

THE COMPLETE SONATAS OF LUDWIG VAN BEETHOVEN

FIRST AUSTRALIAN SERIES - BY GERARD WILLEMS

The Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG*

I

The completion of the first Australian recording of the Beethoven Piano Sonatas by Gerard Willems is a spectacular achievement. In terms of the mental concentration, physical stamina and lifelong dedication to music poured into it, we have to say in Olympic times, it is the equivalent of a triple marathon. As it also happens, this gold medal winning performance is a double triumph for Australian musicianship. The instrument on which the sonatas are played is a unique piano crafted by Stuart and Son, designed and made in Australia to challenge the best in the world.

Behind the instrument and the artist stands Brendan Ward who conceived and directed this Australian first. Also the recording technicians who have now produced the complete set comprising arguably the biggest piano recording project ever undertaken in

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2.

Australia. And through it all, over the thirty-one months during which the prize-winning recordings were made, there has been the intelligence and emotion of a fellow Australian interpreting the peerless music of Beethoven - bringing that music into a new century, a new millennium.

II

Consider the project

The recording began in Newcastle in July 1997. After only ten sonatas had been recorded, by the end of that year, the project ran out of funds. Fortunately, ABC Classics accepted sponsorship of the recordings. In our perennial mutterings of discontent about the ABC, let us never forget the ABC's indispensability to our national claims to a civilised country.

When the first volume of the recordings was released late in 1998 it inspired critical acclaim. In October 1999 it won the Aria Award for the best classical album. This was the first time a pianist had ever won that award. The release of volume 2 earned international applause. The recordings became best sellers. The daunting project was entirely finished in February 2000 - 31 months and 9 CDs of compressed energy, passion, silence.

The first assault on this musical Everest occurred in the 1930s, by Arthur Schnabel - 162 sides of 78 rpm platters. The

3.

challenge has beckoned the greatest pianists in the world - Brendel, Kempff, Arrau, Barenboim, Gilels. Like Schnabel, Gerard Willems was at first reluctant. It took Brendan Ward more than six months to secure a change of his mind. It required a dedication and sacrifice that cut a swathe through his life. It made everyone involved prisoners to the idea. By the miracles of technology, we are the beneficiaries. The concept is awe-inspiring. In permanent form, it will endure to display one of Australia's best music talents.

III

Consider the artist

This is not only the first Australian to accomplish this feat. It is the first time an artist from the Netherlands has done so. For it is a blessing upon our country that Gerard Willems who was born in Tilburg in Holland, migrated to Australia with his family when he was 12 years of age. He brought with him the rich genetic messages of the Lowlands of Europe where Beethoven himself had lived and worked.

Consider that just forty years before this mighty project began, the Willems family were living in a migrant hostel in Wollongong. The passion of Gerard's father for music demanded that his young son continue the musical education that he had begun in Holland. What a spirit of determination is evident there. We must remember this story when we heard complaints about migrants who every day

4.

renew our resources. This is a true Australian story that should make us humble about the blessings our country has received, and continues to receive, from migrants and refugees from all parts of the world.

In 1965 Gerard Willems won the prestigious Queen Victoria Piano Competition. For his work in this series, he has won the inaugural Australian Musical Scholarship named for the present Queen. In between such double royal patronage he has worked as a performer, as a teacher, as a recording artist, touring the world and, with music, bringing its mystery to the minds and hearts of millions of people.

Gerard Willems chose to live with his wife and two children in Sydney and to take up his appointment at the Sydney Conservatorium. His repertoire has been astonishing. Alas, Mahler is not mentioned (but I am working on that). Through all the variety of his performances has been woven a dedication to Beethoven which now comes to full flower in the completion of this recording achievement. As Gerard's fellow citizen, I say for millions of Australians who will come to know and appreciate the love you have poured into a musical life and now into this unique creation - heartfelt thanks. *Hartelijk gefeliciteerd!*

IV

Now consider Beethoven

His titanic, tortured life ended nearly 200 years ago. Yet his searing intelligence, his spirit that knows every range and nuance of human emotion, is still alive and with us. The nine CDs are only cold metal. Yet we can evoke from them the relationship of love and hate that Beethoven experienced with the pianoforte at a time that the instrument was emerging to its modern glory. From ecstatic joy to profound sorrow. From life's bitter struggles, anger at injustice to constant rededication to humanity's noble causes. It is all here in the sonatas. In these recordings.

From the age of 27 Beethoven descended into deafness. It was genetic and it increased dramatically in the last ten years of his life. What an irony is there. Yet what a lesson to the 21st century of the dangers of questing for so-called genetic "perfection" in the human species. Having mastered the constraints of the classical and Baroque eras, Beethoven threw off their chains. For two centuries his uplifting music has been the inspiration of rational liberalism, of human dignity and revolutionary objection to despotism, tyranny and discrimination in all its forms.

The Nazi tyrants, in a supreme affront, piped his music into their death camps. By the late 20th century Beethoven's music was played to pregnant mothers in the belief that the music would extend

the range of the sensibilities of children yet unborn. In every shopping mall, in elevators, waiting in phone queues we hear him. In the privacy of our minds or on planes or in giant concert halls, Beethoven is ours. He has leapt the continents and is now the universal genius. His *Hymn to Peace* is an international prayer that beckons us to a new century. But it is not a hymn of peace alone. Beethoven's indelible message is peace with justice. It is an angry message. It rejects self-satisfaction, apathy, tyranny and denigration of one human being by another.

V

And so they all come together. The project. The artist, Gerard Willems. The eternal Beethoven. No one has the right to "launch" these recordings. Beethoven, like his failed hero Napoleon but more enduring, seizes the crown for himself. Out of the piano leaps his mighty spirit. We mortals merely watch and listen in awe.

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LAUNCH, GOOSENS HALL

AUSTRALIAN BROADCASTING COMMISSION, SYDNEY

16 JUNE, 2000 AT 8 P.M

The Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG