

Mozart

K.309, K.311, K.330
K.457, K.533/494

Orli
Shaham



COMPLETE PIANO SONATAS VOL.5 & 6

A Lifetime of Mozartean Magic

By Donald Rosenberg

The sense of wonder the three-year-old felt on her first encounter with Mozart in 1979 hasn't diminished more than 40 years later. Orli Shaham was mesmerized when she heard her eldest brother practice the Piano Concerto No. 20 in D minor, K.466, at home in Israel. She vowed to play it someday.

She would, and then some. In the decades since that fateful experience, Shaham has performed a dozen or so of Mozart's twenty-seven piano concertos and all eighteen of his piano sonatas. Where the sonatas are concerned, she has gone further than the concert stage: for Canary Classics, Shaham has recorded the complete cycle on six compact discs, the final two of which make up the present release's Volumes 5 and 6. With this achievement, the pianist puts a double bar line on an exhilarating journey through music she has known most of her life.

Shaham's affinity for Mozart is evident in each sonata, to which she applies tonal beauty, technical fluency, textural lucidity, and interpretive flair. The performances are the result of continuous experience and study, getting under the composer's skin to understand his musical methods and motivations.

Bringing the sonatas to recording level inspired the pianist to contemplate scenarios surrounding Mozart's creation of these works, which span the years 1774 to 1789 and his stays in Munich, Mannheim, Paris, Salzburg, Linz, and Vienna. "I'm always thinking about where he was," says Shaham. "Was he trying out that piano? Was he writing for someone's daughters? I want that something from every single one of them."

Shaham traces part of her curiosity in Mozartean matters to her collegiate years. She graduated from the joint Columbia University—Juilliard School program with degrees in history and piano performance. At Columbia, she studied historical musicology with two titans in the field, Elaine Sisman and Walter Frisch. She credits the university's core curriculum with stretching her mind and changing her life. As a teacher's assistant there, she taught non-majors about classical music, which nurtured an ability to speak to audiences with charming ease. She continues to savor making contact with listeners, whether she is presenting from the concert stage or on radio (often as guest host on the popular program *From the Top*).

The privilege of reveling in Mozart reached a peak when the opportunity arose to capture the sonatas for posterity. Shaham says the initial challenge was figuring out how to “divide the jigsaw puzzle” in terms of order (of recording and release) and possible thematic coupling. She and her team, including producer Erica Brenner, came up with what they believed would be a workable schedule: record twelve of the sonatas in August 2019 and the remaining six in August 2020, all in an admired venue, Mechanics Hall in Worcester, Mass. By recording the sonatas over two sessions at the same time of year, so that the humidity in the wood-bedecked hall would be the same, they aimed to achieve acoustic consistency.

They had no idea how challenging the process would become. Amid what Shaham calls the “twelve months and two weeks” they would take to record the sonatas, the coronavirus pandemic shook the world, bringing much of humanity to a halt. But Brenner and Shaham decided that the second year of recording could continue by following strict health protocols. Brenner worked remotely from Cleveland as Shaham—alone onstage, with recording engineer Robert Friedrich in his own isolated control room at Mechanics Hall—recorded two sonatas a day on a favorite Steinway Model D that could be tweaked, when needed, by the pianist’s “genius technician,” Barbara Pease Renner.

The sonatas were recorded not in the order they were written or in which they would be released but according to what Shaham felt was her comfort level. She wanted to make sure she could manage Mozart’s pyrotechnical and lyrical writing within a day’s recording schedule—“physiological considerations,” she explains. Shaham knew she wanted to record the Sonata No. 14 in C minor, K.457, which is included in this newest release, during the second year’s recording session. “It was the one sonata of the eighteen I felt I needed to think about more.” Finally ready to record the piece in 2020, she was “eager to put all of the emotional content out there to be judged. I’m all vulnerability.”

Achieving a balance of sonatas on each release was a crucial concern. “Each one says something a little different about the whole,” says Shaham. The first disc, released in October 2020, comprises the three B-flat major sonatas (K.281, K.333, and K.570), which hail from different periods. “You can almost see the trajectory in his form and the ideas he’s thinking. It’s a mirror of what the set as a whole is going to show you.” The subsequent volumes group sonatas by period, technical challenge, or compositional evolution.

The newest release’s Vol. 5 contains K.309 and K.311, written in Mannheim in 1777 and 1778,

respectively, and K.330, from 1783. (“Grownup Mozart!,” exclaims Shaham.) Vol. 6 is devoted to an epic duo: the formidable C-minor sonata, K.457, and the F-major sonata, K.533, which Mozart deemed symphonic, as Shaham notes. “That’s why there are only two sonatas on that CD.”

To give listeners an idea of what lay in store, Shaham began posting movements from the initial sessions—along with videos shot by Brenner—on her recording-related website orlishaham-mozart.com in April 2020 (a month after the start of the pandemic). In following months, she posted another movement each week.

Why Shaham is a pianist has entirely to do with Mozart. Hearing the D-minor piano concerto played by brother Shai, who now heads the Laboratory of Developmental Genetics at New York’s Rockefeller University, was the three-year-old’s first impetus. Many more revelations would follow. She was all of six when she began learning the popular Sonata No. 16 in C major, K.545, “on my little upright. I was obsessed with it.” With her scientist parents and her brothers Shai and Gil (now the world-renowned violinist), Shaham moved to New York soon thereafter.

She entered Juilliard’s preparatory department and learned the Piano Sonata No. 4 in E-flat major, K.282, when she was eight. From that point on, she took

up at least one Mozart sonata per year, while at the same time embracing a spectrum of music from the eighteenth century to today. She said she has continued to glean lessons about Mozart’s artistry by working closely with living composers. She came to realize that the figure she had observed in *Amadeus*, one of the first movies she saw, presented a mythical depiction of the compositional process. “We were taught the divine went straight to Mozart’s pen,” Shaham says. But composers with whom she has been directly associated have helped clarify “how Mozart was thinking about stuff.”

One of those composers is Steven Mackey, who wrote a piano concerto, *Stumble to Grace*, that Shaham premiered in 2011 with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra under its then—music director, David Robertson. Another is her husband, that same celebrated conductor named Robertson, whose piano concerto *Light Forming* she has performed several times, most recently with Robertson and the Seattle Symphony. The musical power couple—who also recorded Mozart’s Piano Concertos Nos. 17 and 24 with the St. Louis Symphony—share a home with their artistically inclined twin teenaged sons: Nathan, a violinist and bassoonist, and Alex, a composer and pianist. Shaham said Nathan, whose name was inspired by both Nathan Milstein and the Israeli author Nathan Shaham (no relation), may have also

been subconsciously named after Nathan Broder, editor of one of the first complete editions of Mozart piano sonatas, a beloved, now well-worn copy of which the pianist received when she was seven.

Forty years later, Mozart continues to be central to her musical life. “He’s been with me the longest and through everything,” she says. “His operas were the first operas that grabbed me. I do owe a lot of that to Elaine Sisman.” Shaham is serious about the everything bit: She takes all of the repeats in the piano sonatas on her traversal for Canary Classics. (“How often are you going to record the complete cycle?”) Her approach to ornamentation in these scores has been guided by the implications in Mozart’s writing—the highest and lowest notes in a passage, the character of the music, how improvisatory additions affect the narrative. “You see the way Mozart experiments and makes changes. He makes a scaffold and puts the rest on top of that.”

Shaham agrees most of the sonatas are “formulaic” in that they are cast in traditional forms. But this doesn’t imply they resemble one another or are in the least bit conventional. Instead, Mozart is both subtle and daring in his distinctive handling of materials. And to Shaham, there’s more. “He’s also experimenting with audience manipulation—with the things he sets up beautifully and fulfills, how

he thwarts your expectations. I do see through these sonatas that you the listener or amateur pianist—you were on his mind. In his letters, ‘you’ means whatever your level of musical training.”

Since she finished recording the sonatas during the year of a world-wide cataclysm, Shaham has returned to these pieces knowing she can always learn more and take new approaches. She says she internalized much of what the process revealed to her as she relived the sonatas while editing the performances with producer Brenner. “On a grand scale, the day after you’ve recorded something, you play it better than before,” reflects Shaham, with a hint of the excitement of a three-year-old in awe of Mozart. “The process of recording teaches you so much. So you’re a better pianist than you were before.”

Shaham doesn’t pretend to hold the key to a man who died more than 230 years ago, but she has come “closer to the shadings of those meanings” in his music. “I think what you can feel is the depth of his own feelings. I do feel much closer to that than when I started this project. I know better the things that concerned him, things he was trying to convey and work out and play with.”

Orli Shaham, piano

A consummate musician recognized for her grace and vitality, Orli Shaham has established an impressive international reputation as one of today's most gifted pianists. Hailed by critics on four continents, Ms. Shaham is in demand for her prodigious skills and admired for her interpretations of both standard and modern repertoire. *The New York Times* called her a "brilliant pianist," *The St. Louis Post-Dispatch* has praised her "wit, passion, delicacy," and the *Chicago Tribune* referred to her as "a first-rate Mozartean."

Orli Shaham's performance schedule brings her to concert halls from Carnegie Hall to the Sydney Opera House and most of the major venues in between for recitals, chamber music, and concerti. Ms. Shaham has performed with nearly every major American orchestra as well as many in Europe, Asia, and Australia and is a frequent guest at major summer festivals around the world. Since 2007, she has served as curator and performer in the Pacific Symphony's chamber music series, and is artist in residence at Vancouver Symphony USA since 2022. She is also artistic director, host and pianist of the interactive children's concert series, Orli Shaham's Bach Yard, which she founded in 2010.

Ms. Shaham's wide variety of repertoire is reflected in her discography, which includes over a dozen titles on

Deutsche Gramophone, Sony, Canary Classics and other labels. In addition to Mozart's complete piano sonatas, she has recorded "Mozart Concertos" (K.453 and K.491) with the St. Louis Symphony Orchestra conducted by David Robertson; "Brahms Inspired," and "American Grace," featuring Steven Mackey's piano concerto *Stumble to Grace* with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and conducted by David Robertson, all on Canary Classics. Other recordings include "Nigunim, Hebrew Melodies," "Dvořák for Two," "The Prokofiev Album," and "Mozart in Paris," all with her brother, the violinist Gil Shaham on Canary Classics; and "Saint-Saëns *Carnival of the Animals*" with pianist Jon Kimura Parker and the San Diego Symphony; and "John Adams' *Grand Pianola Music*" with pianist Marc-André Hamelin and the San Francisco Symphony led by John Adams (SFS0063).

Ms. Shaham is on the piano and chamber music faculty at The Juilliard School, and served on the juries of both the Cliburn and Honens International Piano Competitions. She is a major presence on public radio coast to coast: she is Co-Host and Creative for NPR's "From the Top," and was host of "America's Music Festivals," and "Dial-a-Musician," a radio feature series she created, all of which were broadcast nationally.

OrliShaham.com

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–1791)

Volume 5

- 1–3 Piano Sonata in C Major, No. 7, K.309**
- 4–6 Piano Sonata in D Major, No. 8, K.311**
- 7–9 Piano Sonata in C Major, No. 10, K.330**

Volume 6

- 1–3 Piano Sonata in C minor, No. 14, K.457**
- 4–6 Piano Sonata in F Major, No. 15, K.533/494**

Orli Shaham, piano

Recording Producer & Editor: Erica Brenner

Recording Engineers: Robert Friedrich; Michael Bishop (K.330)

Mastering Engineer: Robert Friedrich, Five/Four Productions, Ltd.

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Hamburg Steinway (Model D-274 #576975) Piano Technician: Barbara Pease Renner

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Orli Shaham is a Steinway Artist.



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