

Beethoven: Complete Sonatas for Violin and Piano/Duo Concertante

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The ten sonatas for violin and piano by Beethoven are a string of beautiful pearls composed during the early to middle years of his life. All but the last were completed before the Eroica Symphony (1805), but many portend the markers of Beethoven's coming greatness - wide dynamic range, syncopation, arching melodies and complex harmonies. Under the guise of what some consider Beethoven's salon music, especially in the earlier sonatas, there are indications of deep soil.

Duo Concertante has recorded all the sonatas in this new Marquis CD set. Based at Memorial University in St. John's, Newfoundland, this married and musical partnership has spent many years developing their interpretations and performing the sonatas in concerts. Duo Concertante is Nancy Dahn, violin and Timothy Steeves, piano.

The Beethoven Violin Sonatas would seem to be the perfect repertoire for the Duo. The pair perform music that utilizes both instruments as equal soloists and accompanists. The Beethoven Violin Sonatas are most definitely an equitable division of labour - they are sonatas for two solo instruments, just one of the many original details that Beethoven would introduce in his chamber music, symphonies and solo works.

Both Dahn and Steeves are expert instrumentalists. I've heard them in concert and they have serious chops. Dahn is Juilliard/New England Conservatory trained and Steeves studied in Germany. Additionally, they are both very musical - they consistently make beautiful music together. As such, my interest never waned, even after three CDs of Beethoven sonatas.

So, expertise, great training, lots of time developing interpretations, musical, etc. How does that list measure up as complete musicians against the masters who have recorded these works? Dahn and Steeves are placing their performances against Mutter, Kremer, Stern, Menuhin, Grumiaux, Dumay, Szeryng, Perlman, Heifetz and every other stellar fiddler of this century and last. What makes pedagogues from Newfoundland have the courage to stand with giants?

I'm not sure of the answer to the last question, but stand they do, and stand confidently in and among them. This is a wonderful new set to add to the list.

First, we get consistency. I love consistency in large sets. So many sets are performances plucked from hither and thither. Not, Duo Concertante. The interpretations, recorded over a twelve month period, are no fuss, no muss. Nothing like the Romanticism that Anne Sophie Mutter brings to her highly regarded DGG set. Sure, Mutter's playing is beyond reproach, but there's a lot of syrup in the sound. Dahn eschews this approach and lets the beautiful melodies sing, adding even more tasteful vibrato when things get intense. And, Steeves matches her with a clear technique all the way.

Compare the glorious second subject of the Kreutzer Sonata's opening movement. Dahn and Steeves allow the melody to breathe and sing, without adding affectation. Kremer's guilty of a lot of affectation, but fiddle devotees would know that before plonking down the cash for his set. If you like your Beethoven fresh, clean and inspiring, this new Marquis may well be for you. If you are a fan of the Perlman and Grumiaux sets, try Duo Concertante.

As for the recording, it's an absolute beauty. For pure audiophilia, no other Beethoven Violin Sonata recording I know comes close - even the famous Perlman/Decca takes second place. Natural music making in a natural space. The Glenn Gould Studio in Toronto is a gem of a hall, and engineer Dennis Patterson has captured it perfectly. Clinically, even. That, of course, can bring a few problems. Bow arms at the ends of phrases and piano pedals under a microscope can be problematic. The resolution from my reference system uncovered one or two minor blemishes but nothing that hindered my enjoyment and my admiration of this set many way.

Duo Concertante took their name from the Kreutzer Sonata's inscription: 'in stile molto concertante'. It was the first piece this musical couple played together. And, their musical devotion to 'two equal and dynamic voices' is perfectly highlighted in this superb new recording. Very highly recommended.