

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 10 February 2023
7.30pm

Farewell Recital

Christian Zacharias piano

Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893) The Seasons Op. 37b (1875-6)

*January (By the fireside) • February (Carnival) •
March (Song of the lark) • April (Snowdrop) •
May (White nights) • June (Barcarolle) •
July (The reaper's song) • August (The harvest) •
September (The hunt) • October (Autumn song) •
November (Troika) • December (Christmas)*

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in D D850 (1825)

*I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto •
III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace •
IV. Rondo. Allegro moderato*

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Christian Zacharias bids farewell to the solo piano recital tonight with one piece that is profoundly close to his heart and 12 that he first performed only recently. For him, there are a few composers, Schubert prime among them, who are 'family', and he has played them most of his life. Then there are others, like Tchaikovsky, of whom he has played little: just one piece before now (the first Piano Concerto), and that at the behest of a dear friend. Yet, like so many of us, Zacharias took the enforced leisure of 2020-1's lockdown as time to try different things and found the miniatures we hear tonight.

50 years separate the two halves of this recital: Schubert wrote his sonata in 1825, **Tchaikovsky** his miniatures in 1875/6. How the musical world changed in that half century! Schubert's single piece lasts almost as long as Tchaikovsky's dozen: he stands near the close of a period in which the sonata was considered the pinnacle of solo piano music. Like his contemporaries, he wrote many, substantial and great examples while Tchaikovsky and others of his time were more inclined to fantastical inventions, genre pieces, virtuoso showpieces and miniatures born of poetical inspirations. *The Seasons* is a fine example, each delightful piece evoking a month of the year. The idea came not from Tchaikovsky but a publisher called Nikolay Bernard who had inherited a monthly music magazine called *Nuvelist* from his father. He dreamt up the notion of this musical calendar and published a piece per month throughout 1876. There is an erroneous story that Tchaikovsky had to be reminded to write each month's piece by his faithful valet. Thanks to the evidence of the state censor's official date stamps - even music as innocent as this had to be scrutinised before publication - we know he composed them in batches.

The surprise is that the Tchaikovsky of 1875 accepted so modest a commission. This was a phenomenally successful time for him: still in his mid-30s, he was celebrated and successful, enjoying a succession of triumphs including the premières of his First Piano Concerto and Third Symphony; *Swan Lake* would follow soon. So, why? His own answer was that he was '...very much in the mood for working on little piano pieces,' though Bernard's generosity was clearly significant too: 'I am most grateful for your courtesy and readiness to pay me such a high fee.'

The titles were all Bernard's, and although Tchaikovsky certainly responded specifically to some (February's *Carnival* is brilliantly festive; September's *Hunt* suitably rumbustious; November's *Troika* eventually takes off with gusto), other pieces are simply delightful music, like songs without words. Perhaps the most famous single movement (June - *Barcarolle*) is neither specifically summery, nor a

barcarolle - but its haunting, introspective melody is among Tchaikovsky's finest.

Over the interval, as we travel back in time those 50 years, it is worth reflecting on how ardently Tchaikovsky admired **Schubert**. Of the 'Rosamunde' quartet he wrote: 'What an inexhaustible wealth of melodic invention we find in this composer whose career was cut short at such an untimely early age! What lavish imagination and sharply delineated originality!' Another time he described Schubert as 'always so full of genuine fire and inspiration.' Above all he lamented that Schubert was so little recognised in his own lifetime - and even in Tchaikovsky's time, many key works still lay undiscovered. In 1825 he was 28 and had enjoyed some success, published a little but not yet found anyone like a Nikolay Bernard eager to pay him high fees. His output that year was mostly song plus various short pieces for piano solo and duo, including two and a half remarkable piano sonatas. They make a striking set. Written between April and May 1825, the first one and a half (D840 - not completed - and D845) are reflective, searching works while tonight's sonata - written in August - is among his most flamboyant and extrovert.

It could be that this sonata captures something of Schubert in holiday mood. He left Vienna in May and spent the whole summer until September walking in the mountains, staying with friends or singing/playing for his supper in the households of music-loving aristocrats. His letters home are a delight, full of humour, warmth and rapturous descriptions of the magnificent landscape in which he found himself. Wherever he went he performed his latest songs, including settings of Walter Scott's *The Lady of the Lake*, and was gratified by their reception. Come August, while staying at the spa of Bad Gastein, south of Salzburg, he wrote this piece.

Throughout the sonata, the tempi are notably upbeat: even the 'slow' movement is marked *con moto* ('with movement'). The opening bars fairly stride into the room and waste no time in propelling the listener through ear-catching changes of direction and key. There is humour: occasionally, he interrupts the flow for a yodelling, bell-like motif that might remind anyone who has walked in those mountains of the bells worn by grazing cows. There is a rustic, folksy accent to the main melody of the closing *Rondo*, and the pervasive mood of ebullient good humour is unshakeable in all but the *Andante con moto*. That slow movement offers a sustained and undisturbed peace. It brings to mind a phrase from Schubert's last letter of the summer to his brother Ferdinand: '...sunk in bliss, we steered our easy course through the lovely day...'

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