Over the next two years, pianist András Schiff will be coming to Ann Arbor, through the auspices of University Musical Society to perform all 32 of Beethoven’s sonatas for piano. To complement the UMS Beethoven Sonata Project, the School of Music, Theatre & Dance will sponsor a two-year series of recitals, lectures, and chamber concerts that put the sonatas into historical context.

Represented by Steven Whiting, on the musicology faculty, and Logan Skelton, chair of the piano department, the series will take on all of Beethoven’s sonatas, whether for piano solo or piano with other instruments. Whiting’s lectures will involve “live examples” performed by students who will then perform the complete sonatas, so that audiences can gain an intensive preparation for Schiff’s recitals. Whiting is also offering a two-semester survey of Beethoven’s sonatas to upper-level undergraduate and graduate students.

“The thirty-two solo sonatas published by Beethoven between 1795 and 1823 represent the culmination of the genre, the bedrock of any pianist’s repertoire, and a perennially engaging challenge to the attentive listener,” Whiting says, “but one’s picture of this music is immeasurably enriched by considering the accompanied sonatas as well (what we call violin sonatas, cello sonatas, piano trios, and so forth). In these works, Beethoven broke the mould nearly from the start, by publishing four-movement piano trios and solo sonatas, as if he were writing keyboard symphonies. Some individual movements are patently orchestral; others invoke the high drama of serious opera or the hijinx of comic opera.”

“Time and again, Beethoven conceived his sonatas in terms of other media and genres,” Whiting continues. “In the process, he imposed difficulties that only the most proficient musicians could master. As a result, genres originally conceived for amateur domestic music-making inevitably shifted to the domain of public performance by professional virtuosos.”

The next program is scheduled for Saturday, December 8, 2:00 p.m., in Britton Recital Hall. Check the School’s Web site for subsequent dates and times: www.music.umich.edu. The lecture-recitals will be timed within the two weeks preceding each of Schiff’s visits to Ann Arbor.

Steven Whiting