

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 10 March 2023
7.30pm

Gradus ad Parnassum

Jean Rondeau harpsichord

Johann Joseph Fux (1660-1741)

Harpeggio

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Piano Sonata in E HXVI/31 (c.1773-4)

I. Moderato • II. Allegretto • III. Finale. Presto

Muzio Clementi (1752-1832)

Prelude in C minor from *Gradus ad Parnassum* Op. 44

(pub. 1817) *transcribed by Jean Rondeau*

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Prelude Op. 39 No. 2 (?1789) *transcribed by*

Jean Rondeau

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Sonata in C K545 (1788)

I. Allegro • II. Andante • III. Rondo. Allegretto

Ludwig van Beethoven

Prelude in F minor WoO. 55 (?1803) *transcribed by*

Jean Rondeau

Muzio Clementi

Adagio sostenuto in F from *Gradus ad Parnassum*

Op. 44 (pub. 1817) *transcribed by Jean Rondeau*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Fantasia in D minor K397 (c.1782-7)

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Gradus ad Parnassum

Mount Parnassus is the home of those most gracious and beloved daughters of Zeus, the Nine Muses, who live to delight the gods with the gentle arts and to inspire humankind to artistic creation. It is (so Hesiod tells us) 'through the Muses and far-shooting Apollo that there are singers and harpers upon the earth'; indeed Orpheus, the most inspired of all singers and harpers, was given his lyre by Apollo on the slopes of Parnassus. Every mortal musician since has only aspired to scale that peak: to tread the *Gradus ad Parnassum* - the steps to Parnassus.

So what could be more fitting than to open with a celebratory sweep of the harp strings: a *Harpeggio*, by way of invocation, from the imagination of **Johann Joseph Fux** (1660-1741), whose textbook *Gradus ad Parnassum* (1725) was the defining work of 18th-century musical tuition? Leopold Mozart used it to tutor his brilliant son Wolfgang. Haydn studied it throughout his youth and, in old age, set his recalcitrant pupil Beethoven exercises from its pages. Beethoven's friend and business partner, the Italian composer and piano manufacturer **Muzio Clementi** (1752-1832), in turn wrote his own *Gradus ad Parnassum* tailored to the newly-fashionable pianoforte: 103 'exercises in the strict free style' published between 1817 and 1826.

For each of these composers, it was understood that as well as being a source of income, the process of teaching was a sacred duty. Fux's example echoed through the music that they composed for pedagogic purposes: a constant reminder that even (perhaps especially) music intended for teaching should be a worthy tribute to the Nine. The modest proportions and ebullient manner of **Haydn's** Piano Sonata in E HXVI/31 (published in 1776) suggests a work intended for skilled amateurs (who would have made quite an impression with the headlong *Finale*). But the stately central *Allegretto* harks back to another world; that of the measured counterpoint and scholarly seriousness that Haydn had imbibed from Fux, and whose discipline never left him.

That discipline, of course, was exactly what the young **Beethoven** found so trying in his kindly old teacher. He'd already had his fair share at the hands of his boyhood tutor Christian Gottlob Neeffe, whose preferred medium of instruction was Bach's *Well-tempered Clavier*. It's certainly tempting to hear Bach's influence, as well as the guiding hand of Fux, in the two keyboard *Preludes* performed today – published in 1803 and 1805 but believed by some to date as far back as 1787-9, when the composer was still a teenager in Bonn, and originally intended (it's been suggested) for organ.

But a solid technical grounding, allied to genius, could be the key to riches in the second half of the 18th Century - as keyboard instruments became an essential middle-class acquisition. 'My kind of music is far too popular for me not to be able to make a living' wrote **Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** from Vienna to his

sceptical father Leopold in June 1781. 'This is a true Clavier-land!'. He was in continual demand as a piano teacher. Piano music was also readily saleable, and after February 1788, when Austria's renewed war with Turkey had pushed Vienna into inflation and recession, that became a priority. Concertgoing had been badly hit.

That might explain the composition of the Piano Sonata (K545) that Mozart inscribed in his personal catalogue on 26 June 1788 as 'a little piano sonata for beginners'. He never published it in his lifetime (it wasn't printed in full - under the title *Sonata Facile* - until 1805), which strengthens suspicions that it was originally conceived as teaching material. The perfections of this exquisite miniature masterpiece (written at the same time as Mozart's final three symphonies) are too familiar, and too self-evident, to require much comment. This is the Mozart whom Artur Schnabel described as 'too easy for children and too difficult for artists'.

Mozart's personal prowess at the keyboard had been the main source of his celebrity in the prosperous days after he moved to Vienna in 1781, and it owed much to his skill as an improviser – the defining accomplishment for any 18th-century virtuoso. The young Muzio Clementi was pitted against Mozart in a keyboard improvisation duel, hosted by Emperor Joseph II of Austria, on Christmas Eve 1781. 'Until then I had never seen anyone perform with such spirit and grace' Clementi recalled. 'I was particularly astonished by an Adagio and some of his extemporized variations'.

Great improvisation, of course, requires the skills of a composer as well as a pianist. 'His improvisations were well-ordered, as if he had had them written out and lying before him' wrote Mozart's friend Maximilian Stadler. 'Some thought that he must have worked everything out and practiced it beforehand'. That would be one explanation for the extraordinary Fantasia in D minor K397, usually dated to 1782, but left incomplete by Mozart at his death in 1791 and published only 1804 (it's thought to have been completed by August Eberhard Müller in 1806).

Mozart often sketched the beginnings of movements, knowing that he'd be able to supply the remainder quickly and easily off the top of his head when the moment came. Sure enough, he breaks off mid-way through the genial allegretto rondo-finale. But it's telling that everything else – the swirling andante prelude (clearly an evocation of a pianist starting to improvise, in the time-honoured *Harpeggio* manner of Orpheus strumming his lyre) and the tragic adagio – is written out in full. A plan for an improvisation, or a record of an actual improvisation that Mozart considered too good to waste? In either case, it's one of the closest records we have of the real-time workings of Mozart's creative imagination – both as composer, and as peerless performer.

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