

Daniel Barenboim: The big picture

The extraordinary response to Daniel Barenboim's Beethoven sonata cycle reveals that what audiences really want is to immerse themselves in the work of great artists

By Jessica Duchen
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On Sunday afternoon, Daniel Barenboim ceremoniously closed the lid over the keyboard after playing Beethoven's last sonata. It was the end of an eight-concert marathon in which the pianist's complete Beethoven sonatas cycle had provoked unprecedented scenes at the Royal Festival Hall. A sold-out auditorium; chairs for those queuing for returns; a big screen at the ballroom floor to relay the concerts to the overflow; the unanimous standing ovation – an extraordinary mystique sprang up around this event.

"In all my years of concert-going, I've never seen anything like this," admits Marshall Marcus, head of music at the South Bank. Part of the ovation had to be for everything Barenboim represents. Not least, he's the co-founder (with the late Edward Said) of the West-Eastern Divan Orchestra, in which young Israeli and Arab musicians play side by side – an ideal that fits perfectly with Beethoven, a composer strongly associated with philosophies of freedom and brotherhood.

True, the hype went out of control. One article raved about the fact that he played the sonatas from memory, as if this hadn't been standard concert practice among far lesser mortals for a century. And those howling over the fact that the series was not recorded or broadcast can take comfort in Barenboim's recording of all the sonatas made in the late 1960s, which is rather more technically secure.

The whole certainly became blown up into more than the sum of its parts, and in turn, it is part of something bigger: an increasing hunger among audiences for "complete cycles" that offer intensive explorations of a single artist's work – whether it be Beethoven, Shakespeare or Wim Wenders.

Robert van Leer, head of music at the Barbican, suggests that that is because of the sheer scale of the involvement – if you put in extra effort, you reap extra rewards. "There's a lot of evidence," he says, "that the public like events that can take them to a different level of understanding." He points to the enthusiasm for the LSO's recent Sibelius cycle, and their Mahler symphonies conducted by Valery Gergiev: "These cycles can give you a broader view of a

composer's work, an increased depth of insight and a more meaningful experience."

A series devoted to one director is always an attractive prospect in specialist cinemas. The BFI Southbank's programmes currently range from a celebration of Burt Lancaster to a run of films by the Chinese director Jia Zhangke, and a Wenders retrospective.

Directors seem more reliable a prospect than composers, some of whom lend themselves to this treatment better than others. Beethoven is usually top choice, but Bach is also a favourite: John Eliot Gardiner's series of the complete cantatas won a cult following, and audiences always flock to hear Andras Schiff or Angela Hewitt in the keyboard works – Hewitt is currently on a world tour with the complete Well-Tempered Klavier. Shostakovich and Bartok are popular with string quartets, since these cycles offer intense reflections of their composers' troubled lives. But presenting, say, all 104 Haydn symphonies would be a tall order.

Countless pianists, though, see staging a Beethoven cycle as the answer to all their problems – and few are truly capable of pulling it off. "You'd be amazed," says John Gilhooly, director of the Wigmore Hall, "by how often I'm approached by musicians who want to programme complete cycles when they're nowhere near ready to tackle them. More often than not, I have to close the door."

It's obvious why so many performers want their turn. If cycles are popular, ticket sales will be good; and if you programme eight concerts, you can sell tickets for the lot to the same people. With bicentenaries for Mendelssohn, Schumann, Chopin and Liszt coming up, plus a double whammy for Mahler – the 150th anniversary of his birth in 2010 and the centenary of his death in 2011 – we can expect to hear too much of all of them.

But when the total-immersion experience works, it really works – and it can create a hunger that's self-perpetuating, as the Royal Shakespeare Company found in the case of its Complete Works Festival. The project drew together Shakespeare performers from all over the world, often using other languages. The company is now presenting the History plays as a series in its own right.

"It has become a journey that never ends," says the RSC's associate director Deborah Shaw. "Being 'complete' is just the starting point. The insight into the development of Shakespeare as a writer is full of beautiful surprises – as it unfolds, you live through his obsessions with him, and you learn what he wanted to put on stage at different times. It's more than you'd usually get out of a lifetime's theatre-going."

The festival attracted more than 500,000 visitors to Stratford, says Shaw, many booking for a stream of events – "they really bought into coming on the adventure with us." Now its productions have reached all the way from Warwickshire to Bogota and Damascus.

The concept of a series isn't new, but what is different is the fervour of the response. Is the preponderance of pap on television, undemanding musicals in the West End, and celebrity gossip almost everywhere driving people to high culture and something of substance? It's not impossible. Shaw thinks that there's a deeper issue at stake, too. Fluffy culture may be fine for fluffy times – but not for ours. "Michael Boyd, our artistic director, noticed this atmosphere right away, and his first season in 2004 offered a whole series of tragedies," she says. "Some people said, 'You're mad', but it tapped into something. We were a country going to war; it felt like a time for big plays and an examination of the human condition." The proof, she adds, was the sight of youngsters queuing round the block to get tickets for Hamlet. "There's a need to dig deeper, to find that culture is something worth working on. Britain became more political over the past decade, and there are big concerns facing us – wars, climate change, religious questions of the kind we used to think were disappearing."

Schiff, who has performed numerous series of Beethoven's sonatas, as well as Schubert's and quantities of Bach, has spoken of noticing a "congregational" atmosphere at those concerts. Shaw echoes this: "Where else do we all get together in large groups and share this kind of experience? The theatre and the concert hall are among very few places where it can happen. Maybe this is the new church." She's only half-joking.

If we need to make sense out of a senseless world, perhaps we turn instinctively to the arts to absorb wisdom from great creators who seem to have understood life better than we do. At Barenboim's Beethoven, everything came together: the right person in the right place at the right time, playing the right music, to an audience almost desperate to be part of it. Nobody could have left that last recital without feeling that they'd witnessed something resembling a historic moment.