

Beethoven Meets a Stunning World Premiere

On Saturday night, the Cheng²Duo launched the world premiere of their "Ludwig and Beyond" project in honour of the Beethoven Anniversary year -- in front of a small but appreciative live audience and a very much larger and also appreciative online audience.

The premiere had originally been planned for Europe, in June, and was of course cancelled due to the Covid-19 outbreak.

Thanks to the Ottawa Chamberfest, which has launched its first online "season" to make up for the lost summer festival, the Chengs had an opportunity to perform Part 1 of their unique programme right in their home town of Ottawa.

The uniqueness of this project lies in the Duo's conception of commissioning several contemporary composers to create new works inspired by or connected in some way with one of the five Beethoven *Cello Sonatas*, and then present the Beethoven works with the contemporary ones all together at the same time.

The three composers commissioned are Paul Wiancko, Samy Moussa, and Dinuk Wijeratne.

In last night's performance we heard the world premiere of Wiancko's stunning *Sonata No. 1: Shifting Baselines*, alongside the Beethoven *Sonata No. 4* which Wiancko took as his point of departure -- and with the rest of the programme filled up with the Beethoven *Sonatas No. 1 & 5*.

Contemporary classical music can be a mixed bag. Reactions can range all the way from the mental garbage can, through, "Well, that was interesting," to "I want to hear that again -- I'm sure there's more to it than meets the ear at first hearing."

Very much rarer is the excitement of "I need to hear this piece again -- *now!*" And that was very much my reaction to Wiancko's *Sonata*.

This is a striking example of a work conceived on a broad scale, 23 minutes long, with more than ample musical interest and thought to sustain that length of time. The work unfolds in a series of interconnected sections, each one displaying its own unique sound world -- ten sections was my count.

The *Sonata* began with an introduction of pizzicato notes on the cello, evoking the idea of a plucked jazz bass. Soon the piano joined in, doubling the cello and adding a few selected notes in the higher register. What captured my interest right at the outset was the presence of a clear rhythmic element in the music, distinct tempo and frequent shifts of metre combining to keep musicians and audience alike on their toes.

The great strength of Wiancko's work is the continuing presence of a clear rhythmic sense through every subsequent section -- whether fast or slow, simple two-step or more complex cross-rhythms, every page of this *Sonata* has something to say on the rhythmic level. I take the time to emphasize this point because so much contemporary music consists of sound effects totally lacking in any kind of rhythmic life at all.

Not that melodic or harmonic interest is lacking in Wiancko's music -- far from it! Different sections of the *Sonata* ranged from solemn chordal harmonies to fiercely discordant dance-band sounds, from gentle wisps of melody reminiscent of Debussy to cello melodic figures cutting directly across the patterns of the piano. A furious scherzando came closest to evoking the musical world of Beethoven.

The penultimate section returned clearly to C major, the key of the Beethoven *Sonata No. 4*, with slow scale passages rolling quietly up and down on the cello, beginning on different degrees of the octave but remaining firmly grounded at all times in the home key. This merged into a shortened recapitulation of the opening pages which brought the work to a subdued conclusion -- a classical touch indeed.

As for the three Beethoven *Sonatas*, the music is too well known to require comment. Performances by the Chengs covered the fullest range of style, from the quasi-Mozartean world of the early *Sonata # 1* to the more rarefied atmospheres of the late Op. 102, containing *Sonatas No. 4 & 5*. Entirely appropriate was the scaled-down tone of the first sonata. More striking was their subtlety in some passages of the later pair where other interpreters may find more blood and thunder appropriate. The key here was the adoption of a taut, crisp articulation by both players which prevented overly-romantic lushness and kept all the strands of the musical argument clearly in view -- especially valuable in the fugal finale of *No. 5*.

And who could resist the piquant playfulness which equally characterized that fugue? Certainly, I had a smile on my face -- and I'd like to think Beethoven did too.

The second programme of this remarkable Beethoven project, with **two** more world premieres, will be live-streamed on Dec. 19, 2020. Details are available from the Ottawa Chamberfest.