

BEETHOVEN X WALKER

Program Notes

A concert of two piano sonatas each by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) and George Walker (1922-2018)? Some people might consider the pairing a perplexing provocation, but the concept governing this benefit event is that considering Beethoven and Walker side by side is actually a kind of affirmation. Beethoven's sonatas are, of course, timeless landmarks, his work announcing a new type of music, consecrated in struggle, both of the culture into which he was born and the difficulties of his personal life. George Walker's sonatas, infinitely less well known, are pioneering monuments of invention, created amidst the increasingly insurmountable barrier of systemic racism. Both composers were stubborn mavericks who faced down obstacles to grace the world with music of beauty, depth, and originality. Both were searching artists, never content to repeat formulas, whose works inspire listeners to respond deeply, on various levels.

Beethoven wrote thirty-two piano sonatas, so sonatas No. 30 and No. 31 were among his last works in the form. The two sonatas were written in short order, in 1820 and 1821, at a time when Beethoven was fifty years old, profoundly deaf, socially isolated, and had come to terms with the reality that he would not find marital or familial happiness. However, during these years, the composer seems to have accepted his earthly fate, and now sought a spiritual reconciliation with his life as lived. Because of his message of victory through renewal and rebirth, Beethoven stands for resilient human spirit, peering through the veil of life's suffering to a world of imponderabilities.

These pieces are more intimate and freely reflective works than, for instance, the monumental Hammerklavier Sonata that preceded them. In each of these pieces, the composer pushes the boundaries of the form that he had done so much to codify, creating new paths of exploration over strict adherence to rules. In sum, he was revisiting and redefining his own life's structure and path, by deconstructing the assumptions and musical forms that had led him to this late point.

George Walker's story is also one of achievement in the face of persecution—genius in the midst of improbable odds and stolid opposition to his career and trajectory. Despite producing work in a time of explicit and systematic opposition to his expression and place in classical music as a Black musician, Walker was a pioneer noted for many “firsts.” Chief among these was his status as the first Black composer to win the Pulitzer Prize. [But, he was also the first Black graduate of Curtis Institute, and the first Black doctoral student to receive a Ph.D. from the Eastman School of Music.] Walker was able to sustain a career spanning over three quarters of a decade and produce close to one hundred remarkable compositions. His work, today, stands among the most pioneering, experimental, and foundational of the modern era.

Walker wrote five piano sonatas, which, like those of Beethoven, both honored and extended the nature of the classical piano canon. His compact, and texturally sparse Piano Sonata No. 2 was composed in 1956 as his doctoral dissertation for Eastman School of Music. This was an era in which serial processes were all but mandated by the academy, but here Walker hewed to a more “accessible” tonal language. The sonata is composed as a set of variations, with its thematic material clearly expressed in music that is both elegantly rich and highly compact. Walker also

incorporate elements borrowing from jazz, spirituals and folk music in novel and unexpected ways.

The Piano Sonata No.4, written in 1984, opens in stately fashion with the bell like ringing of octaves, in an incantation of sorts, and closes with an introspective reference to the beginning bell theme. As in Sonata No. 2, Walker again subtly interweaves elements of jazz and spirituals: listen closely in the final movement for a bold statement of the spiritual “Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child”. The harmonies and rhythms of Sonata No. 4 are far spikier than those of Sonata No. 2, and the music seems, at times, improvisatory in nature, following an almost free and intuitive path, rather than the careful crafting of the previous sonata. Here is the work of a man functioning as a daring modernist. Taken together, these sonata’s demonstrate Walker’s incredible range, power, and ever-evolving inspiration.

Not unlike his immortal predecessor.

-Andrew Freund