
PERFORMER INTERVIEW

A Life-long Dedication to Beethoven: An Interview with Ronald Farren-Price

Elina Yasumoto

Associate Professor Ronald Farren-Price, AM, has an international reputation as a fine recital pianist. He has performed throughout Australia, and in Russia, China, Europe, the UK and the USA. In 1995, he celebrated fifty years of teaching at the University of Melbourne, where he himself had been a student, with the award of an Honorary Doctorate. He served as Dean of the Faculty of Music at the University of Melbourne from 1986 to 1990, and continues to teach as a Principal Fellow in the Faculty following his retirement from the full-time teaching staff in 1997. Throughout his long career, Farren-Price has been a dedicated interpreter of the piano works of Beethoven. Elina Yasumoto, a pianist and musicology student at the University of Melbourne, interviewed him concerning his relationship to this composer.

EY: Ron, you have mentioned that you have made a life-long dedication to the works of Beethoven. What exactly does this mean?

RFP: It was not something that I decided, that 'I was going to make a dedication.' It was something really outside of me that took hold of me, and I found that as I moved on through life this was taking me over, and my dedication to this master's works was getting deeper and deeper.

EY: How would you describe your relationship with Beethoven?

RFP: I would say something like an ant looking at a lion! All of us have a contribution in life. We all know and believe this—we're all here for a purpose. For some of us, at times we may question this: 'Would the world notice if I were not here?' But yes, the world would notice (in the overall, this is). Over the generations since Beethoven lived on this earth, many people have been dedicated, like I have, to the art of playing Beethoven. But I would say truly that I

do feel an affinity with this most human of men, this man who suffered indescribably. We all know about the deafness: that must have been horrific. So much so that he even contemplated suicide. But apart from that, from fairly early on, Beethoven started to have complicated physical ailments, real difficulties, so that it is a miracle that he was able to concentrate and compose his music.

We know the story of 1809, when Vienna had been bombarded by Napoleon's army. We have the picture of Beethoven in his brother's cellar with pillows strapped to his ears because the vibrations (due to the condition of his ears) were sending him crazy. But pillows! And still working—working at his art. I somehow relate to that. I relate to some of the oddities ... sometimes when I hear the way that he is injured and has fractured a relationship with somebody else, as I read it, I'm hurt. I think, 'Why, that was unnecessary. That was unnecessary, Beethoven, why!' You know I can think of those such as the Prince Lichnowsky who invited him—he was always so good to him. He was one who gave him an allowance to keep composing without having to worry over money. Archduke Rudolph, the Prince Lichnowsky and Prince Lobkovich subsidised him. He had all the ailments of humanity about him, as well as the great grandeur and spiritual heights that he scaled. So, how would I describe my relationship with Beethoven? I would say as just a modest disciple. An ant to a lion!

EY: At what age did your fascination begin, and what brought this about?

RFP: I can tell you, at my primary school in Brisbane there was in the reader a story—you know, a sort of romantic and probably rather silly story about the 'Moonlight Sonata'—and an enterprising teacher brought along a copy of a recording (a 78) and I was in another room, but I heard it. I was probably seven or eight, the first time I heard this music—and it absolutely arrested me. So much so, that in my classroom I couldn't think of anything else. I have always remembered that. At the age of twelve my piano teacher gave me that sonata, and I learnt it rather quickly and performed the whole sonata at the end of the year. At the age of thirteen I performed the first concerto of Beethoven with the Brisbane Symphony Orchestra. They were great springboards, wonderful works. I remember that when I did the first concerto I didn't do the cadenza that I always do now, which is Beethoven's third cadenza—that great cadenza. But it was nevertheless a great, great springboard to start a career.

EY: People today tend to venerate the late period, but Beethoven's compositional style as a whole is so multi-faceted. He can be a Classicist and a Romantic, conventional and arcane, heroic, pathetic, transcendental and farcical; with Beethoven there is a trajectory of such different often contradictory moods and styles. The *Diabelli Variations* alone reflect this. But this periodisation can be contested. Are the late works greater than the early works? Is there genius in the early as well as the late works? Do you have a preference for period? What are your thoughts about the many faces of Beethoven?

RFP: Very, very profound and involved questions. Yes, I have a lot of thoughts on this. Just going to the first of these, are the late works greater than the early works, I think I can quote Beethoven himself. Someone once had the temerity to say to Beethoven, 'I think "such-and-such" a quartet (one of his late ones) is better than the "such-and-such" quartet.' And I have always admired the reply of Beethoven, who I thought could have been furious, but he wasn't.

He said in a very noble way (and this is the very interesting thing, that Beethoven could be very friendly and noble), he said: 'Each has its place.' I thought that was a marvellous comment, a marvellous reply, and I've always kept that in my mind. Now, as you know, every year on the sixteenth of December, on Beethoven's birthday, I give a recital of his music in the *Impresaria* series. This year I am playing, for the first time, the first sonata of Beethoven in f minor, and it has been marvellous. I've taught it many times, of course (but not actually memorised it, nor performed it), so it has been a great experience to do this. One sees immediately that Beethoven's stamp is on it. As a matter of fact, I see it as a forerunner to the great middle period f-minor sonata, the *Appassionata*. There are many features in it which show some similarity [to the earlier work]. But even in the slow movement, which would not be regarded as one of his profound slow movements, there is an indescribable sadness that Beethoven could achieve immediately ... it was something quite marvellous. As a composer he wasn't the prodigy, of course, that Mozart was in producing masterworks so early, because this occurred when Beethoven was twenty-four—and that was his first sonata. But do I consider the last ones greater than the earlier ones? In a way, yes; the last sonatas are the final achievement on keyboard from every point of view, and particularly the spiritual. The early sonatas show Beethoven the virtuoso, which he was. No one could touch him, apparently, in the whole of Europe, and he could do things that others could not: this is evident even in his first sonata.

I think they are all marvellous; middle period, later middle period, and of course the *Hammerklavier* and then the last sonatas, let alone the variations. The *Diabelli Variations*, they do reflect what you have said about the possibilities in heroic writing, pathetic, transcendental and of course, farcical. That shows something of the humanity of Beethoven. Now Beethoven, although we revere him (and he suffered for this reverence, in a way), didn't know that generations after him were still going to revere him like this. I'm not saying that every work he wrote was a masterpiece. There are some which are—curious! I think just about every sonata, every sonata movement is really marvellous, yes, but there are one or two works where he was trying to do ... something unusual! I've performed one of them in a Beethoven concert in the Melbourne Concert Hall, the Fantasy opus 77. To bring this work together needs a huge understanding of Beethoven, and it needs the interpreter to help Beethoven because he has so many thoughts and, in a way, they very easily might not hang together. That's farcical, where he's purposefully being so. Usually his joking has a slightly heavy Teutonic rudeness about it—like jabs in the ribs; with accents on the weak beats and things like that!

EY: So you think that accents on the weak beats sometimes could reflect that nasty side of his sense of humour?

RFP: Well, it could, yes. Heavy handed (or 'heavy footed!').

EY: I think that you have just touched on the humour in Beethoven. Is there anything else that you wished to say about that aspect of his writing, which is less commented on, but important.

RFP: I like going back to what I said, quoting him—'Each one has its place.' I think that you can take the first subject of the Sonata opus 31, number 1, in G major. (Of course, we're thinking a lot about the sonatas at the present time, and I think this is the interesting thing, that the

comical can occur). It has been said, anecdotally, that when Beethoven conducted, when he was aiming for a *pianissimo* he disappeared right below the rostrum—all one saw was the baton stick—and when he wanted a sudden *fortissimo* he jumped feet into the air! Things like that. In a way that also describes the comical about him—very amusing.

EY: The development of Beethoven’s style corresponds with turning points in Beethoven’s biography. How have turning points in your life impacted on your relationship with Beethoven?

RFP: I think, first of all, I would say what I did at twelve with the *Moonlight Sonata*, then what I did at thirteen with the first concerto—but the great turning point was meeting Claudio Arrau and being accepted as a student by him. Arrau was born in 1903 and died in 1991, so he almost spanned the twentieth century. He was one of the greatest of Beethoven interpreters in that century, and probably of all time. To be so closely aligned with him was a great turning point. When I was auditioned by him, he kindly gave me a scholarship to cover the fees. At that time he was doing something most unusual. He was playing the thirty-two sonatas live on the BBC. These days, people record them, and they say: ‘that part is not quite as good as I would like it.’ But here Arrau was doing it live in a studio, which is much worse than doing it in a hall; imagine the impersonal aspects of that. And it’s going out to a million homes. The contact with Arrau, and hearing him play Beethoven time and time again (all the concertos of course, and the sonatas), was one of the greatest turning points in my life.

EY: When did Arrau record ‘the thirty-two’?

RFP: That was in March 1952.

EY: Why do you think Beethoven’s music has been so accessible to you? If his music is a window through which we see things beyond the pane, what makes the glass clearer?

RFP: You know, I think that we are very fortunate in this age in the type of editions that we have. So much research has gone into creating these editions, as much as we can possibly know; we have that advantage today. So I would say that the study of the score is important, and I continually put a microscope on the score, and I’m looking at every detail.

EY: You actually put a microscope on the score?

RFP: Well not actually, but it’s like that! My father was a businessman, but he was a watch specialist himself, and he spent a lot of his life looking, peering like that—and I really think that I have inherited that; but my peering is directed towards music, and particularly towards Beethoven’s music. What we human beings are searching for all the time is clarity; clarity about life, clarity about what is beyond life, this life that we know. I think it is studying the score and having your heart and mind open to the possibilities for this music to take you over, and really to achieve the depths that are in it. That’s a very good analogy. It’s like what St Paul says: seeing through a glass—that is true, and I think it comes back to having an open heart as you study.¹

¹ ‘For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face: now I know in part; but then shall I know even as also I am known.’ 1 Corinthians 13:12 (King James version).

EY: Given that Beethoven's music correlates so powerfully with his struggles, does struggle or spirituality in the listener's own life necessarily make Beethoven more accessible?

RFP: Yes and no. It need not be an ingredient that they have to go through, but I think all human beings at one time or another are faced with an unbelievable situation such as the death of someone very close, or severe illness. I do not think that we can avoid struggle. If we avoid struggle we are only running away. We have to face struggle, I mean—this is just a small aside—but several years ago when I had shingles inside the ear, I was told by the specialist sometime later how fortunate I was that it did not affect my hearing. This would have been a calamity. My first words were: 'I want to be as close as possible to Beethoven. But not quite that close!'

EY: What are your thoughts on how age, musical background, cultural heritage or other factors influence the listener of Beethoven?

RFP: We live in a very multicultural society, and it is one of the miracles of life that people from other cultures respond to Beethoven. You do not have to be from a Western European tradition. You've experienced this yourself, and it's quite marvellous isn't it; it has nothing to do with that, but it seems to be universal. So truths are universal, aren't they? The same is true, I suppose, if I go to India and I hear Indian music; it can take me to another world that I don't know, and I am fascinated by it, but my actual study and roots are in the Western school, and particularly in Beethoven's music.

EY: How have the different ways of engaging with Beethoven, whether score-reading, listening, performing or teaching, impacted on your experience and understanding of this composer?

RFP: Tremendously. I have already covered score reading, but listening—again the listening: being in a concert hall, hearing something one has heard a thousand times before, like the fifth symphony, if it's on I think 'Marvellous!' I never think 'Oh not that again.' I have a completely open heart to it—I want to hear it! And I want to listen because creation is going to take place when that concert starts in ten minutes. Creation is going to take place with Beethoven's fifth symphony so yes, I am pleased to say that my response is greater than ever.

EY: What do you mean by 'creation takes place'?

RFP: Well, 're-creation.' The interpreter (or the interpreters, if it is an orchestra) are the re-creators of this music. I'm sure that the absolute genius inspiration came from him—and above. But we performers have this great responsibility that we are re-creating it through our study of the score, through our study of the style. This happens with performing and teaching. This is why teaching for me is so important. I have just learnt so much from teaching, and I continue to do so.

EY: What have you learnt after a lifetime of dedication to the works of Beethoven?

RFP: Because the music is so great, whether it's simplicity itself, or whether it is profound like the slow movement of the *Hammerklavier*, or the 'Arietta' of opus 111, whether it is profound

or simple, one is being taught about the high principles of life and, as I've said before, what is beyond this life.

EY: Could you elaborate on the high principles of life?

RFP: As you know, a lot of Beethoven's music is heroic, but that deals with humanity. I think that when I do come across the heroic, it is to do with man's achievements despite difficulties, and in his case, particularly so. Yet the spirituality that is present in so much of his work, whether it's the opus 110, the *arioso* movements, whether it's the great fugue—I remember when Claudio Arrau gave me a lesson on the fugue movement of the opus 110, and then we came to the great chords at the end where he uses the subject of the fugue in those chords. Arrau said to me: 'I can only sum this up in one way, and that is Martin Luther's great hymn *A Rock of Fortress is Our God*.' And that's what I mean by this, that he takes us beyond. Beyond playing the piano well or anything else, to the world which is beyond us. Now you know, Beethoven (I think I should say this) was in my estimation a religious man. Not a 'church-man' so much, but religious. And he was always returning to his Creator for consolation and also for forgiveness because he was marked very much by the frailty of humanity as we all are. But he was aware also for the need for that, to be renewed. One only has to read what Beethoven has written. It is that he believes that he has been given this art from the Almighty—a high, noble calling. That's why even on his deathbed he was working. It's a lesson to us all, isn't it!

EY: If you could only listen to one work of Beethoven for the rest of your life which would it be?

RFP: That is a very difficult question. Very difficult because I need so many of them! I do find the opus 110 sonata complete (in the attainment through spiritual grace of the final achievement). We are taken to the gates of heaven. That's one thing. With the opus 111, the 'Arietta' is so spiritually profound in its completeness ... in C major, but it's different from the opus 110; there is not so much of triumph about the 'Arietta,' just the head bowed. The final triumph you have in the opus 110, but in the opus 111 the head is bowed, and it is unbelievably beautiful. I could also say the seventh symphony; I could say the ninth symphony ... the third, or fifth—they all mean so much to me.

EY: For you, are the last three sonatas programmatic?

RFP: Yes, I feel that some people regard the last three sonatas as one work, a cycle. That's why I like playing the three of them together, actually, and it's something that's going to be a project of mine: the three of them together. For me, personally, they are (to use a word that is used a lot these days) a journey. I think we arrive at the highest point and after the highest point, which is that great $A\flat$ ending of the 110, the 111 shows us that humanity's struggle is there to the end. At the first movement of the 111 we are thrust into turmoil again—absolute turmoil—and one is fighting for life, existence, in that. But that dissolves into ... prayer. That 'Arietta' is just amazing, isn't it? *Amazing!* It takes us right through this movement with its variations—right through to that final C-major chord. And I think it's significant that it is C major. Like the $A\flat$ for me: every time Beethoven uses $A\flat$, I feel

that there is a glorious friendly quality. He even writes that at the beginning of the opus 110—‘with friendliness.’²

EY: What was the significance of the C major?

RFP: Pitch has always meant a lot to me. C major—there is something open, not dark ... it’s open to the world—and that’s how he’s left it for us.

EY: Can you comment on the significance of pitch for you?

RFP: All my life I have had perfect pitch, and it has its own disadvantages as well as advantages, but it is certainly not necessary at all. For example, I’ve always considered the key of A \flat to be marvellously warm and human. I consider that there is an openness in C major—nothing secretive. I think of G \flat as a darker, more mellow key, etcetera, etcetera! Just one small example of the significance of pitch for me is this: there was a stage when we always started concerts with the national anthem, which was ‘God Save the King’ or ‘Queen.’ Just about everybody did it in G major. Then Goossens, who was appointed conductor of the Sydney Symphony Orchestra, did it in G-flat major.³ It had a wonderful mellowness ... it changed it for me!

EY: The variation form seems to take on special prominence in the late works, for example, opus 109, opus 111, the late string quartets, the ninth symphony. What are your thoughts on this?

RFP: I do not think anybody mastered the variation form as Beethoven did. And yes, the six variations of the opus 109, with that very extended variation at the end, and the variations in opus 111 (even though he doesn’t call them variations) are masterpieces. I think it is the way he’s able to give that very ethereal writing at the top of the piano—which seems to some people not to have any purpose (well, any pattern). But it does, it does—it’s all marvellous, I think. Variations—you can look at the *Diabelli Variations*: the first variation—the grandeur of that! After writing a simple waltz theme that he just tossed on the floor, Beethoven later took it up and wrote this masterpiece, these thirty-three variations. This was the height of his writing in variation form.

EY: And what about all the trills in those last piano sonatas?

RFP: Yes, I think they are very significant. In this, Beethoven is trying to keep the sound going, to do what the strings would do. The piano, as we know, dies—the sound dies. And hearing the trill is marvellous—it gives a continuation of the pedal note, or whatever he wants there. He asks the pianist to be very skilful of course, because sometimes you have to keep the trill going and play the melodic part above it—or below it! And in either hand, too, and this happens in both those sonatas. Now I think the long trill in Beethoven is very significant.

EY: How would you describe your personal goals and achievements in your lifelong engagement with Beethoven?

² In the G. Henle Verlag Urtext Edition (1980) it is marked ‘*con amabilita.*’

³ Sir Eugene Goossens, British composer and conductor (1893–1962).

RFP: Well I feel it's an ongoing thing. I feel I am coming closer than ever in my life to understanding Beethoven interpretation. As I said, it's ongoing, it's continuing, and the works that I still have to do, I doubt whether I will be doing all of them in this life! But as I have said to others when they ask 'Why are you studying such a thing, you're not going to perform those,' I say, 'I'm getting them ready for the next world!'

EY: What further goals would you like to fulfil?

RFP: With regard to Beethoven, I have not performed the *Diabelli Variations*. I've done a lot of the great variations but I would like to do that. Memorising Beethoven for me is also very important. That is when you are assured that you know the score, when you've memorised it. Otherwise, you can, in very much a surface way, read through the slow movements and never get the intensity that they contain, whether it's the earlier ones or the late ones. The opus 10, number 3 'Largo' is just unbelievable—that somebody of twenty-five or twenty-six could write with such profound understanding and knowledge—just amazing!

EY: Would you consider recording the complete Beethoven Sonatas?

RFP: I would consider, it but I don't know if I've got the years left because the one that I've not performed particularly is the *Hammerklavier*. And although, again, I've taught it, I would need time—time to do that and, as you know, I continue my teaching career. I love teaching. I love the personalities, the people, but also I'm fed by it. It's exhausting, but you're fed at the same time. So I would consider it, but who knows, when I'm ninety I might!

EY: If you could do it all again, what would you do differently or what would you make sure to relive?

RFP: I'll tell you what, I'm grateful for a lot of things, particularly how 'the lines have fallen unto me' but what I would do differently?⁴ I would learn something like the *Hammerklavier* early in my life, so that it became second nature at this stage of my life.

EY: Was there a particular moment in your performing life or in that relationship with Beethoven that is a favourite memory?

RFP: Yes, I have had significant performances. I remember my first performance of the G-major concerto (the fourth) was with the Melbourne Symphony Orchestra and John Hopkins, when both of us were very young, and that was an occasion to always remember. We reached great heights that time. I can also remember a performance of the same concerto in Moscow, and again, the same thing. The fourth and the fifth are marvellous works to play. And I'm grateful to have been allowed to do this. Imagine that this has been your life's work—and you have been able to work and be inspired! A lot of people have their life's work and are not inspired. But we are; you are, and I am inspired by music. We live with the great masters—in my case this particular master—day by day. Isn't that unique?

⁴ See Psalm 16:6 (King James version).

EY: Yes, that is a good way of finishing. Is there anything further you would like to add?

RFP: I was thinking about just two instants [from Beethoven's life] that I've read about. First, Eleanor von Breuning in Bonn. Once she saw Beethoven just gazing out the window with a look on his face as if he'd been transformed. She spoke to him, and he replied: 'I had such beautiful thoughts.' Then, I can think of another instance when he would go to his favourite restaurant for lunch, obviously absorbed in very deep thought. This mood continued for a long time. He then asked the waiter: 'Could I have the bill for my lunch please!' He hadn't eaten a thing!