

Beethoven Cello Sonatas – No. 1 in F, Op. 5 No. 1^a; No. 2 in G minor, Op. 5 No. 2^b; No. 3 in A, Op. 69^c; No. 4 in C Op. 102 No. 1^d; No. 5 in D, Op. 102 No. 2^e.

Mstislav Rostropovich (vlc); **Sviatoslav Richter** (pf).

Speakers Corner/Philips Ⓢ PHS2-920 (two LPs); rec. c7/61; bd6/62; ae3/63. From Philips SAL3453/4.

These two LPs of all the Beethoven sonatas for piano and cello are very special. Few performers surpass Richter and Rostropovich in the sheer assertive scale of their conception of this music. Even so, there is no sense of two individualistic performers being brought together for the sake of a spectacle. Each plays into the other's hands as if it were a practised duo.

For first-period works the two Op. 5 sonatas always seem remarkably assured, so they respond well to the highly projected performing style. Each begins with a long Adagio in which Rostropovich's poised, intense playing stays long in the memory. Near the end of the Adagio of No. 2 there are some huge silences in Richter's part. He allows them to register with rare, calm confidence and at their full value. The ensemble between the players is always precise, and excitement is never achieved by fast tempi alone; the last two movements of Op. 5 No. 1, for example are quite measured. At the very end of No. 2 where the cello has broken octaves, Rostropovich forces his tone with an ugly effect very rare in his playing.

Written 20 years later, the two Op. 102 sonatas form a kind of gateway into Beethoven's late style. In the faster movements the players match their phrasing and the enunciation of their rhythms with marvellous precision. No. 1 especially is a most engaging work, combining quirky humour with an ever-present unpredictability.

For many, the grandly scaled Op. 69 Sonata – where the acoustic is marginally more spacious – will be the musical highlight of the series. It rather resembles the famous *Kreutzer* Sonata in the same key, written five years earlier and has something of the same grand "manner of a concerto" (Beethoven's description). Thus it responds splendidly to these players' treatment. All the recordings are closely balanced. At times the huge sound the players make seems to beg for rather more acoustic ambience. There is some master tape hiss and a touch of pre-echo but neither seriously impinge on the attention. **Graham Silcock**