

Music Views and Reviews by H. Graham Lowry

A superb version of the Beethoven violin sonatas

Beethoven: The Complete Sonatas for Fortepiano and Violin, Jos van Immerseel, fortepiano, and Jaap Schröder, violin; Deutsche Harmonia Mundi, Editio Classica 77163-2-RG (3 discs), \$20.97

These astonishingly beautiful performances by Jos van Immerseel and Jaap Schröder of Beethoven's violin sonatas are easily the best buy in classical recordings available on CD today. Their complete set of the 10 sonatas is available in a boxed set of 3 CDs, averaging over 78 minutes per disc, at about half the usual cost.

These are not only great performances; they are played at the true classical pitch of C=256 (or A=430), instead of the strained, higher pitch imposed in most modern performances. And they feature outstanding original instruments. Dutch fortepianist Jos van Immerseel performs on an 1824 Conrad Graf from Vienna, maintained by the Vleeshuis Museum in Antwerp. His countryman Jaap Schröder plays a 1684 Italian violin made by Joffredus Cappa of Saluzzo.

The string timbre and output of these instruments are in perfect balance, with the special added benefit that the fortepiano's mid-range can produce distinct, multiple voices, without the muddying blur generated by a modern iron-frame grand piano. This particular Graf is also in fuller voice throughout its range than any other fortepiano this reviewer has heard on disc.

Importance of the original instruments

The superior partnership of these two original instruments—and of the per-

formers as well—is particularly important in these works. From the first set of three sonatas, the Op. 12 composed in 1799, to the final Op. 96 of 1812, they all demand major roles from both instruments in developing Beethoven's musical ideas. Even the earliest three are styled "Sonatas for Fortepiano with Violin," rather than violin sonatas with piano accompaniment.

As with Mozart's later violin sonatas, the keyboard instrument is used to vastly expand and enrich the music's development. At the same time, the violin gains greater freedom to introduce singularities into the dialogue. Jaap Schröder plays with great facility of inflection and tonal control, revealing contrapuntal aspects of the music that go virtually unnoticed in most performances. With van Immerseel's expressive playing on such a fine fortepiano, and at the correct pitch for natural voice-register shifts to occur, these performances bring the listener so close to Beethoven's mind that he may even imagine himself in the same room with the composer.

Vocal nature of classical composition

Even in the first sonata, the Op. 12, No. 1, in D Major, Beethoven highlights from the opening movement the vocal nature of classical instrumental composition. He repeatedly has one instrument give way to another at natural voice-register shifts, sometimes as dramatically as a violin "contralto" to a fortepiano "bass."

In the *Allegro assai* of Op. 30, No. 3, the distinctive vocal quality of the fortepiano clarifies the most complex and rapid passages in the tenor-baritone range, never obscuring the singing line of the violin. In the *Adagio*

molto espressivo of the "Spring" sonata, Op. 24, the duet of the lower-pitched violin with the softer, rounded voice produced by the fortepiano with a special pedal effect, is a demonstration of the unique virtues of these performances.

The crowning delight of these sonatas is the 10th and final one, Op. 96 in G Major. The opening *Allegro moderato* is one of those rare poetic statements which immediately suggest the actual composing of the universe. Indeed, this work marks Beethoven's entry into a higher domain of compositional method, which culminated in the late string quartets. The *Adagio espressivo* which follows is almost achingly beautiful, enhanced by the violin's lower register passages at true pitch, and by the sonority of the undamped fortepiano.

Van Immerseel and Schröder's performance of Op. 96 would be worth the price of the entire set, especially since there is only *one* other recording of it generally available on CD: a re-mastered, 30-year-old Francescatti/Casadesus performance that widely misses the mark, and is played at the destructively higher pitch as well.

These performances of the 10 sonatas were digitally recorded during 1986-87 and first released in the U.S. in November 1990. Despite the close miking (an advantage here in picking up the vocal differentiation of the fortepiano), the sound is excellent, offering both full resonance and sharp dynamic detail.

The complete set offers nearly four hours of some of the finest chamber music ever composed. You should make haste to your nearest classical CD outlet to purchase or order it. Many recent recordings performed on original instruments at the correct pitch have already disappeared from the shelves—and from the catalogue.