

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 10 March 2024
7.30pm

Eric Lu piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Capriccio in B flat (Capriccio on the Departure of his Most Beloved Brother) BWV992 (?1704)

Arioso. Adagio. A flattery by the friends to dissuade him from making his journey - A representation of the various mishaps that might befall him in foreign parts - Adagiosissimo. A general lament of the friends - Here, the friends come (for they see that it cannot be otherwise) and take their leave - Aria di Postiglione. Allegro poco - Fuga all' imitazione della cornetta di postiglione

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

4 Impromptus D899 (1827)

Impromptu in C minor • Impromptu in E flat • Impromptu in G flat • Impromptu in A flat

Interval

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

Suite No. 5 in E HWV430 (1720)

I. Prelude • II. Allemande • III. Courante • IV. Air and 5 variations

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Song without Words in E Op. 19b No. 1 (1830)

Song without Words in A Op. 102 No. 5 (1845)

Song without Words in C minor Op. 38 No. 2 (1837)

Song without Words in D Op. 85 No. 4 (1845)

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Piano Sonata No. 7 in B flat Op. 83 (1939-42)

I. Allegro inquieto • II. Andante caloroso • III. Precipitato



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The *Capriccio on the Departure of his Most Beloved Brother* is among the very earliest of **Bach's** works to have become at all well known. It was probably occasioned by the departure of his brother Johann Jacob to join the retinue of Charles XII of Sweden, around 1704. The central metaphor of the piece is the sound of the post horn or *cornetta di postiglione*, symbolising – as it was to do a little over a century later in Beethoven's 'Les Adieux' piano sonata – the departing coach. In the first of the six short sections the brother's friends do their best to dissuade him from making his journey. Following this flattering *Arioso* they attempt to frighten the traveller off by describing the various accidents that might befall him in foreign parts. The potential mishaps are depicted by means of clumsy modulations; and having set off in the key of G minor, the piece comes to rest on the brink of F minor, in which key the friends, seeing their cause is lost, give way to an exaggeratedly chromatic lament.

In the fourth section, the friends are resigned to bidding the brother farewell, and from the music's emphatic chords we learn that they have decided to put a brave face on things. In the last two parts the departing carriage is depicted first in a cheerful *Aria di Postiglione* with falling octave leaps in imitation of the post horn, and then in a fugue which makes use of the same leaps.

Schubert composed his first series of *Impromptus*, D899, in the summer of 1827, between the two halves of his *Winterreise* cycle. The first two *Impromptus* were issued by the Viennese publisher Tobias Haslinger in December of that year, but the remaining pair were not published until 1857, when they appeared in a grossly interventionist edition by Haslinger's son Carl. The first *Impromptu* is a sublimated march, and the second contrasts its smoothly flowing outer sections with an explosive middle section in the minor. A coda attempts to reconcile the two ideas, but since the middle section's material predominates, Schubert allows the piece to come to a violent close with the music still in the minor. The third *Impromptu* is a quintessential song without words (Haslinger Junior took the liberty of transposing it from G flat major into a more amateur-friendly G major); while the last presents a left-hand melody beneath a cascade of arpeggios, and has a middle section of heart-rending expressive intensity.

Like Bach, **Handel** was widely known as a virtuoso performer on the harpsichord and organ, but he didn't seriously turn his attention to composing keyboard pieces until after he had settled in England in 1712. Some seven years later he was sent abroad by the director of the Royal Academy of Music to engage opera singers for London, and during his absence an unauthentic edition of his keyboard pieces appeared in Amsterdam. In November 1720 Handel issued his own edition of eight keyboard suites, owing to the fact that, as he wrote, 'Surreptitious and incorrect

copies of them had got abroad'. His edition used some of the movements from the Amsterdam publication, but added several newly composed pieces. The E major Fifth Suite owes its fame to the last of its four movements: a set of increasingly brilliant variations on a tune that came to be known from the 19th Century onwards as 'The Harmonious Blacksmith'. Handel's variations had begun life as a self-standing 'chaconne' in G major, and the suite's second and third movements are also revisions of earlier pieces, this time written in E major from the outset.

Mendelssohn's *Songs without Words* belong among his most original creations. By no means all of them are song-like, though the very first of them, Op. 19b No. 1, features a *cantabile* melody above a rippling accompaniment shared between the two hands. Mendelssohn's music is characteristically seamless, and in the remaining pieces of Eric Lu's selection the reprise either sets in as part of a continuing harmonic sequence, as in Op. 38 No. 2 and Op. 102 No. 5, or begins before the music has actually returned to the home key, as in Op. 85 No. 4. Also typically for Mendelssohn, the first two of those pieces have an accompaniment that is syncopated throughout, lending the music its sense of agitation.

Prokofiev's Sixth, Seventh and Eighth piano sonatas form a 'War' trilogy. He began writing all three in 1939, sketching out ideas for each new sonata while the preceding one was still being composed. The grimness of the war years seems to have left its mark on the harshly dissonant, percussive style of all three sonatas.

The opening movement of the Seventh Sonata has the tempo marking of *Allegro inquieto*, and the 'unease' of the heading is conveyed in the music's restless character. The main theme, given out in quiet octaves, is punctuated by a repeated-note figure which eventually forms the springboard for a warmer second theme in a markedly slower tempo. A long *accelerando* leads to the movement's tumultuous climax – a long development in which Prokofiev manages to combine both themes, the second of them appearing in the sonorous bass of the piano while the first continues its vertiginous course.

For his slow movement, Prokofiev writes a bitter-sweet waltz whose melody was, perhaps not surprisingly, much admired by Francis Poulenc. But the main weight of the piece is carried by its middle section, where the music once again reaches a climax of overwhelming force, with grinding dissonances punched out, and *fortissimo* scales sweeping across the keyboard. As for the finale, it is a famous driving toccata – a virtuoso *tour de force* which never lets up for an instant. Here is Prokofiev's 'machine music' at its most spectacular.

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