



Moonlight Sonata in La La Land

By Brian Lauritzen

In an old Peanuts comic strip from way back, Lucy—ever infatuated with the mercurial pianist Schroeder—says, “I’m looking for the answer to life, Schroeder. What do you think is the answer?”

Schroeder’s reply knocks Lucy backwards from her perch at the foot of the piano. “BEETHOVEN!”

“Beethoven is it, clear and simple!
Do you understand?”

Schroeder then lowers his head and starts playing a bit of Ludwig’s music. All Lucy can muster in response is, “Good grief.”

Whether the answer to life is Beethoven (or, perhaps, the number 42), his music has achieved not just immortal or iconic status, but it is in fact more lofty than that. Beethoven’s music is classical music. Ask anyone who doesn’t know anything about classical music to name a composer and even he or she can probably come up with Beethoven’s name. He’s everywhere.

You can find Beethoven at Pershing Square in Downtown Los Angeles. There’s a Beethoven Street in the Marina del Rey/Culver City area of town. Every time a Dodger pitcher strikes out a batter at Dodgers Stadium, they play the first four notes of Beethoven’s Fifth Symphony.

It’s easy to lose sight of the genius of Beethoven in light of his ubiquity. This is something that happens with regularity in our lives. The greatness of something gets recognized by the masses, it becomes an icon, and we take it for granted.

The Eiffel Tower, for example. An astonishing feat of architecture that is still as impressive as it was when it was built 130 years ago. The Grand Canyon: this giant hole in the ground that, even when you’re staring at it in person, is somehow unbelievable. There are things in life, natural or man-made, that are simply everything they’re cracked up to be.

The Moonlight Sonata is everything it’s cracked up to be. It’s one of the three most

famous works by Beethoven and probably one of the five most famous works in all of classical music. Its ubiquity doesn’t diminish its greatness. It has the power to move us no matter where we encounter it.

In fact, as I write this, I’m sitting in a busy cafe in the middle of Terminal B of the busiest airport in the world, Atlanta’s Hartsfield-Jackson International Airport, and a harp transcription of the *Moonlight Sonata* has just started playing over the loudspeaker. (I’m not making this up! This is actually happening right this moment, I promise!) What a special moment this music can create. Sublimity among chaos. And that’s in the middle of an airport while nursing a beer, nibbling at a mediocre cobb salad, and waiting for a massively-delayed flight back to Los Angeles.

Beethoven to the rescue.

When we encounter greatness, it changes us. In our two piano concerts this month at The Wallis, we will encounter more than our deserved share of greatness. Benjamin Grosvenor will bless us with a performance of that *Moonlight Sonata* by Beethoven, a piece that composer Hector Berlioz called, “One of those poems that human language does not know how to interpret.” (For his part, Beethoven said, “Surely I’ve written better things.”)

Grosvenor’s recital includes a popular sonata by the Russian composer Alexander Scriabin which also begins with a ponderous slow movement. Unlike Beethoven’s *Moonlight*, which only received its evocative title after the composer’s death, Scriabin had specific images in mind in his g-minor sonata: “The first section represents the quiet of a southern night on the seashore; the development is the dark agitation of the deep, deep sea. The E major middle section shows caressing moonlight coming up after the first darkness of night. The second movement represents the vast expanse of ocean in stormy agitation.”

Leif Ove Andsnes and Marc-André Hamelin have an inordinate amount of

fun when they perform together. The Oxford English Dictionary’s 2016 word of the year was “post-truth,” the definition of which is “relating to or denoting circumstances in which objective facts are less influential in shaping public opinion than appeals to emotion and personal belief.” But that Andsnes and Hamelin have a riot when they perform together isn’t post-truth or fake news or any such thing. It’s just a fact. Period.

Speaking of riots, they’ll be performing Stravinsky’s two-hand version of his ballet which famously sparked, if not a full-on riot, at least a minor disturbance in the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in May of 1913 when it was first performed. Stravinsky actually wrote the piano version first to help the dancers rehearse the choreography, but it wasn’t performed until 1967, when Michael Tilson Thomas and Ralph Grierson gave it a spin on a Monday Evening Concerts program here in Los Angeles. That was four years before Stravinsky’s death and the composer was likely in attendance. (He lived not far from here—on Wetherly Drive, just above the Sunset Strip—for longer than he lived anywhere else in his life.)

Another two-piano work by Stravinsky, some music by one of Stravinsky’s muses, Mozart, and a bit of Debussy round out the Andsnes-Hamelin program.

In both programs, we encounter greatness. For either 88 or 176 keys.

Join Brian Lauritzen and other guest moderators for free pre-concert conversations in the Bram Goldsmith Theater with the artists prior to select classical music performances, along with a complimentary glass of wine provided by The Henry Wine Group. RSVP at [TheWallis.org/Series](#)