



Xavier Phillips and François-Frédéric Guy in Beethoven at Wigmore Hall

Par [Zoltán Szabó](#), 08 juillet 2019

Performing Ludwig van Beethoven's complete works for cello and piano always includes considerations of timing. Although the cycle is not long enough for two recitals, most musicians would regard the five sonatas and three sets of variations crammed into one concert as too draining both musically and physically. Xavier Phillips and François-Frédéric Guy opted for a compromise at their Wigmore Hall recital and programmed four of the five sonatas and left out one of the variations (on Mozart's "Ein Mädchen oder Weibchen"). This created a longer than usual programme, at the end of which they added the second movement of the *Cello Sonata in F major, Op.5 no.1*, as an encore. Thus, while the complete set was still not offered, somewhat oddly, artists and their audience came tantalisingly close to the full experience.

The sonatas and variations were introduced in chronological order, beginning with the *Cello Sonata in G minor, Op.5 no.2*. Reassuringly, the signs of a long-term collaboration were obvious from the start; the two French artists were visibly comfortable in each other's company (they have recorded the cycle four years ago), their artistic approach to this glorious repertoire was the same and the balance between their sound was never a problem.

Phillips' supreme technical control of his instrument was immediately obvious. His care to bring out the velvety dark hues of his precious Matteo Goffriller cello resulted in multiple tone colours. Arguably, an instrument of this calibre has its own sonic personality and Phillips' playing completely unified his musical expression with the tone of his instrument – something not to be taken for granted. His right-hand technique was eloquent and his vibrato varied and warm, providing a compelling case for a beautiful Beethoven sound. Throughout the evening though, the musicians' jointly formed sonic world regularly tamed the composer's harsh and surprising accents, deliberately sublimating the brutally strong dynamic contrasts of the score. Beethoven's music may be beautiful but it is also often confrontational, and that was seldom noticeable in this performance.

Guy possesses an equally solid technique but was more than once responsible for musical decisions which struck me as odd. The descending scales of the first movement's introduction sounded pedalled together, creating clashing resonances repeatedly. Elsewhere, in the theme of the second movement, his playing lacked the witty subtleties of Beethoven's texture. The first few, technically demanding variations of the *12 Variations on 'See the conqu'ring hero comes' from Handel's Judas Maccabaeus* were lacking in clarity. Consecutive notes, whether in a running passage or a melodic phrase, often sounded too similar, resulting in a shorter or longer block of sound rather than infinitely varied directions within those notes. Sensitivity to agogics (a delicate stress expressed

with time rather than volume) was not always evident in Guy's playing, at least in the early part of the recital.

The first two works demonstrated on many occasions how much Beethoven learned from the French virtuoso, Jean-Louis Duport, about the technical possibilities of the cello, coming gradually of age as a solo instrument in the 18th century. Beethoven was possibly the first to compose repertoire in which cello and piano were equal partners. By the time the *Cello Sonata in A major, Op.69* was created, he refined his writing for these instruments even further.

In this Sonata, both musicians reacted to each other's musical ideas with sensitivity, while maintaining their individual interpretation as well. This included at times precise reading of the score's instructions, for example, when Phillips followed Beethoven's unusual bowing suggestions at the very beginning of the first movement, or the direct opposite, evidenced by Guy beginning the Scherzo movement with an overly strong, almost aggressive sound (against the instructions of the score), only to be continued with the same melody on the cello softly (as written in his part).

The vast experience in playing together showed in the joyful *Seven Variations on "Bei Männern, welche Liebe fühlen"* from Mozart's *Die Zauberflöte*. In the various variations, here pathetic, there cheeky, at another time even heroic, their ability to resonate with each other's musical initiative blossomed fully. I enjoyed most the sixth variation where a tender dialogue took place between the two instruments, infused with spontaneous intimacy.

The pair of late works, Op.102, completed the recital. Both movements of the C major Sonata start with a slow introduction and these serene moments belonged to the best of the evening, where the cellist's ethereal sound blended in subtle counterpoint with the introverted phrasing of his partner. Similarly, the second movement of the D major – Beethoven's only slow movement in his five cello sonatas – created a truly memorable atmosphere with its pathos and delicate conversation between the two instruments.

With its substantial, if incomplete, arc, this recital was a gratifying musical experience.