

13.5.09

Till Fellner's Beethoven Cycle, Part 3

by Charles T. Downey | [Wednesday, May 13, 2009](#)

This review is an Ionarts exclusive.

[Till Fellner](#) and his borrowed Steinway returned to the Austrian Embassy on Monday night for the third installment of his complete cycle of Beethoven piano sonatas, with this concert under the aegis of the [Embassy Series](#). The young Austrian pianist's accomplishment is in some ways the opposite of [Paul Lewis's recorded set](#), giving a landmark rendition of the Hammerklavier (sonata no. 29) after some understated, even hurried-through performances of the three sonatas of op. 10. Fellner played the second sonata of this set on his [2007 recital](#) at the National Gallery of Art, and his performance of it here was ironed out a bit, still with a gentle Allegretto movement and a jokey Haydnesque Presto that brought out the contrapuntal entrances and put the repeated notes of the harmony in the background. Some of the op. 10 fast movements seemed unsettled in tempo, with Fellner rushing just a bit in places and leaving the ends of notes a little ragged here and there. The third sonata had a tragic and operatic second movement, followed by a buoyant third movement (especially effective in the trio with its evanescent right-hand triplets), and again showed Fellner's talent for understated wit (he has worked with Alfred Brendel, after all) in the rondo.

Fellner's op. 106 was nothing short of a technical marvel, an almost breezy handling of a viper that made one forget the poison in its fangs. Indeed, the audience's restrained



Pianist Till Fellner (photo by Francesco Carrozzini)

Fellner Beethoven Cycle:
[Part 1](#) | [Part 2](#)

Online scores:
[Op. 10, no. 1](#) | [Op. 10, no. 2](#) | [Op. 10, no. 3](#)
[Op. 106](#) ("Hammerklavier")

applause may have been due in part to the ease with which Fellner played the work, meaning that a listener might not have realized just how difficult it was. The exposition of the first movement established the tone of Fellner's interpretation, a careful balance of hammer (explosive where needed) and lightness (exceptional clarity of independent lines) that never felt overplayed, resulting in a sort of Schubertian grace. In fact, never has the Hammerklavier struck my ears as so close to the Schubert sonatas, which of course it was, composed only about a decade before D. 960. In terms of tempo, Fellner was generally steady as a rock, yielding only as Beethoven indicated, no matter the demands to be negotiated, although the first movement's tempo was slower than the absurdly fast metronome marking that Beethoven indicated. The same was true of the enigmatic scherzo (although Fellner did almost meet Beethoven's metronome marking), kept lively and bouncing with energy right to its abrupt conclusion, slowing only slightly at the trio, perhaps in reaction to Beethoven's marking *semplice*.

The most unusual part of Fellner's Hammerklavier was in the mammoth third movement. The *Adagio sostenuto* marking, modified by the further indication *Appassionato e con molto sentimento*, leads some pianists, including Paul Lewis, to settle on a glacial tempo. Fellner was again fairly close to Beethoven's metronome marking, which keeps the music moving forward and allows the pianist to realize the long *ritardandi* later in the score (mm. 107-112 and 168-173) in a gradual, eventually dramatic way (not possible if the tempo is already too slow). Fellner also did not draw any more attention to the enigmatic, sudden harmonic shifts in the piece, allowing these often unprepared transformations of tonal center (F# minor to G major, for example) to sound like subtle, sleight-of-hand tricks. The dramatic introduction to the fourth movement was mercurial, moving from suspended chords to rushing passagework to booming chords with zephyr-like fluency. Again, Fellner played just under the metronome marking of the fugue but was able to master the outrageous demands of the work, both *cantabile* and more orchestral in scope. It was a performance to remember.

The next concert presented by the Embassy Series will feature pianist Christopher Hinterhuber at the Austrian Embassy, this Friday (May 15, 7:30 pm), to honor the 200th anniversary of the death of Haydn.