

of the Chickering and Mason households whose descendants would become famous piano manufacturers.

Perhaps most impressive is the description of the mythical oratorio itself, based on the biblical story of Job, and the libretto that is included on facing pages in the final chapters of the book. The details are almost mind-boggling, including notes on orchestration, vocal ranges, staging and interpretation. There is even an authentic notated melody for the boy soprano's aria, which originated in a sketchbook of Beethoven's dated 1810.

First published, and first read by me, in 2020 the 250th anniversary of Beethoven's birth – here are two more words that were new to me (and my spell checker): semiquincentennial and sestercentennial – it seems especially fitting that while reading *Mr. Beethoven* I immersed myself in the music of that master. Some of it was mentioned in the book, but other works came as a result of new recordings released to coincide with the auspicious year.



For *Op.109* there were numerous choices. Young pianists eager to make their mark with this fabled work included **Haiou Zhang** and **Uriel Pascucci**. **Zhang's My 2020 (Hänssler Classic HC20079 naxosdirect.com/search/hc20079)** begins with *Piano Sonata No.30* followed by the final *Sonata No.32* and also includes Bach transcriptions by Feinberg and Lipatti, with two

bonus tracks: a cadenza from Beethoven's fourth piano concerto and the familiar bagatelle *Für Elise*. In the booklet, Zhang explains the meaning of the disc's title, referencing COVID-19 and reflecting on having made his Rachmaninoff *Piano Concerto No.3* debut in Wuhan, and giving masterclasses there, shortly before the outbreak. He goes on to speak about why the Beethoven sonatas have meant so much to him for so long and says that every Sunday morning the Bach transcriptions are part of his "confession." The performances are equally moving.



While Zhang has already recorded a number of discs for Hänssler in his young career, **Pascucci's Solo Piano – Beethoven; Pascucci; Mussorgsky (IMD-Classics urielpascucci.com/copy-of-discografia)** appears to be his recording debut. Pascucci has chosen to bookend his own *Prelude, Tango and Fugue* with Beethoven's *Sonata Op.109* and Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition*. I am a bit discomfited by a couple of abrupt transitions in the third movement of the Beethoven which I attribute to unfortunate edits, but otherwise it is a thoughtful and sensitive performance. The Mussorgsky is powerful and well-balanced, occasional surprises in the use of rubato and syncopation notwithstanding. His own composition shows him at his most comfortable, its contrasting movements each bringing a different mood to the fore. The rhythmic tango, with its pounding chords growing to a near *perpetuo mobile* ostinato climax is a highlight.



My go-to reference for Beethoven sonatas is Toronto's own **Anton Kuerti**. My base-ment is currently under renovation and the bulk of my vinyl collection is inaccessible at the moment, so I was unable to pull out his original recordings of the entire cycle of 32 on Aquitaine from 1977. Fortunately Kuerti recorded the final five sonatas for **Analekta** in 2004, released on two CDs: *Nos.28, Op.101 and 29, Op.106 (FL 2 3187)* and *The Final Sonatas, Nos.30, 31 and 32 (FL 2 3182 analekta.com/en)*. It was to the latter I turned for comparison's sake, and I must say, to my ears Kuerti just cannot be beat when it comes to this repertoire.

That being said, my piano explorations did not end there. Two mid-career artists also released Beethoven discs recently, **Pierre-Laurent**

**Discover.**  
**Listen. Play.**

picanto

**Picanto.ca** – Canada's new digital platform for creative music.  
Owned and operated by the Canadian Music Centre