

A Pianist Prepares

Gilles Vonsattel on Performing Beethoven's Sonatas at CMS

By Andrew Alden



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Pianist Gilles Vonsattel will perform the complete cycle of Beethoven piano sonatas during the 2026–2027 season.

For the first time, the Chamber Music Society of Lincoln Center presents all 32 Beethoven piano sonatas in a single season. Gilles Vonsattel will perform the entire set across two programs in Alice Tully Hall and six in CMS's Rose Studio, starting in late October and continuing through March. I spoke with Gilles at his home about preparing for the cycle, and the first concert in particular, which ends with the massive *Hammerklavier* Sonata, Op. 106.

Andrew Alden: When did your practicing for this project start in earnest?

Gilles Vonsattel: That's a complicated question, because some of the sonatas

I've played for a long time, while some of them are totally new since I agreed to the project. And once you agree to something like this, it's not like all your other playing commitments magically disappear. There's a gradual weaning from other things—not agreeing to learning new repertoire was a big one. I feel like I've been able to solidly concentrate on this for about two years, meaning fewer distractions from other projects coming in.

In the case of what's on the first program, *Hammerklavier* was brand new for me when I agreed to this. I think I learned it in 2022 or 2023, and I've been lucky to get to play it many times since. I scheduled that very

carefully. When someone asks you to play the Beethoven sonatas and you haven't played *Hammerklavier* before, that is a challenge!

AA: What would you liken that challenge to?

GV: Beethoven's language is very particular. You have to understand why he wrote every phrase in the structure to have it make sense. It's a very abstract piece, so you have to hear it in your head and organize it; you have to understand the connections, and that just takes time and experience. To use a hiking analogy, you're learning the path, and there are not a whole lot of shortcuts to learning why one thing follows another. The third movement is unusually long for a slow movement—it takes about 17 minutes, and can go longer depending on tempo—and it's very deep emotionally. I've found it's hard to recover from that movement, but you really need to recover because then you have to play the fugue, which requires you to be super present and super aware of your own resources because the fugue can derail; it's very difficult physically and

mentally. So you're at the absolute limit, you're at your most vulnerable, especially when you finish the slow movement. And then you really have to keep your wits about you.

The density of material is so high, compared to some of the other sonatas. The texture is just so intense. At the same time, it's really important that it not just sound like a ton of information with overwhelming complexity and no singing or character.

A big part of the work of keeping this in shape is to really make sure that I've internalized Beethoven's markings. There's a spot where, for instance, I have to crescendo for exactly three half-bars and pull back for one half-bar. That asymmetry is something you have to physically understand. Practicing it is almost like what a dancer would do—the balance in my arms, the way my fingers are placed. The way I'm dealing with balance affects the sound. It has to do with shoulders, arms. Everything is moving together to try to create that impression.



Vonsattel in conversation with pianist and CMS Co-Artistic Director Wu Han in CMS's Rose Studio.

AA: When do you feel you break from what Beethoven wanted? How does that conversation happen within you?

GV: In the first movement, Beethoven famously writes a crazy tempo marking—a half-note equals 138. Some people have put forth theories that maybe his metronome was broken. Or if the other tempo markings in the piece often seem a little fast, maybe we can infer something from the other movements as well. Maybe there's an actual number that we can assume he meant. Or maybe it's best not to get too hung up on the number and instead look at the marking, which is *allegro*. It doesn't say *prestissimo* or *presto*, which he certainly would have used.

So at some point, it becomes a matter of interfacing with the information we have from 200 years ago, and how people have struggled with this piece since and the solutions they've

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found. Ultimately, you have to try to sound good in the concert! You have to say something with the piece that’s coherent. When I first played this piece, I tried to get close to the metronome marking. I learned something from it, but I don’t think the richness of the piece came across. It sounded impressively frantic when I listened to the recording; I thought, “Wow, that’s a



Vonsattel performing with CMS in Alice Tully Hall.



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In addition to performing the complete Beethoven piano sonatas, Vonsattel will deliver three public lectures on the sonatas throughout the season, each exploring different facets of Beethoven's creative process and his development as a composer.

lot of energy being expended." But I'm not sure I understood why. So I think everybody has to navigate these issues. And it's fun when you hear someone play the piece and you think, well, I wonder how this person dealt with it.

AA: Are there any recordings that made a huge impression on you?

GV: There are a couple of recordings where people really go for it. Schnabel goes for it with the tempo. I actually like to listen to the extremes. Kempff has one of the more majestic versions. When someone brings out different things in the piece, you notice what's possible. Listening to enough recordings makes it hard to be dogmatic. And then once you decide what to go with for a given performance, it's probably time to stop listening to the recordings.

AA: As you've been working on this, how has your appreciation of Beethoven changed?

GV: I have gained an enormous amount of appreciation for his originality and his creativity. Even in this huge volume of music that I'm dealing with, nothing is phoned in. When the music repeats, for example, the classic thing would be to have an exposition in sonata form and then a recapitulation that uses the same material. But Beethoven always gets creative with registers or something else changing.

You can tell this originality is just built into the DNA of the human being. It's incredibly inspiring, even without getting into the difficult narrative of his life. I tell my kids sometimes to come over and listen; there are always spots where no matter how many times I've played them, I get goosebumps. There's such a depth of expression in the sense of this give and take between forgiveness and trauma. And that's very, very affecting.

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