda takes over, dominated by trills and the use of the upper register.

Eventually, the movement and the whole corpus of Beethoven's piano sonatas dies away to silence.

## Artist Biographies

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### Imogen Cooper *piano*

Imogen Cooper is regarded as one of the finest interpreters of Classical and Romantic repertoire. Recent and future concerto performances include the London Symphony Orchestra with Sir Simon Rattle, Hallé Orchestra with Sir Mark Elder and The Cleveland Orchestra with Dame Jane Glover. This season her solo recitals include London, Dublin and Montreal.

As a committed chamber musician Imogen performs regularly with Henning Kraggerud and Adrian Brendel. Following a long collaboration with Wolfgang Holzmair in both the concert hall and recording studio, her Lieder partners now include Ian Bostridge, Dame Sarah Connolly and Mark Padmore. Imogen's most recent solo recordings have been for Chandos Records.

Imogen received a DBE in the Queen's Birthday Honours in 2021. The Imogen Cooper Music Trust was founded in 2015, to support young pianists at the cusp of their careers and give them time in an environment of peace and beauty.