

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 11 May 2023
7.30pm

Alexander Gavrylyuk piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Sonata No. 14 in C sharp minor Op. 27 No. 2 'Moonlight' (1801)

I. Adagio sostenuto • II. Allegretto • III. Presto agitato

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Kinderszenen Op. 15 (1838)

*Von fremden Ländern und Menschen •
Curiose Geschichte • Hasche-Mann • Bittendes Kind •
Glückes genug • Wichtige Begebenheit • Träumerei •
Am Camin • Ritter vom Steckenpferd • Fast zu ernst •
Fürchtenmachen • Kind im Einschlummern •
Der Dichter spricht*

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Tarantella from *Venezia e Napoli* S162 (1859)

Interval

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Nocturne in D flat Op. 27 No. 2 (1835)

Polonaise in A Op. 40 No. 1 'Militaire' (1838)

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Intermezzo in B flat minor Op. 117 No. 2 (1892)

Intermezzo in C sharp minor Op. 117 No. 3 (1892)

Franz Liszt

Danse macabre S555 (1876) *based on Camille Saint-Saëns*

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Beethoven composed this 'sonata quasi una fantasia' in 1802. It's tempting to link its profound depression and bitter fury with his encroaching deafness – even to see the middle movement as a portrait of the woman he had to give up all hope of marrying: his pupil, Julie Guicciardi. 1802 was the year of the open letter to the world he wrote staying at the village of Heiligenstadt – the 'Heiligenstadt Testament' – in which he laments the irony that he, of all people, who most needed his hearing, was losing it. With hindsight we may speculate that had Beethoven been able to continue his life as a virtuoso, he may not have become the composer he did become – but that would have been scant consolation to him in 1802.

The piece acquired its nickname because Ludwig Rellstab, a music critic and the poet of some of Schubert's very last songs, said (according to a later report) that the first movement reminded him of Lake Lucerne in the moonlight. This location falls a little oddly on my ears, but I suppose we all have our different moonlit places. Luckily, we no longer notice the nickname, and so, having become effectively meaningless, it has some useful function, saving us from referring only to a pedestrian 'Sonata No. 14'. One of its great points of interest is its reinforcement of the fact that Beethoven was the most imaginative user of the sustaining pedal. His earlier sonatas contain the instruction 'with the knee' – puzzling until you recall that the dampers were raised by a knee-lever under the keyboard. By 1802, some pianos had moved on to pedals, and so Beethoven used more general instructions: *con sordini* for 'dampers on' (no pedal, in modern terms) and *senza sordini* for 'dampers off' (foot down, or knee up, according to the mechanism).

Schumann was a prolific father – eight children between 1841 and 1854. How his wife, Clara, was able to maintain her position as a leading piano virtuoso is not the least of the mysteries surrounding the Schumanns. All this, however, was in the future when he composed his *Childhood Scenes* in February 1838. Clara, whom he was unsuccessfully courting, had been taken away on a seven-month concert tour by her disapproving father. Perhaps the *Scenes* are dreams of happiness to come: alas, it was to be short-lived.

About the time Schumann was considering his 'Dream Children', as Charles Lamb called such figments in one of his collection of *Essays of Elia*, **Liszt** was composing pieces recalling his travels to Venice and Naples with his mistress, Marie d'Agoult. *Tarantelles napolitaines* was based on a popular song by Guillaume Louis Cottrau; in the late 1850s he revised the piece, improving the melody and adding

others, enriching the figuration and making it still more virtuosic. In this version it was published in 1861 as a supplement to the second volume of his *Années de Pèlerinage*.

By 1835, the year he composed the D flat Nocturne, **Chopin** had been living in Paris for four years. He had discovered that he could not compete with flashy pianists like Henri Herz or Sigismund Thalberg, but found that his Romantic good looks, refined playing and interesting backstory – having fled from a conquered Poland – gave him the entrée to the smartest drawing-rooms. He performed in public rarely, but he charged the earth for a piano lesson. The *Musical World* described him as 'a species of musical Wordsworth, inasmuch as he scorns popularity and writes entirely up to his own standard of excellence'. 1835 was the year he met Mendelssohn, Robert Schumann and Clara (still Clara Wieck at this point, and according to Chopin 'the only woman in Germany who can play my music'). Chopin played the 'Military' Polonaise in one of his rare concerts, in the Salle Pleyel on 26 April 1841. He had hoped that the concert would prove impossible to promote, but three-quarters of the tickets were sold before it was even announced.

The precise nature of **Brahms's** relationship with the Schumanns is another mystery, but by the time these pieces of his were premiered, in London in 1893, Clara's relationship with Brahms had long settled into Advising Muse. Brahms described these late piano pieces as 'lullabies to my sorrows'. Technically, they are remarkable for the way in which Brahms disguises his motivic obsessions as melodies. The opening number of Op. 117, the famous 'setting' of a Scots folk lullaby, is a beautiful soothing melody. Yet it merely expresses the shape underlying many late Brahms pieces: a leap upward of a fourth, followed by a sliding descent – the very picture of still-aspiring age. It's the shape that underlies the middle section of Op. 118 No. 2, the opening of the D minor Violin Sonata, and the opening of the F major Cello Sonata. Such motivic obsessions are found throughout Brahms's last score or so of piano pieces.

Saint-Saëns originally composed his *Danse macabre* in 1872, as a song setting a poem based on a play – a Hallowe'en dance of death. In 1874 he re-cast it for orchestra. Shortly after, Liszt transcribed it for solo piano – though some would say that for its full diabolical dose of virtuosity, it had to wait for Vladimir Horowitz's further arrangement, which he recorded in 1928.

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