



Kaleidoscope  
Beethoven Transcriptions  
Mari Kodama



## KALEIDOSCOPE

### Beethoven Transcriptions

#### Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

- |   |   |       |
|---|---|-------|
| 1 | Piano transcription of String Quartet No. 7, Op. 59, "Rasumovsky" No. 1:<br>II. Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando * | 8. 58 |
| 2 | Piano transcription of String Quartet No. 6, Op. 18: II. Adagio ma non troppo *   | 7. 25 |

#### Mily Balakirev (1836-1910)

- |   |   |       |
|---|---|-------|
| 3 | Piano transcription of String Quartet No. 8, Op. 59, "Rasumovsky" No. 2:<br>III. Allegretto - Maggiore: Thème russe | 8. 36 |
| 4 | Piano transcription of String Quartet No. 13, Op. 130:<br>V. Cavatina. Adagio molto espressivo                      | 6. 47 |

#### Modest Petrovich Mussorgsky (1839-1881)

- |   |  |        |
|---|--|--------|
|   | Piano transcription of String Quartet No. 16, Op. 135: * |        |
| 5 | II. Vivace   | 3. 48  |
| 6 | III. Lento assai, cantante e tranquillo                  | 10. 07 |

#### Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Theme and Variations on Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Clarinet Quintet KV 581:  
IV. Allegretto con variazioni \*

- |    |               |       |
|----|---------------|-------|
| 7  | Theme         | 0. 54 |
| 8  | Variation I   | 0. 56 |
| 9  | Variation II  | 1. 01 |
| 10 | Variation III | 1. 45 |
| 11 | Variation IV  | 1. 17 |
| 12 | Variation V   | 2. 50 |
| 13 | Variation VI  | 1. 03 |

Total playing time: 56. 02

**Mari Kodama**, piano

\* World-premiere recording



## True art is obstinate

There is probably no artist about whom talking and writing moves me as much as Ludwig van Beethoven. This unique composer has accompanied me for decades. I played his music as a child, as a teenager, as a student, and I still play it today in concerts, and also when I am completely on my own. I would almost say: I live with Beethoven, I listen to him, I try to understand him, even more, I try to fathom the secret of the depth and complexity of his compositions and their immediate impact. Who was this man actually? Sometimes I think about what I would ask him if I had the chance to meet him.

Over the decades, Beethoven has become my life philosopher, a point of reference not only for my artistic work. Why? Certainly because of the ideas he expresses in his art and the attitude with which he does so. "True art is obstinate ... it cannot be curbed into flattering forms," he wrote in 1820 in one of his conversation books, which helped him to communicate with others despite his deafness. With this sentence, he formulated the human being's claim to individual freedom, which is clearly non-negotiable for him and which constitutes his dignity, not only in art. At the same time, however, he also formulates the obligation to make this freedom one's own, to develop and to constantly seek and create something new that can only be found beyond traditional thinking. With each of his works, he demands

the right of the individual to self-determination and self-realization and also the obligation to move ahead and grow. This is exactly what he himself has always done, searching for new musical solutions in every composition and finding them beyond the compositional rules of his time, which is the reason for the enormous dynamism of his music. He has never repeated himself. I perceive his attitude as deeply optimistic. There is so much hope in his works, hope that people are able and willing to make use of their intellect to defend their individuality and to develop further for the moral good. He never gave up this hope, not even in the darkest moments of his life. It is his music that has deeply influenced me. Beethoven certainly has contributed to my own optimism.

With this recording, I approach Beethoven from a side that is very unusual for me. For the first time I play excerpts from his string quartets on the piano. This is a very moving experience for me. As a pianist I have been forced to merely listen to this decisive part of his complete works, which I admire so much, not least because of its ground-breaking modernity. For a musician, to listen only, and not to play is comparable to a child being prohibited to touch something that he would like to hold in his hands and truly “grasp”; something which requires the sense of touch. This is because playing music myself and thinking about how to play it leads me much deeper into a work than just hearing it or studying the score.

As a consequence, studying piano transcriptions of famous Beethoven string quartet movements written by such great composers as Camille Saint-Saëns, Modest Mussorgsky and Mily Balakirev enables me to find a new approach to Beethoven and his music in two ways. Firstly, parts of his late works can now be played by me, which allows me to understand them differently. And secondly, I can now follow the tracks of others who have been searching for the same thing as me: to get closer to Beethoven in order to understand him more fully. Performing these transcriptions for piano, which are actually not transcriptions but arrangements or, rather, ‘poetic adaptations’, allows me to learn how these three composers understand Beethoven, how they work out precisely what seems to them to be the essence of Beethoven’s string music, how they make his music their own with the help of their works and thus meet precisely that demand of obstinacy that Beethoven constantly makes for all of us. It feels to me that playing these adaptations of individual movements gives me the opportunity to ask, even if not directly to Beethoven himself, then at least to Saint-Saëns, Mussorgsky or Balakirev, about their view of Beethoven. Their impressions, as expressed in the transcriptions, will undoubtedly take me further, just as they will hopefully give you a further, deeper or at least new understanding of Beethoven.

**Mari Kodama**

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Mari Kodama', with a stylized flourish above the name.

## Kaleidoscopic glimpses of Beethoven

### Transcriptions of Beethoven string quartet movements

These exceptional new recordings offer the listener a new avenue of approach to Ludwig van Beethoven's oeuvre. Mari Kodama presents well-known Beethoven string quartet movements transcribed for piano by Camille Saint-Saëns, Modest Mussorgsky and Mily Balakirev, along with a Mozart transcription penned by Beethoven. What inspired this unique compilation? *"I consider the album a kind of homage to Beethoven. Even now, I'm still discovering new aspects of his original piano works all the time. But I was really drawn to the idea of considering and experiencing Beethoven through the compositional perspective of other great composers. And new outside sources of inspiration can also give rise to new interpretational ideas."*

Transcriptions are a form of arrangement. They are undertaken for a variety of reasons, such as to lend the work a different

tone color; as such, many transcriptions involve new instrumentation. These changes "represent a substantial modification of the source material if the momentum of the original tone color is intrinsic to the texture" (Schröder). Such is certainly the case here: transferring the highly individual and yet homogenous sound of a string quartet composition onto the piano is surely among the most artistically challenging tasks an arranger can face. Mari Kodama offers an apt comparison: *"I see a lot of parallels between arranging musical compositions and translating literature. The translator's own interpretation — their individual taste, their inner sense of the work — plays a hugely important role in the process. Word-for-word translation tends to miss the meaning of the original. But as an interpreter, I'm a translator as well. Here, in a way, I had to do a kind of double translation: from the original to the*

*transcription of the original, and from the string quartet to the piano."*

Considering the arrangements separately, we can see that Saint-Saëns, Mussorgsky and Balakirev were truly exceptional translators in Kodama's sense of the word, artists who infused their works with their own individuality as accomplished composers and arrangers. The works presented here were chosen in close cooperation with Yukihiisa Miyayama, who is an expert in retrieving the scores of musical rarities. He has previously assisted Mari Kodama and her sister, Momo, with archival expertise and advice when they recorded their album of Tchaikovsky's ballet music (also released through PENTATONE). *"I received a whole stack of music from Japan from him, and these Beethoven string quartet transcriptions just stood out,"* Kodama says. *"So it wasn't a difficult decision for me, plus a few of the works had never been recorded."*

## Beethoven's string quartets

Alongside the piano sonata and the symphony, the string quartet was one of the most important musical forms in Ludwig van Beethoven's oeuvre. The seventeen string quartets he composed between 1798 and 1826 traversed a broad stylistic spectrum, from op. 18 with its Haydn-esque Classical order to the late works of op. 127 and after, which bordered on New Music. As with symphonies, Beethoven's path to the string quartet began with compositional detours through related forms — he cautiously felt his way through string trios and quintets before ascending chamber music's highest peak, planting his first triumphant flag in the form of op. 18. The three-part **Adagio from the Quartet in B-flat Major** presented here strides along in 2/4, with turns playing an important functional and motivic role. The instruments engage in spirited musical dialogue. The e-minor middle section soon brightens into major once more, and leads into a repetition of the main theme.

With the three string quartets comprising op. 59, which Beethoven wrote in 1804-1806 and dedicated to his patron Count Rasumovsky, the composer ventured into uncharted musical territory in terms of his internal structures as well as his use of temporal expansion. A mere five years after op. 18, his artistic ambitions had developed so radically that his contemporaries were left completely overwhelmed — op. 59 was deemed “insane music,” “patchwork by a madman” and “not generally intelligible”. Here, for the first time, the concept of the symphonic is applied to the string quartet, as evidenced in the inner movement structures and in his use of expansion. Classical thematic figures give way to discursive melodies; varying, open-ended progression prevails over traditional thematic development. The cello is given a more prominent role, significantly expanding the quartet’s acoustic range into the deep bass regions.

Quartet No. 1 in F Major is exemplary of Beethoven’s new musical language: formally

expanded, extremely thematically dense, and artificial and autonomous in internal structure. The *Allegretto vivace e sempre scherzando* evokes an almost playful cadence, but one that is continuously disrupted. Innumerable thematic figures flit past as the movement unfolds. Saint-Saëns transcribed this movement in 1869. Quartet No. 2 represents a stark contrast in almost every respect: it is significantly shorter and clearer in form than its predecessor, reaches another level of expression, and emphasizes the commonalities among the movements rather than making clear individual distinctions. The e minor **Allegretto —**

**Maggiore: Thème russe** is structured into five parts, and features a twice-repeated trio in E major whose “Russian” theme is strongly reminiscent of Mussorgsky’s *Boris Godunov*, entwined in triplet figures. Balakirev completed his transcription in 1862 in the Caucasus, but the work was only published in Moscow in 1954, after his death. Op. 130 and op. 135 were composed in 1825-1826, and mark Beethoven’s late quartet

phase; even today, these works represent the pinnacle of string quartet artistry. The compositions feature intricate motivic work, employ polyphony over dialectics, and sublimate inflection to the utmost. Beethoven also varies the number of movements: the **Cavatina** recorded here is the fifth of six in op. 130, a ceaselessly flowing song with an “oppressive” middle section (Beethoven’s words) in C-flat major. Balakirev’s transcription of the cavatina was published in 1859 and dedicated to the pianist Apollon Gussakovky. In his last quartet, op. 135, Beethoven returns to the traditional four-movement structure. The continuous rhythmic shifting in the Scherzo gives it a light, weightless quality; in the Trio, the first violin launches into daring acrobatic leaps. Where have the gloomy depths of the previous works gone? The subsequent Adagio takes a fairly plain, abstract theme through four variations before concluding with its figurative resolution. Mussorgsky’s arrangements of these movements date back to 1867.

## Beethoven in a new light

To mark the composer’s 250th birthday, Mari Kodama considers it important to view Beethoven in a completely new light: “I look at the original works as though through a kaleidoscope, experiencing Beethoven from a variety of perspectives,” she explains. “But it’s not pure, unadulterated Beethoven, because Saint-Saëns, Mussorgsky and Balakirev all incorporated aspects of their own personal styles to a greater or lesser extent — while still preserving Beethoven’s soul. *Therein lies the true artistry in these transcriptions.*” In Saint-Saëns’ **Trois transcriptions** (1869-70), she points out, the arranger’s characteristic ideas are particularly evident — subtle, nuanced references to his *Danse macabre*, for example, or to the scherzo movement of his Piano Concerto No. 2.

Attentive listeners will soon notice that the arrangers have all padded the pieces’ climactic moments with pianistic fireworks, such as the expanded bass segments

or arpeggiated chords in Balakirev's transcriptions. For the interpreter, these translations represent a huge technical challenge.

As a pianist, how does one transfer Beethoven's original string-quartet sound onto the black-and-white keys? *"As a pianist, one shouldn't — no, must not try to imitate the sound of one or more stringed instruments, because then it sounds completely unnatural."* Thus, the greatest challenge facing the pianist is that of employing the natural qualities of a percussive, full-hand instrument intelligently, in a way that allows listeners to imagine the string sound. To do this, Kodama says, the interpreter must first analyze the original work in great detail. *"That's the only way to achieve balance among the upper voice, the middle voices, and the bass in one's own playing. While we were recording, we went back to the string-quartet scores again and again at certain critical points, checking how*

*Beethoven himself handled the voice leading."*

It is worth noting that the transcriptions used here are only individual movements: middle movements, a slow movement and a scherzo. No opening movements, no finales. If one compares the recorded repertoire to a dinner menu, the main course is clearly absent, as the culinarily minded Kodama notes with a wink: *"A balanced menu does not necessarily require a main dish; a combination of amuse-gueules and appetizers has a unique charm too. It's the same with this musical menu: quality prevails over quantity, and on that basis, one can create an effective dramaturgy, which, moreover, takes the individual character of different movements into account."*

Beethoven was also a versatile arranger in his own right, reworking others' compositions as well as his own. His treatment of the **Aria con variazioni**,

the final movement of Mozart's **Clarinet Quintet KV 581**, conveys the essence of the original especially well. Whereas Saint-Saëns, Balakirev and Mussorgsky all remained relatively faithful to the manuscript in their arrangements, merely adding ornamentation, Beethoven's work strays relatively far from the source material; even so, his version is unmistakably Mozartean in character.

Indeed, in Mari Kodama's view, a good arrangement is one in which the essence of the original constantly shines through: *"The colors need to be right. A transcription doesn't have to be a literal note-for-note piano arrangement. Rather, it should be composed to sound like the original. Like I said, it should be a good translation, one that conveys the content and the meaning of the original work. Naturality is the key — it can't sound difficult!"*

**Jörg-Peter Urbach**  
(transl.: Jaime McGill)



## Acknowledgments

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