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The theory that history is shaped by heroes is so antiquated that it's grown moss on the north side. But we cling to it when describing musical history, and for me, a Beethoven symphony cycle rises or falls on the "Eroica" and the Ninth Symphony, at the apex of his ambition and achievement. A new cycle of the violin sonatas makes me turn to the "Kreutzer" Sonata first—it's the equivalent of an "Eroica" for violin and piano, which immediately raises issues. When the work was premiered in 1803 (at a concert that began at 8:00 in the morning!), the gentler sound of historic pianos was reasonably balanced with the violin. But a trap lay in waiting for the future. In his sketchbook Beethoven makes clear that the "Kreutzer" is "very much in concertante form, like a concerto" and goes so far as to describe it as a "sonata for pianoforte and violin obbligato," implying that the piano comes first.

When two virtuosos perform it (e.g., Itzhak Perlman and Martha Argerich on EMI/Warner), the trap is sprung, and the "Kreutzer" becomes a thrilling competition. But even when the pianist assumes the usual secondary role expected of an accompanist (e.g., Jascha Heifetz and Emmanuel Bay on RCA), the performance must rise imaginatively to meet Beethoven's unprecedented conception, especially in the tempestuous first movement. Purely as a practicality, the violinist can't be swamped by the piano, an issue that isn't so pressing on recordings and the magic worked by twiddling knobs in the control room.

Having laid out my criteria, which aren't everyone's, naturally, I found the "Kreutzer" Sonata played by the Elan Duo very satisfying. British violinist Andrew Smith and Bulgarian pianist Elina Christova evoke the strength and power I associate with middle-period Beethoven (my hero), voicing their parts in concertante style rather than solo and accompaniment. The piano's cadenza-like flourishes in the first movement introduction are delivered with assurance and sure musical instinct. As recorded, Smith's violin tone is slim and silvery, closer to Grumiaux than to Oistrakh, shall we say, but with close-up miking both instruments are balanced to bring out inner details without the piano dominating.

Such a deeply considered interpretation takes time to mature, and so it's no surprise that the Elan Duo has regularly performed the complete cycle of Beethoven's 10 violin sonatas in concert. One such event, covering three evenings, took place in November 2012; these studio recordings from Radford University in Virginia were made that summer and are the culmination of the duo's Beethoven Project begun in 2010, the year their partnership was formed. I can think of duet partners where the pianist was unequal to the challenge of the later sonatas (Heifetz and Bay again, but also the much-praised 2010 set from Renaud Capuçon and Frank Braley on Virgin), but that doesn't happen here. The Elan Duo are so well matched musically that they rival any number of famous performers in this repertoire. Since the 10 sonatas span from 1797 to 1812, there's a range of stylistic differences, which Smith and Christova handle with finesse.

Finesse and poise are hallmarks of this cycle, in fact. Innately neither performer “plays big,” but that’s not a hindrance given their polish and empathy for each other. Their account of the “Spring” Sonata is especially lively and buoyant, and nowhere do they approach Beethoven as a monument, which allows for plenty of freshness in their interpretations. Personally I prefer a style in early Beethoven that looks ahead to his later development rather than backward to Haydn, and the Elan Duo seem to agree, as in their sinewy reading of the first movement of Sonata No. 4 in A Minor from 1801 — after all, we’re only two years before the inception of the “Eroica.” The Elan is capable of a Mozartean cheerfulness that shifts into the self-reflective eloquence of Sonata No. 10 in G, one of Beethoven’s most quietly beautiful chamber works.

As for reservations, the recorded sound is listed as up-to-date 96 Hz/24 bit, but on my system the violin’s upper register was thin and the piano somewhat tinkly, which required damping down the treble and boosting the midrange. The acoustical ambience is also dry and tight. No doubt the response from other listeners will vary from one playback system to another. In order to present the sonatas chronologically without splitting any, four CDs were required where some sets take only three. These aren’t serious drawbacks, considering the musical rewards to be relished here, which are considerable. Huntley Dent