



In Pursuit of 32

*Joel Schoenhals' relentless plan to perform
all 32 of Beethoven's piano sonatas*

by Jeff Mortimer



"I've never bought into that attitude about 'shoulds' in classical music."

"They call it the Mt. Everest of piano playing," says Joel Schoenhals. Considering how many tourists scale that peak these days, there may need to be a better metaphor for

playing all 32 sonatas composed for that instrument by Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827), a brilliant pianist himself and arguably (and you will get arguments) the greatest composer of all time. Schoenhals, EMU professor of piano, is three-quarters of the way to the top of that mountain: he's performed 26 so far through the first six of eight Pease Auditorium concerts that will eventually span four years.

Plenty of pianists have recorded all of the sonatas, and one, Stewart Goodyear, played them all in a single day in Dallas (coincidentally, his so-called "sonatathon" took place the day after Schoenhals' most recent Pease performance last March). But it's hard to overstate how exceptional Schoenhals' project is, and what a rare opportunity it offers to area music lovers.

Hearing a complete traversal performed live is unusual enough, and ordinarily entails a renowned touring virtuoso giving a series of concerts in one location. The last time this happened locally was when Andras Schiff did it in eight concerts

between 2007 and 2009 at Ann Arbor's Hill Auditorium. But for a locally based pianist to assay the task was, until now, unheard of.

"I've never bought into that attitude about 'shoulds' in classical music," says Schoenhals. "I didn't do this because I felt I was 'ready.' I did this because I wanted to understand the music better, I wanted to spend my days with great music, and I felt like, even though these pieces are really famous, the students and community at Eastern needed to hear this. When an idea coalesces for me, the energy comes together. It's kind of an evolutionary process where you get to a place where you realize 'I really want to do this right now.'"

In this case, part of that timing was the birth of his son, Aaron, four years ago. "I started this project right after that, and one reason was I didn't want to be on the road and away from him that much," he says. "When I take a break from working at home, I can see him."

It wasn't part of the original plan, but thanks to the generosity of a handful of classical music fans in the area, Schoenhals performs each program half a dozen times or so prior to its Pease presentation in private homes at what are called "salon concerts," helping him paternally as well as professionally.

"If I have half a dozen events in an academic year, that's a lot," he says. "This is easily twice or three times that much, and it's all here. I've gone through way more music and done more live performing than ever, and I've been able to stay at home more often."

His approach, and priorities, are unconventional, an adjective that fits Schoenhals to a tee. He grew up in Oklahoma in a family that valued music enough that he learned to play but not so much that he was pressured to be a prodigy, and was one of the first graduates of Vanderbilt University's Blair School of Music before earning his advanced degrees at the prestigious Eastman School of Music in Rochester, N.Y.

In his view, Blair's newness when he was there was a boon. It was still too young and small to provide the cocoon that often envelops performing arts students, so "it was integrated into the larger university environment," Schoenhals says. "That was good for the trajectory of my work, to have that early experience in a non-conservatory university environment."

As it turned out, it was also good that "I didn't have a lot of intense classical training pre-college," he says. "I had done a lot of music, but I was in a rock band, I was in a jazz band, played piano in a cocktail lounge, played for community theater. When I got to

university, a lot of that repertoire was very new to me. It made me realize I had to work hard, but it also excited me because there was so much stuff I was discovering for the first time and just wanted to eat up."

His untraditional path is reflected in his teaching. "I think it's served me well in relating to a variety of different kinds of students and their needs and what their career paths are," Schoenhals says. "It's not just about playing Beethoven. Beethoven is intense, hard to beat, but it's still one avenue. That was the beauty of my background. Those experiences have helped me guide people of different backgrounds into different kinds of career paths."

Like other thought leaders in the academy in general and the performing arts in particular, he's had to face the fact that the pedagogy of the past won't prepare students for the careers of the future.

"It's this unreal world that we are all kind of perpetuating," says Schoenhals. "One of the wonderful things about being at Eastern is I don't have that unreality, honestly. I can deal at a high level of music teaching and making but not have to feel like I'm training young people for competitions that don't lead to anything. I have some performance majors, but they generally don't expect that

they're going to have a concert career. They understand they may be teachers, have a church job or a piano studio, do some accompanying, and still have a rich life in music.

"But I also have education majors and music therapy majors. My role is to bring the highest level of musical understanding to them, so that they're using music in their profession at the highest level."

According to James Leonard, a nationally read music critic, reporter and lecturer based in Ann Arbor, the highest level of artistry, technique and passion is what Schoenhals brings to what Leonard deems "the greatest body of piano music ever written by the greatest composer of piano music who ever lived."

"His phrasing is lyrical, all his lines sing, he's got a bell-like tone, and all the pitches ring," Leonard says. "He's got a command of form: he knows where everything is and he knows where it's all leading to. He's got a tremendous technique; nothing I've heard him play is beyond his abilities."

Leonard has not only heard him in concert but also penned reviews of several of his eight recordings (five solo, three with colleagues), all of which have earned wide critical acclaim. He is appropriately awed by the enormity of the task Schoenhals has undertaken. "What he's got to do is not just learn to play but also memorize 10 hours worth of music," Leonard says. "And he not only has to play and memorize it but he's got to understand it. And then he's got to communicate that understanding in his performance."

When he received a Faculty Research Fellowship in 2012 that helped launch the project, "I had performed publicly about eight of the sonatas," says Schoenhals, "which isn't very many. Those you relearn anyway." The preparation process that he's developed keeps him hopping during the six months between Pease presentations.

"If I memorize a movement a week, I'm at three months, and I start the house concerts at month four, so I better get cooking," he says. "Every weekend for two months ahead of the Pease concerts, that's what I'm doing. They've almost turned into not being practice recitals. People are so into it that I feel just as much responsibility to deliver a meaningful concert at the first house as I do at Pease. This has forced me to be more organized, more efficient, more disciplined and to understand the music more deeply and immediately."

The next program at Pease is scheduled for September 18, 2015. Like all the others, it will be recorded and posted both on YouTube and at joelschoenhals.com. For Schoenhals, archiving his performances is another kind of learning experience.

"The great thing about live performance is it's live and it's gone," he says, "and the bad thing about live performance is it's live and it's gone. Doing studio recordings has its own pitfalls, and I was interested in the idea of documenting the live performance, as it is, with all the memory slips, coughs, and finger twisters."

If and when he watches them himself, he'll be revisiting an experience that, for all its challenges, will be hard to let go of.

"I love playing the piano because it engages me mentally, emotionally, physically and spiritually," Schoenhals says, "and I'm engaged on all those levels every single day with some of the greatest music ever written. It's relentless, but the work is always welcome. It's been the most intensely gratifying musical experience and growth opportunity that I've had. I'm going to miss the stimulation of it when it's over, for sure. It's been a real cool ride." ■



"I love playing the piano because it engages me mentally, emotionally, physically, and spiritually, and I'm engaged on all those levels every single day with some of the greatest music ever written. It's relentless, but the work is always welcome. It's been the most intensely gratifying musical experience and growth opportunity that I've had."

photograph by Scott Stewart