

## The Classical Beat

By Stephen Dankner

### **THE UNIQUE MUSICAL STATEMENT – THE WORLD WITHIN**

I'd like to focus on a trend that is becoming more popular every year – the consecutive performances of a complete category of works (sonata, concerto) of a composer at music festivals and in recordings.

Tanglewood has announced its lineup of concerts for the spring and summer, and Beethoven will be represented by performances of all five piano concerti, and Garrick Ohlsson will perform the complete piano sonatas in an eight-concert marathon in late June and July.

The conception behind the complete survey of a specific genre within a composer's corpus is worth noting, and reveals a lot about how we perceive classical music today. These aural excursions have both good and unsettling aspects, I think. Beethoven seems like an obvious choice for these forays into the landscape of his art: There are 16 string quartets (17 if you count the "Grosse Fuge" as a separate work, and not as the last movement of Op. 130), 32 piano sonatas and nine symphonies. What insights do listeners derive from these non-stop traversals? Well, we can get some sense of the composer's pathway, over many years, from journeyman to mature creator; this is particularly true in Beethoven's case. The piano sonatas and string quartets were composed throughout his thirty-year-plus creative life in regular intervals, and in his last years were the focus of his musical thought.

I've heard several complete performances of the quartets and one or two of the piano sonatas, and while these marathons are impressive, it always strikes me as a stunt, displaying more of the instrumentalists' endurance, eclipsing the composer in the process. At least Ohlsson will perform the piano sonatas over the span of three weeks, so that the cycle can be anticipated, absorbed and considered after the last notes disappear.

What would the old masters think about their music played in such a concentrated, heavy dosage? Could they have conceived of the phenomenon? They'd probably, after the initial shock, ask, "Why"? In contemporary music, a mania has developed to play all the Bartok (6) and Carter (5) string quartets in one evening. I shudder to imagine the effect.

Haven't the Emerson and Pacifica String Quartets thought about the repercussions of musical overkill?

It's as much our fault as it is the performers'. We want to own and have instant access to the unabridged masterworks of classical music. But now the emphasis is on the interpretation of these masterworks, and each new set of CDs is routinely touted as being the "definitive version". The incentive to build large CD collections compels music lovers to purchase multiple performances ("versions") of the music, in complete collections. Performers have been following market trends, and so they record the canon over and over. This has been going on for years, to the extent that even die-hard CD collectors have stopped buying yet another Beethoven piano concerto collection. The end result is that performers are competing with each other, and the music becomes only the vehicle to sell more records. Or, in the case of a live venue, to experience the performer's exploits "up close and personal".

Simultaneously, an opposite and insidious deviation is emerging in the world outside the concert hall: movements of quartets, sonatas and symphonies are being set adrift and being played in snippets, disassociated from their musical context; the microcosm of music, now splintered and exploded to bombard us watching TV, entering buildings – anywhere and everywhere. The iPod Shuffle may be the perfect realization of a tool crafted to cause musical free-association on a scale that the creators of Muzak never dreamed. Brainwave patterns could eventually be disrupted; better call to see if your HMO will pay for ADHD medication!

Garrick Ohlsson is a great pianist, and I look forward to his Beethoven sonata cycle. He is a great interpreter who constantly puts the music first, without any veneer of his own cult of personality. And, people should hear the minor works next to the blockbuster sonatas like the "Moonlight", "Waldstein", "Pathetique" and "Appassionata" for context. If the blur of sound can be prevented from spilling over from one work to another, then nothing will be lost. But, I know that as a composer – and I've heard it from Suzanne Bloch, daughter of composer Ernest Bloch, and from an oft quoted maxim by Mahler – that a piece of music – a unique individual creation – is a world unto itself, not to be compared to any other in existence, even by the same composer. And, it must be perceived as being individual, special, and idiosyncratic.

