

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 10 February 2025
7.30pm

Dénes Várjon piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

7 Fantasien Op. 116 (by 1892)
Capriccio in D minor No. 1
Intermezzo in A minor No. 2
Capriccio in G minor No. 3
Intermezzo in E No. 4
Intermezzo in E minor No. 5
Intermezzo in E No. 6
Capriccio in D minor No. 7

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Dance Suite BB86b (1923)
I. Moderato • II. Allegro molto • III. Allegro vivace
IV. Molto tranquillo • V. Comodo • VI. Finale

Interval

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este from Années de pèlerinage, troisième année S163 (1877-82)

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Fantaisie-impromptu in C sharp minor Op. 66 (c.1834)
Nocturne in D flat Op. 27 No. 2 (1835)
Etude in A flat Op. 25 No. 1 (1835-7)
Etude in F minor Op. 25 No. 2
Mazurka in B flat minor Op. 24 No. 4 (1833)
Fantasy in F minor Op. 49 (1841)



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In the early 1890s **Brahms** returned to solo piano compositions after a lengthy break, publishing four late collections, Op. 116-119, that are markedly different in character from his earlier piano music. Introspective in tone, their elastic phrasing, evasive rhythms and close-knit, integrated thematicism fully justify Schoenberg's label, 'Brahms the Progressive'. Of these late collections, it was the *7 Fantasien*, Op. 16, published in December 1892, that established the prototype: a cycle of mutually compatible character pieces, here comprising four intermezzos and three capriccios. That the collection is framed by two spirited capriccios in the same key (D minor) suggests an overall coherence that is strengthened by other cyclical connections between the seven pieces. The second and third of these 'fantasies' are couched in relatively conventional ternary designs, but the fourth, an Intermezzo in E major, unfolds in a more continuous manner, akin to what Schoenberg called 'developing variation'. It is also notable for the density of its motivic working, permeating the texture in ways that break down conventional distinctions between melody and accompaniment. This fourth piece, the emotional heart of the cycle, is the first of a group of three in E major/minor, of which the central one (the fifth of the cycle) is an Intermezzo in E minor. It is the most iconoclastic and elusive – perhaps also the most prescient in its sense of a suspended temporality – of the cycle.

In 1873, Buda and Pest were united to form modern Budapest, becoming one of the twin capitals of the recently established dual monarchy of Austro-Hungary. Fifty years later, in 1923, the Budapest City Council commissioned several composers to mark the anniversary of this unification, giving birth to **Bartók's** Dance Suite for Orchestra, which he arranged for piano two years later. The work perfectly demonstrates that Bartók's fascination with traditional (demotic) music was never about narrow nationalisms, for its six movements draw on agrarian traditions from diverse ethnic groups, notably Hungarian, Romanian and Arabic. Throughout the Dance Suite, simple folk-inspired fragments of melody are presented against complex harmonic backcloths, with driving asymmetrical rhythms creating a raw energy that is truly infectious. Only in the fourth movement is this energy stilled. Inspired by Arabic traditions, this movement creates an evocative soundscape that alternates fragments of chromatically twisting monody with densely dissonant, layered harmonies. Several movements from the suite are linked by a ritornello theme, and this, together with material from the first movement, is also incorporated into the finale.

Pieces two, three and four of the third book of **Liszt's** *Années de pèlerinage* ('Years of Pilgrimage') were inspired by the Villa d'Este at Tivoli near Rome, where Liszt often stayed. 'Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este' ('The Fountains at the Villa d'Este') is the fourth piece, but unlike the second and third, which have a dark, even disturbing tone, 'Les jeux d'eaux' is all sunshine and light, not least because most of it occupies the higher register of the piano.

Composed in 1877, it renders what George Enescu called *una sonorità aquatica*, setting the compass reading for a cluster of imaginative water scenes by early 20th-century composers, including Ravel, Szymanowski, and Enescu himself. As to the Liszt prototype, a left-hand melody slowly emerges from the introductory *scène d'eau*, unfolding against a backcloth of shimmering figuration in F sharp major, before the tone changes with a middle section in D major, marked *dolcissimo*. At this point in the score, as the deeper registers of the piano are employed for the first time, Liszt added a note from St. John's Gospel 4:14 to invoke 'a well of water springing up into everlasting life'.

Aside from the last, the **Chopin** works in this programme are a cross-section of miniatures written in the mid-1830s. The earliest is the *Fantaisie-impromptu*, Op. 66 of 1834. This was not published during the composer's lifetime, and the 'Fantaisie' part of the title was assigned by Chopin's factotum Julian Fontana, who published the work posthumously. Chopin himself called it an *impromptu*, and its overall design – crudely, an *étude* enclosing a nocturne – served as a model for his three later *impromptus*. From Op. 27 onwards, Chopin published his nocturnes in contrasted pairs rather than in groups of three. The two of Op. 27, composed in 1835, are perfectly complementary, the darkly brooding C sharp minor of the first transformed enharmonically into the consolatory D flat major of the second, whose alternation of an ornamental aria and a sequentially developing theme represents one of the most common nocturne formats. Op. 24, comprising four mazurkas, was completed in the autumn of the same year, and No. 4 was by far the most ambitious mazurka yet attempted by Chopin. It has a complex, multi-sectional form that incorporates a haunting Lydian-mode episode in octaves and a lengthy coda. Around the same time, Chopin began work on a second set of *études*, which was published as Op. 25 in 1837. He himself frequently played the first two as a contrasted pair.

Finally, with the *Fantasy*, Op. 49, composed in 1841, Chopin created one of the undisputed masterpieces of 19th-century pianism. Commentators have often identified a 'late style' in his music from the early 1840s onwards, a time when his composing was undertaken mainly during summers spent at George Sand's manor house in Berry. Op. 49 inaugurated this phase. It belongs to a rather specific genre of *Fantasy* (cultivated *inter alia* by Mozart, Beethoven and Schubert), which might be thought of as a kind of composed-out improvisation, typically opening with a slow introduction and often incorporating a 'slow movement'. In both respects the Chopin *Fantasy* conforms, with the introduction comprising slow marches in F minor and F major respectively, and the 'slow movement' in B major in the manner of a chorale. For the rest, the formal outline is *sui generis*, though unfolding against the background of a sonata-form archetype.

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