Opus 27 #1 is, for me at least, the unsung hero of the group, the jewel in the crown. It, and its successor, the famous Moonlight Sonata, Opus 27 #2 (so-called due to a publisher’s hubris, rather than Beethoven’s own wishes), are both given the designation Sonata quasi una fantasia. This appellation is certainly more apropos to the first than the second (perhaps Beethoven needed to add this to the Moonlight because it, too, like Opus 26 and Opus 27 #1, starts with a slow movement). Opus 27 #1 is a series of short movements strung together without pause. The first movement, as with Opus 26, is a set of variations based more on a subdued sense of harmonic color rather than any particular melodic element, abruptly interrupted by a quasi-Development in the key of C (this key has been already announced in one of the earlier opening phrases). Likewise, the key of C (in the minor mode) becomes the basis for the second movement Scherzo, leading to a short Adagio interlude in the subdominant before breaking out into a spirited Rondo, the only full-scale movement in the work. This is turn is interrupted once more by the Adagio (this time in the tonic key) and a very quick and humorous coda brings the sonata to a close.

The Moonlight Sonata, with its instantly recognizable triplets in the right hand and its descending, brooding left-hand, was perhaps (as has been postulated by others) the work that transcended the gap from the optimism of the eighteenth century to the pessimism of the nineteenth, coming as it did in 1801, shortly before Beethoven’s wrenching acknowledgement of his insidious deafness. The first and third movements show unity of style at every turn—melodically, harmonically, and structurally. The charming second movement, a quick Minuet, is noted for a persistent delay of the tonic by the repeated A flat dominant—a stroke of compositional genius. The full-blown fury of the last movement surely serves to underline Beethoven’s dislike (and the inappropriateness) of the publisher’s title.

This evening’s program brings to an end those sonatas associated with Beethoven’s so-called early period. Many artists today, both young and old, are inclined to play the more mature sonatas from his later periods—for whatever reasons—and often neglect these delectable masterpieces. It is my fervent hope that my first three programs, played chronologically in order to show Beethoven’s unique development, will help to change this.


Tonight’s piano technician is Susan Willanger Cady.
The first thing one notices about the writing in Opus 14 #1 is that it resembles the four-part writing of a string quartet. And that is exactly what Beethoven did with this work, in a transcription (his only one in this genre) that puts many details from the piano version in a completely new light. One of the paradoxes pianists face today in performing Beethoven involves the myriad questions that arise over this or that in his scores, things left unsaid, even unfinished—not to mention all the problems caused by the many original manuscripts that have gone missing over the years. Many of these questions are broached and even answered in the string quartet version of Opus 14 #1 (numerous crescendi where the piano score marks just the opposite, many tiny differences in dynamics) all pointing to interesting, if perplexing, interpretative challenges for the performer. This sonata is the only one on tonight’s program to contain the “normal” fast-slow-fast relationship of sonata movements.

Likewise, Opus 14 #2, while gentle and touching on the surface (particularly in the first movement), gives us a new view of Beethoven the Experimentier. The opening theme, if not balanced and weighted properly, sounds off-kilter, as if all the accents are in the wrong place, an anomaly reflected in the opening of the Scherzo as well. Of course, Beethoven the Architect resolves this rhythmic ambivalence in the codas of both movements. The slow movement is a delightful and witty set of variations, each variation building on an element or elements introduced in the preceding one. The last movement is a Scherzo, and not a Rondo or a sonata-form movement that one would normally expect. It is full of wit and dash.

Opus 22 shows Beethoven once again in his virtuoso mood. The first movement is built; moreover, on a sequence of abrupt beginnings and endings. As one might expect, there is no need, when composing in such a frame of mind, for a coda at the end of the movement. It finishes as suddenly as the Exposition earlier on, excepting this time in the tonic instead of the dominant, and that’s that! The Adagio is one of Beethoven’s most beautiful slow movements—simple, sincere, and affecting. The charming Minuetto, built on ideas from the beginning of the sonata, is followed by what appears at first to be a subdued Rondo. Very quickly, though, it becomes apparent that Beethoven is providing a symmetry with the abruptness of ideas originally sown in the first movement. But whereas in the first movement Beethoven discards his ideas quickly and humorously, in the last movement he holds on to them, and this feeling is not easily undone, even by the forward thrust of the fugal-sounding middle section.

Opus 26 is an anomaly in Beethoven’s output. The first movement is a theme and variations (not the first time this has happened in keyboard history (the first movement of Mozart’s K.331 is a well-known antecedent), but the first time in which Beethoven allows himself the freedom of composing a piano sonata without the "requisite" sonata-form to start. Here, the operative word is color, and Beethoven exploits this in the five variations. A lively Scherzo is followed by a Marche funèbre, written in Beethoven’s words, “on the death of a Hero”, whom subsequent history has never managed to identify! The last movement is a perpetuum mobile of lightness, contrast and color, the latter very much mirroring those elements in the first movement.