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Violinist Andrew Smith and pianist Elina Christova formed the Elan Duo in 2010 as the result of an agreement to perform and record Beethoven's 10 violin sonatas. They played the music live between 2010 and 2012. Then they made the PnOVA recording. Smith was a student of Emanuel Hurwitz and Ida Kavafian. At the age of 23 he made his London debut and became the concertmaster of the Orquestra da Norte in Portugal. Since then he has worked with a number of orchestras in the United States and the United Kingdom. He is founder and artistic director of Britain's Stamford International Music Festival. Currently, Smith and his wife, cellist Andrea Mills, live in Connecticut. Born in Bulgaria, raised in Austria, Elina Christova came to the United States as a Fulbright scholar and studied with Solomon Mikowsky at Manhattan School of Music. Since then she has performed widely, taught at Sacred Heart University, and lectured at Warsaw University. Although with the Beethoven sonatas they are competing with some of the best artists currently on record, Smith and Christova have new ideas and their thoughtful interpretations deserve to have their own place among today's recordings.

Beethoven began writing his violin sonatas in 1797 when he was 27 years old. He dedicated the three works of op. 12 to Antonio Salieri, with whom he studied vocal composition. These sonatas are not early works and the composer's confidence in the value of his originality is already apparent. Actually, he composed the first nine sonatas, including the most often played one, the "Kreutzer," within a six-year period, but the 10th, known as the "Cockcrow," did not appear until 1812. In earlier sonatas the violin would get the main melody and the piano would accompany. The First Sonata already shows Beethoven's immense genius as he constructs its opening movement from melodic fragments. At the same time he insures the equality of the accompanist by having the piano and violin dialogue as they expand these building blocks of melody. Smith and Christova communicate with the greatest ease as they unveil the full melodic glory of the movement. After a more usual second movement, the manner in which he uses the catchy melody of the Rondo foretells some stylistic aspects of his later works. The Third Sonata contains some notably difficult passages, which foretell great works to come. Smith and Christova play them smoothly and with a perfection of style that indicates their innate taste. In 1801, Beethoven expected his opp. 23 and 24 to be published together because of the music's contrasting moods. His A-Minor Fourth Sonata is dark and menacing, while the Fifth, the F-Major work called "Spring," is bright and lyrical. The Fourth was the first Beethoven sonata that the critics of his time found pleasing. On this disc, Smith's clean tones bring out the starkness of the composer's stormy landscape, while Christova's facile pianism fascinates the listener's ear.

Between 1801 and 1803, life was improving for Beethoven. He became the resident composer at the Theater an der Wien and his concerts were beginning to reward him financially. The sonatas of op. 30, his Sixth, Seventh, and Eighth, show his musical maturity. The light and happy airs with which the Sixth begins and ends enclose an achingly beautiful slow section. The Seventh, written in C Minor, looks forward to later works and presages their magnificence. In addition to superior craftsmanship, the Eighth Sonata is notable for a parity of violin and piano, along with syncopation and accents,

that were unusual for the early 19th century. Smith and Christova bring it to life with panache. The Ninth Sonata, now known as the “Kreutzer,” was originally dedicated to Polish and African violinist George Bridgetower. Since there was no time for rehearsal, Bridgetower sight-read it for its first performance. He and Beethoven had a falling out over drinks after the concert. Afterwards, the composer rededicated the work to Rodolphe Kreutzer, then considered the finest violinist of the age. Kreutzer, however, never played it because he found it incomprehensible. The playing of Smith and Christova proves that they find it eminently comprehensible. The critics received the “Kreutzer” well and it caught the fancy of the public. Beethoven described it as a “sonata written in a concertante manner, almost like a concerto.” The work’s double- and occasional triple-stopping do not faze Smith in the least, and Christova has the vitality to energize the rhythm-laden piano line. They perform the decorative melody of the second movement gracefully and arrive at the last movement with plenty of pizzazz, playing the finale with many an exciting rhythmic turn. Leo Tolstoy used the concertgoers’ memories of the urgent rhythms of this glorious music as the background for his novella *The Kreutzer Sonata*. The 10th Sonata was written nine years after the “Kreutzer”; it relates closely to the String Quartet No. 11, op. 95, written in 1810, and the Piano Trio No. 7, op. 97, known as the “Archduke,” which he completed the next year. It is the only violin sonata that bears some of the characteristics of the composer’s late period.

Smith and Christova’s project was to record all of these sonatas, and they have done it extremely well in a style that shows the way some of the finest artists perform Beethoven in the 21st century. There are an enormous number of recordings of the Beethoven sonatas. Gidon Kremer and Martha Argerich recorded all of them for Deutsche Grammophon in the 1990s when recording fidelity was not as good as it is today, but they give heartfelt performances. On Decca Ovation, Itzhak Perlman and Vladimir Ashkenazy are much more brilliant and give a flashy perspective on the works. Arthur Grumiaux and Clara Haskil recorded them for Decca in the 1950s. Unfortunately the 2007 rerelease does not contain optimum sound reproduction. Like Smith and Christova, Perlman and Askenazy’s performances take up four discs. Grumiaux and Haskil’s work was rereleased on a three-disc set. Kremer and Argerich’s discs are sold separately. PnOVA’s sound is clear and the two artists are equally present. These Beethoven sonatas are well worth hearing in more than one interpretation and I imagine that most classical recording buffs already own at least one set. I suggest adding the Smith and Christova rendition for an updated performance. I enjoy hearing their enthusiastic rendition and expect listeners will too. Maria Nockin