WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 10 October 2024
7.30pm

This concert is supported by the Rubinstein Circle

Steven Osborne piano
Paul Lewis piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)	Allegro in A minor D947 'Lebensstürme' (1828)
	Rondo in A D951 (1828)
Robert Schumann (1810-1856)	6 studies in canonic form Op. 56 (1845) *Study in canonic form in C • Study in canonic form in A minor • Study in canonic form in E • Study in canonic form in A flat • Study in canonic form in B minor • Study in canonic form in B*
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)	Variations on a Theme by Haydn in B flat Op. 56b (1873)
	Interval
Franz Schubert	Sonata in C D812 'Grand Duo' (1824) *I. Allegro moderato • II. Andante • III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace - Trio • IV. Finale. Allegro vivace*

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Time and the tides of history have not been kind to the piano duet. In the 19th and early 20th centuries, almost every middle and upper-class household in western Europe (and beyond, into the far outposts of empires) possessed a piano, intended for the entertainment and edification of friends and family. Orchestral concerts were expensive and uncommon – much easier (and cheaper, and more fun!) to buy duet reductions and play them at home. And quite aside from transcriptions, there were many original compositions written for a pair of pianists to learn and enjoy together.

By the mid-1820s, **Schubert** had gained considerable acclaim for his piano duet dances, marches, and variation sets. In the spring and summer of 1828, his final year, he composed three substantial pieces which push four hands above and beyond the playful models of polonaise or marche militaire: a mighty *Fantasie in F minor*, a fiery *Allegro in A minor*, and an easy-going *Rondo in A*. The *Allegro* D947 begins with a striking opening theme that borders on the operatic, the music eventually retreating into a hushed second subject. As the piece unfurls, Schubert throws us through wildly varying moods and dynamics, the music sliding across tonalites in whispered phrases and galloping passagework. No manuscript survives of this piece, only a copy headed simply 'Duo': it is to the business-savvy publisher Anton Diabelli that we owe the title *Lebensstürme*, when he issued the work in 1840.

The *Rondo* D951 may have been written to commission for another Viennese publisher, Domenico Artaria. It features a delightfully lyrical, warmly-accompanied rondo melody (several commentators have noted its similarity with the finale of Beethoven's E minor Piano Sonata Op. 90) – though this theme is put through its paces, with occasional bravura decorations and magically delicate 'scoring' for four hands. The *Rondo* was published in December 1828, a month after Schubert's death, and was counted by the young Robert Schumann as 'among his first compositions'.

Schumann's own contributions to four-hand piano music are relatively few. The *6 Stücke in canonischer Form* date from 1845, a year in which he worked intensively on the study and composition of contrapuntal music: reading treatises; constructing fugues on the name B-A-C-H; contemplating his friend Felix Mendelssohn's considerable skill in this mode of writing. In April 1845, Schumann rented a pedal keyboard from a local musician which could be attached to his grand piano to allow him to practise his organ technique at home. This, in turn, inspired him to write for his 'Pedalflügel', and Schumann excitedly predicted that pedal-piano music could become a new domestic format. When the *6 studies* were published, he therefore labelled them 'Book One' – but he never continued the sequence.

The description of these pieces as 'studies' gives something of a false impression. Yes, Schumann plays impressive contrapuntal tricks with canons. But this is seldom the musical focus for a listener, since the counterpoint is cleverly inconspicuous and what we hear is a succession of character pieces: a Bachian prelude; a swaying siciliano; two singing andantes; a sprightly scherzo; and a stately chorale to close the set.

Brahms's *Variations* on the 'St Antoni' Chorale were composed in the summer of 1873, a few years before he finally completed his First Symphony. He discovered the theme thanks to Carl Ferdinand Pohl, author of the first major Haydn biography: it appears in a *Divertimento in B flat* which is now considered spurious. But whatever the Chorale's authorship, it clearly fired Brahms's imagination. The gracefully lilting theme is followed by eight variations, some showcasing Brahms's love of gently knotty cross-rhythms; others stormy or delicate, several cheerfully virtuosic. The whole ends with a spectacular passacaglia, the subject used as the basis of a circling bass line and a kaleidoscope of other contrapuntal games to bring the work to a joyful close.

Brahms split the opus number of these *Variations* into two: Op. 56a is assigned to an orchestral realisation, and Op. 56b belongs to the two pianos score. Significantly, Brahms wrote to his publisher that he did not want the piano version to be seen 'only' as an arrangement – this is a brilliantly idiomatic work for twenty fingers, carefully crafted to be every bit as legitimate as its larger instrumental manifestation.

The same is true of Schubert's Sonata D812 (it is once again to Diabelli that we owe the later title of 'Grand Duo'), which Robert Schumann and others believed to be the short score of an unrealised symphony. In 1824, Schubert travelled to Zseliz (now Želiezovce in Slovakia) to spend the summer teaching Princesses Karoline and Marie von Esterházy. Sometimes happy, sometimes miserable and bored, he reported to his brother Ferdinand that he had composed 'a big sonata and variations on an original theme for piano duet' during his time in the countryside. There is no evidence that Schubert intended the work to belong anywhere other than at the keyboard – but Schumann's misinterpretation is understandable given the orchestral nature of Schubert's writing. The score is full of daring experimental harmonic shifts and an astonishing array of textures: pianistic 'orchestration' that plays with registers and density of writing to give us a sense of far more than two people playing. A questing, dramatic *Allegro*, spacious in its proportions, is followed by an *Andante* that alternates lyrical intimacy with a more overtly rhetorical presentation of its themes, as if speaking out to the world only to turn inwards again and muse in private: a perfect encapsulation of the range of modes available to piano duettists. A rumbustious *Scherzo* full of stamping accents and off-beats comes next – and then a gripping *Finale* that is stopped repeatedly in its tracks between ever-more breathless dashing and dancing towards the finishing line.