

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 21 February 2025  
7.30pm

Fabian Müller piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor Op. 5 (1853)  
*I. Allegro maestoso • II. Andante  
espressivo • III. Scherzo. Allegro energico  
IV. Intermezzo. Andante molto •  
V. Finale. Allegro moderato ma rubato*

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 29 in B flat Op. 106  
'Hammerklavier' (1817-8)  
*I. Allegro • II. Scherzo. Assai vivace •  
III. Adagio sostenuto •  
IV. Largo - Allegro risoluto*



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***Please note that the running order of this concert has changed since these programme notes were written.***

In February 1817, **Beethoven's** A major Sonata Op. 101 appeared in print under the title 'Sonate für das Hammerklavier' [sic]. This was not to indicate any technological advancement in instrument design, but rather a case of national pride: there was a sudden flurry among German-speaking composers to use German-language designations, and thus the 'fortepiano' became the 'Hammerklavier'. Beethoven's next Piano Sonata in B flat major was finished in 1818, and the first Viennese edition once again described it as being for 'Hammerklavier' – hence its nickname.

The Sonata was composed between 1817 and 1818, and was dedicated to Beethoven's long-standing patron, friend and piano pupil Archduke Rudolph. (Of the many works inscribed to Rudolph, the most famous are the Fourth and Fifth Piano Concertos and the *Missa Solemnis*, written for the Archduke's elevation to Archbishop in 1820 and famously completed four years too late for his investiture!). Indeed, the resounding chordal opening of this Sonata was originally intended for a four-part chorus, 'Vivat Rudolphus' to be sung on the Archduke's nameday in 1818. But this music quickly loses its ceremonial correctness in favour of ever more complex, whimsical and wholly unexpected twists and turns. The pianist's hands are pushed to the extremes of the keyboard register, fistfuls of chords eventually giving way to a grand *fugato* – also part of Beethoven's initial idea for his 'Vivat Rudolphus' chorus. The Scherzo delivers a series of slightly crazed curtsies before the music turns dark and churning and increasingly virtuosic, the return of the curtseying seeming even more strange that it did to begin with.

The Adagio is the heart of this Sonata: it is the longest movement and, in its slowness, far more grounded than any other part of the piece. But whether it is grounded on earth or somewhere in outer space is harder to determine. The mournful opening dissolves into the kind of high right-hand filigree that almost sounds like Chopin before Chopin, and the harmonies – let alone the strange twists and turns of that high melody line – still sound truly odd. We are periodically soothed by moments of lullaby-like gentleness, but these never fully resolve and are usually cut short as if mid-sentence. It takes around 20 minutes before Beethoven finally allows us to stay on course for a beautifully whispered resolution. And then comes the Finale, beginning with the same gentle, floating tone of the previous movement and gradually gaining strength and energy until we are eventually catapulted into a faster tempo for a three-part fugue *con alcune licenze* – 'with a few liberties'. What begins as an enthusiastic but occasionally odd contrapuntal texture comes to strain more and more energetically against the limits of the medium. The fugue eventually plays itself out only to be replaced by a calmer kind of counterpoint which then builds, in its turn, to a mighty climax and, ultimately, closes the work.

There is no doubt that **Johannes Brahms** knew the 'Hammerklavier' Sonata as a young man. By the time he arrived on the doorstep of Robert and Clara Schumann in the autumn of 1853, he had already completed his own Piano Sonata no. 1 in C major, soon to be his Opus One – and this begins with a theme that directly combines the opening of the 'Hammerklavier' with the opening of Franz Schubert's *Wanderer-Fantasie* D760. These two composers, along with Liszt, Chopin and the Schumanns, were crucial influences on the young North German, who was himself a ferociously talented pianist. His current work-in-progress at the time of meeting the Schumanns was a Piano Sonata in F minor – his third such work – which he played in its entirety to Robert and Clara *aus dem Kopf* (i.e. 'from memory', without the aid of a written score) on 2 November 1853. Thanks to their enthusiastic advocacy and public support of his talent, Brahms was able to begin publishing his works, and after tinkering with this particular piece for another few months, it was ready for the world by February 1854.

The Sonata is littered with assorted literary and musical allusions – including many references to Brahms's early compositional gods. But everywhere there is contrast: subtle shifts of mood, tempo, tonal areas and rhythmic devices carry the texture from dense fistfuls of chords into quasi-chorales, lyrical melodies, closely imitative counterpoint and, in the Scherzo, a witty reworking of the finale of Mendelssohn's C minor Piano Trio into dazzling triple-time. The Finale's second section, after the initial statement of the Rondo theme, begins with the note sequence 'F-A-E' – a reference to the motto of Brahms's close friend Joseph Joachim, the talented violinist who had engineered his introduction to the Schumanns (*Frei aber einsam* – 'Free but lonely'). And the second movement bears a rather more direct literary reference in the form of a poetic epigram by C. O. Sternau (the pseudonym of Otto Julius Inckermann, a contemporary of the composer):

'Der Abend dämmert, das Mondlicht scheint / **The evening draws in, the moonlight shines,**

Da sind zwei Herzen in Liebe vereint / **Two hearts are united in love**

Und halten sich selig umfassen. / And hold themselves surrounded in bliss.'

Perhaps the most intriguing movement in the Sonata is the fourth – a *Rückblick* ('Looking back', or 'Remembrance'). Over the course of just two pages, Brahms seems to recall shapes and fragments of previous movements without ever referring to them directly. The sparse texture, occasionally angular harmonies and unusual title seem particularly reminiscent of the later works of Robert Schumann. Indeed, Brahms followed this Sonata was with an explicit homage, his *Variationen über ein Thema von Robert Schumann* Op. 9. One wonders what Clara Schumann made of these Variations: she had written her own, on the same theme, the year that Brahms arrived on the family's doorstep.

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