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Beethoven

'Complete Sonatas & Variations for Cello & Piano'

Ralph Kirshbaum *vc* Shai Vosner *pf*

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What better way to celebrate an important birthday than with the Beethoven cello

sonatas? It's hard to believe that Ralph Kirshbaum is 70 and, certainly in the company of Shai Vosner, these sonatas – recorded last year at London's Wigmore Hall – have an infectious exuberance.

Highlights are many: the opening movement of Op 102 No 1, for instance, which is unerringly paced and nicely balances the muscular and the skittish, and Kirshbaum never less than beautiful in the high-lying writing. Naturalness is a key feature of these readings – a tribute to Kirshbaum's long relationship with the pieces. Just sample the way in which the introductory *Adagio sostenuto* of the First Sonata unfurls before your ears, leading into a playful account of the *Allegro*. They relish equally the bustling rondo that forms the second and final movement.

The minor-key starkness of the Second Sonata is underlined by the fact that they place it after the 'Ein Mädchen oder

Weibchen' Variations. This is one of the most compelling things in the set, the slow opening given with due depth of feeling and dramatic light and shade. The following *Allegro* has an understated strength that is very effective. Phillips and Guy are notably quicker here, as they are in the finale of this sonata, while Queyras and Melnikov delight in the subversive, combined with a huge range of colours not quite matched in this new set.

I'm slightly less convinced by Kirshbaum and Vosner in the Third Sonata: few can match the questing spirit of Isserlis and Levin at the start. And their Scherzo is just a little on the deliberate side. But it is in the *Adagio cantabile* that I have most reservations – it simply sounds too ponderous, especially compared to Queyras.

The great slow movement of the final sonata, on the other hand, contains much beautiful playing from Kirshbaum, with Vosner the most empathetic of fellow travellers. The way they link from this movement to the fugal finale, whose opening upward scales are imbued not just with perkiness but elegance too, is another highlight. Of the three variation sets, 'Bei Männern' works particularly well.

As a whole, this is a more 'traditional' approach to the sonatas than the comparisons listed below, but if subversion and reinvention are not top priorities, it's well worth exploring. **Harriet Smith**

Selected comparisons:

Isserlis, Levin (2/14) (HYPE) CDA67981/2

Queyras, Melnikov (11/14) (HARM) HMC90 2183/4

Phillips, Guy (1/16) (EVID) EVCD015