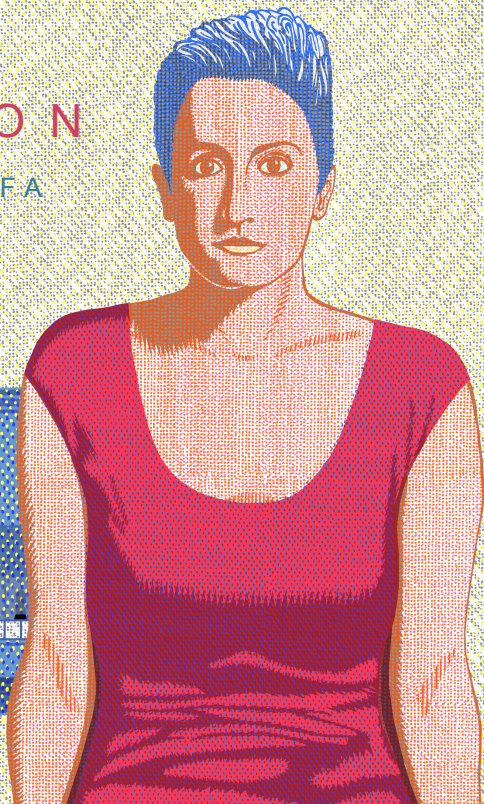


BEETHOVEN  
LISZT  
DIEZ-NIETO

ELEVATION

FRANCESCA KHALIFA

*Sheva*



*Don't only practice your art, but  
Force your way into its secrets: art deserves that, for it and  
Knowledge can raise Man to the divine.  
L. van Beethoven*

It is well-recognized that Beethoven gifted us, through his music, with the power of resilience in face of the utmost hardship. Beethoven's capacity of celebrating the vulnerable and the heroic attains final victory in the experience, entirely by musical means, of transfiguration and transcendence. Each directional change in Beethoven's creative output has been solely guided by a need to express a specific state of mind; an emotion that could not be expressed in that way before or at all; and by an inner trust that that emotion--that state of mind--would bring us closer to a higher plane of existence. Although not exhaustive, the parallel between Beethoven's personal life and his creative one is relevant to this point, and it is particularly relevant when approaching his so called "late style".

Beethoven's last years were filled with a new sense of self- acceptance, self-love and self-knowledge: the composer seemed to allow himself to shift from the rational – enlightened man of his previous years to a man with a growing sense of spirituality and almost mysticism. He had overcome many losses: the failure of his project of domestic happiness, the stringent isolation from society, the legal struggles over the guardianship of his nephew, and his descent into complete deafness. His music now embodied a message of triumph of will over mortality, in a type of union with the Divine, conveying the existence of a higher, spiritual dimension. The music in this album is an exploration on this idea of ascension and elevation, journeying through various paths to transcendence, its sensations and its qualities. It is also a musical dedication to my mentor, Cuban pianist German Diez Nieto. Nieto was a pupil of and assistant to Claudio Arrau, thus heir to the piano tradition established by Franz Liszt. His love, tenacity, awareness and profundity have lifted me, as an artist and as a human.



## BEETHOVEN: Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Major, Opus 109

Beethoven's Piano Sonata op. 109 belongs completely to the year 1820, and was written just after the longest crisis in Beethoven's life -- which seems to have started after the tragic ending of the Immortal Beloved's affair--came to an end. This year marked the first of the emotional recovery that the composer undertook after the crisis.

The first phrase of the Sonata, with its *dolce and legato*, seems to announce the newly discovered sense of calm and serenity - one that proves still fragile and is soon abruptly interrupted by the Adagio espressivo section, with its sorrowful and dramatic tone.

Beethoven condenses into less than 15 bars the exposition of the first theme, the modulation to the second theme and the cadence into the development section. The inner struggle in this first movement is so acutely depicted that the essence of the sonata-form, even with all the elements intact, completely evaporates: the proportions between parts are compressed and the functions of each part become different and less rigid, opening up a transformation.

Connected to the first movement by an *attacca* is the dramatic and anguished *Prestissimo* of the second movement. Here, the long *legato* phrases that were so important in the first movement are dissolved. Everything becomes fragmented and tormented, rhythmically convulsive and obsessive. The whole second movement and its uncertain ending lead into the hymn-like theme of the third movement, and its set of variations.

The third movement is not just a tonal and formal answer to the previous ones. It embodies the spiritual answer that Beethoven gives himself for his inner conflicts. Each variation brings us to a different angle, moment and sensation of the theme, becoming the means of sublimation, transformation and transcendence of the initial prayer, to which we return in the end, changed, expanded, and elevated.

## BEETHOVEN: Piano Sonata No. 31 in A flat Major, Opus 110

This sonata was written during the years 1821-1822, while Beethoven was also bringing to completion the writing of his *Missa Solemnis*. Although to some extent all Beethoven's late works share common elements, those two works have a very clear common ground: the composer draws direct inspiration from the past, using allegorical motifs as well as style features and gestures characteristic of the Baroque.

The opening movement of the sonata has a tender and ecstatic tone, with some shadows: within the first few lines of the sonata, the melody-accompaniment writing bursts into broken-chord arpeggios, then lands on a harmonically unstable second theme. The symmetry of the sonata-form reinforces this emotional duality, which will ultimately demand the dramatic efforts of the fugue in the third movement to be overcome. In fact, Beethoven ends the first movement with the motif of the upcoming fugue (presented in an inner voice in the right hand), planting the seeds for the final act of liberation.

The second movement, a scherzo with trio with Dionysian connotations, takes us to the depth of the abyss in the *Adagio, ma non troppo* of the third movement. This is one of the darkest and most sorrowful moments in Beethoven's music, one that only through a *Recitativo, Piu' Adagio, Andante* and another *Adagio*, will finally emerge into the lyrical *Arioso dolente* (*Kagesander Gesang*- song of lamentation).

The third movement, the Fugue, in three voices, displays in full power the spirit of resilience rising from the tragic *Arioso*, but it will capitulate to a final lamentation (*Ermattet, klagend*), dissipating in the motionless G major chord repeated ten times at the end of this arioso, before its ascent to the finale. It will take all Beethoven's creative imagination to recover from this grief. Finally, the fugue returns with the inversion of the theme, coming back to life little by little (*Nach und nach wieder auflebend*), and finally transcending even itself and ending in a triumphant arpeggio of A flat major in the very last 5 measures of the piece.

## **LISZT: Second Ballade**

Listz's Second Ballade is a monument to the force of love and its triumph beyond loss. It was written in the spring of 1853, after the completion of his Piano Sonata.

As Arrau reports, in Liszt's circle it was known that the programmatic inspiration of the Second Ballade was the myth of Hero and Leander, which is as follows: Hero was a virgin priestess of Aphrodite living on the western shores of the Hellespont, while Leander was a young boy living in Abydos, on the opposite shores. The two met and fell in love. In spite of the circumstances which were forcing them apart, Leander would swim across the strait every night to meet his lover, guided by a light in Hero's tower. But one night, a storm broke out and the wind blew out the lamp, leaving Leander with no beacon to guide his way. Unable to find his way and overwhelmed by the storm, he drowned. When Hero saw his body washed ashore, she fell off her tower to meet him in the afterlife.

The music starts with rising and falling scales, placing us with Leander, as he crossed the strait and reached Hero the first night. Hero's theme (the theme that Wagner will later use to represent love in *Tristan und Isolde*), presented in the Allegretto, has the sensuality and tenderness of the moment of union between the two lovers. Leander crosses the strait a second and a third time, when the stormy broken octaves make his effort more difficult than before. But he still reaches Hero, and this time when the Allegretto returns, it seems to indulge in the delicacy and intimacy of the moment more than before. The fourth night, the violence of the storm increases; Leander struggles, and in desperation, finally drowns. Hero's theme becomes the anxious desperation of the tragic loss, and resolves into a cascade-like motif representing Hero throwing herself off the tower. Liszt goes further than the myth here, and ends with his message of triumph of love: through variations and transformations, the themes come back transfigured, gaining a sense of liberation and ascension, landing finally in the grandioso scales that lift us to the last image of the ballade, the love theme, in a more serene and accepting tone.



## LISZT: Sposalizio

*Sposalizio* is the opening composition of the second book of Liszt's *Années de pèlerinage*. This set of three suites was conceived in the late 1830s during a period of Liszt's intense travels through Switzerland and Italy, and was published in the late 1850s.

The second book, *Deuxième année: Italie*, draws its inspiration entirely from Italian art and literature, which had profoundly touched the composer. Liszt wrote, "*The beautiful, in this privileged country, appeared to me in the purest and most sublime forms. The feeling and the thought penetrated me more each day concerning the hidden relationship which unites works of genius. Raffaello and Michelangelo helped me understand better Mozart and Beethoven.*"

Liszt often returned for inspiration to the connection between visual and musical expression; the inspiration for *Sposalizio* is Raffaello's eponymous painting of the Marriage of the Virgin. When the first edition was prepared in 1858, Liszt instructed that a copy of the painting be included next to the score. Like in the painting, the composition (which shows the underlying foundation of sonata principles) depicts two main emotional areas: one more ceremonial, solemn, and open (the temple, the piazza, and the gathering crowd), and one more intimate, vulnerable, and tender (Mary and Joseph in the center of the painting, in the act of unifying their lives).

Liszt uses two motifs in *Sposalizio*: the pentatonic arabesque which opens the piece-- a variation of the cross motif originated in the Gregorian melodies--and a more rhythmically and harmonically defined motif, which appears in double thirds in the opening. Like Mary and Joseph, those two motives first appear simply juxtaposed; they intersect and finally unify in the ecstatic climax of the piece. The motifs return transfigured in the end, in a closing coda which provides, like a blessing of the union, a synthesis and resolution.

## **DIEZ NIETO: Tocala**

*Dedication: To my brother, pianist and pedagogue*

Alfredo Diez Nieto (Havana 1918- 2021) has been a multi-awarded pianist, conductor, composer, researcher and educator considered amongst the fathers of Cuban contemporary classical music. He was also German's older brother, and his first piano teacher before the meeting with Claudio Arrau.

*Tocala* was written in 1943 and dedicated to German, who never performed it but held the manuscript among his personal documents until his death. The score was only published in 2012 in Cuba and I was privileged to give the world premiere of this piece at a concert I held at the University of Central Florida in Orlando in 2016.

I had the chance to work on this composition with the Diez Nieto himself and, in his words, *Tocala* is a piece meant to elevate the pianist to technical and expressive heights of spectacular level. The piece, although a youthful work, contains many of the elements of the musical style Alfredo later helped to bring to its peak, the *Africubanismo*: the use of folkloric elements and rhythmic patterns derived from African and Spanish traditions mixed in Cuba.

Nonetheless, here Alfredo still shows a love for a tonal treatment of melodies and harmonies, and the atmosphere resembles that of Debussy's music and its impressionistic and expressionistic quality.





The Italian- Egyptian pianist Francesca Khalifa was the winner of the Ferrara International Piano Festival in 2014, awarded by renown pianist and musicologist Paul Badura-Skoda. Highlights of recent seasons include concerts as soloist with the Cairo Symphony Orchestra in Egypt, the Orchestra Filarmonica Pozzoli in Seregno, the Amadues Orchestra in New York City, chamber music concerts with Orchestra Sinfonica Junior La Verdi in New York City, solo appearances at Steinway Hall New York City, Harbin Concert Hall (China) and Oficina del Historiador (Cuba).

As soloist, Khalifa had also collaborated with the Guido d'Arezzo Symphony Orchestra (Italy), the Oosterkerk Festival Chamber Orchestra (The Netherlands) and with the MET Opera Orchestra string quartet in the realization of Mozart piano concertos (New York City). The Italian pianist has been a guest artist for master classes and lectures at Pino Torinese Master Classes (IT), the School of Performing Arts of Virginia Tech University, the University of Central Florida School of Music in Orlando, the E. Said Conservatory in Jerusalem.

She had also served as Adjunct Instructor at NYU Steinhardt and as Piano Faculty at the Greenwich House Music School (New York City), as well as Teaching Assistant at USF Tampa, where she also received the President's Trio Fellowship for piano trio.

Khalifa is the founder and Artistic Director of the Beethoven Fest New York City (a project which received fiscal sponsorship from the New York Foundation for the Arts), and is also co-founder and Artistic Director of EXTENSITY Concert Series, a newly launched series (2020) which aims to contribute to the dialogue on inclusion and equity in classical music and that has already received important press attention (wwfm, NPR, Radio KAWL hosted by Sarah Cahill).

Khalifa is a recipient of the City Artist Corps Grant 2021 and resulted top prize winner in the Schio International Piano Competition Alink-Argerich Foundation, the Premio Loreto Lancia International Piano Competition, the N. van Westerhout International Piano Competition.

Khalifa is a graduate of Conservatorio G. Cantelli in Novara and holds a Master degree from the University of the Arts in Utrecht.

Further studies include chamber music with the Altenberg Trio at the Konservatorium Wien in Vienna, Austria, and a post graduate Degree at NYU Steinhardt.

Her mentors are the Cuban pianist and pedagogue German Diez (1924-2014) and pianist Ena Bronstein-Barton, both former pupils of Claudio Arrau. Her research on German Diez is at the base of a documentary *Piano Lessons*, which received the official endorsement of the American Liszt Society and premiered on 15th October 2021 at the University of Michigan during the ALS Annual Festival. The movie, officially selected at the Silicon Beach Film Festival 2021 (US) and the XXXIX Turin Film Festival 2021 (IT), received screenings in New York City, Milan and Miami with a very positive critical acclaim.