

**ALASDAIR BEATSON**

14-15 March 2025

Bridport Arts Centre, Ilminster Arts Centre, The Dance House Crewkerne

When the last notes of Beethoven’s Opus 57 Piano Sonata, the so-called *Appassionata*, ceased, there was a spontaneous uproar from the listeners, and in an instant, they were on their feet. It was safe to assume something very special had just taken place at the Ilminster Arts Centre.

Concerts in the West was celebrating its twentieth season and the anniversary of the first concerts in 2006. To mark the occasion Alasdair Beatson, an outstanding pianist and highly regarded internationally as a soloist and a consummate chamber music performer, gave a recital of music by Beethoven, Ferdinand Ries, Fauré, and George Benjamin.

Alasdair Beatson began his programme with a more modestly constructed Beethoven Sonata than the concluding Opus 57: the two movement E minor Opus 90 composed in 1814. By this stage of his life Beethoven showed a stylistic shift to a more contemplative and song-like approach, seemingly accepting his severe deafness rather than the temperamental defiance a few years earlier, demonstrated in the *Appassionata*. The first movement is a series of thoughts, each one seemingly being interrupted by the next. For the listener this might result in an impression of disjointed and isolated ideas. In the hands of a pianist who can follow Beethoven’s thinking and variable temperament, the question of fragmentation will not arise. And so, it was.

The Sonata was followed, very interestingly, with a set of Variations on a theme of an early Beethoven song by his contemporary Ferdinand Ries. Although the music of Ries is heard far less than that of his friend, this was a work full of revelation. The style is post-Classical and, in this case, full of bright, chirpy figurations and rhythms. The largely virtuosic piano writing provided also a further insight into the character of the performer, his exuberance and ebullience.

The music of Gabriel Fauré is known to be very important to Alasdair Beatson who considers the later nineteenth century French composer’s music to have so much spiritual depth and integrity. The *Thème et variations Op 73* at 16-minutes in length is Fauré’s longest work for solo piano. The series of variations suited the composer’s instinct for pieces of shorter and more concentrated structure. Through his carefully considered introduction to this piece, and indeed other works of his programme, one was drawn to an understanding of the respect that Alasdair Beatson places on the music of Fauré. To site but one example, his deep familiarity with the construction of each variation allowed him to draw to the surface without self-conscious fuss, the internal melodic features that are part of the fabric of Fauré’s writing.

During the interval the audience was able to enjoy special refreshments and sparkling wine as Catherine Maddocks, one of the Founders of Concerts in the West and during the 20 seasons has been its Artistic and Executive Director, was presented with an engraved Waterford glass bowl to mark the occasion.

*Piano Figures* by George Benjamin, composed in 2004, was likened by Alasdair Beatson to other sets of short pieces written for young pianists in previous times, such as, Schumann’s *Album for the Young.* When it came to the sixth of the 10 pieces, *Hammers,* the audience may have to started to wonder what child might be able to play such rhythmically complex music. However, Benjamin has always explored new possibilities alongside more conventional music expectations in his music. For his part, Alasdair Beatson has also been an advocate of bringing more recently composed music to his audiences.

Beethoven’s *Appassionata* Sonata was written at the time of his *Eroica* Symphony and other period sonatas, the *Waldstein* and *Les Adieux*. It is a work full of drama, energy, and conflict by a composer in a struggle with increasing deafness and at war with his emotions. From the outset we are taken on a journey of storms and periodic calm waters. Throughout the three-movement work there is always feelings of pregnant eruption. To handle this technically demanding and lengthy tension requires someone who not only has assured pianistic skills but a mental, physical, and emotional temperament that can perform the sonata at the end of a full evening’s recital. The audience felt the involvement and experience and were in awe as Alasdair Beatson drove them to accompany him on his intense journey. Perhaps the reason for the euphoric reception given at the end was as much about relief! The listeners were emotionally drained. Alasdair Beatson? He stood and smiled with gentle humility.

Andrew Maddocks 2025