

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 11 October 2021 7.30pm

Alexander Ullman piano

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Piano Sonata in G HXVI/40 (1784)
I. Allegretto innocente • II. Presto

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 21 in C Op. 53 'Waldstein' (1803-4)
*I. Allegro con brio • II. Introduzione. Adagio molto •
III. Rondo. Allegretto moderato - Prestissimo*

Interval

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Nuages gris S199 (1881)

Piano Sonata in B minor S178 (1849-53)
*Lento assai - Allegro energico - Grandioso - Cantando espressivo -
Pesante/Recitativo - Andante sostenuto - Quasi Adagio -
Allegro energico - Più mosso - Cantando espressivo -
Stretta quasi Presto/Presto - Prestissimo - Andante sostenuto -
Allegro moderato - Lento assai*

Welcome back to Wigmore Hall

We are grateful to our Friends and donors for their generosity as we rebuild a full series of concerts in 2021/22 and reinforce our efforts to reach audiences everywhere through our broadcasts. To help us present inspirational concerts and support our community of artists, please make a donation by visiting our website:

[Wigmore-hall.org.uk/donate](https://www.wigmore-hall.org.uk/donate). Every gift is making a difference. Thank you.

Wigmore Hall is a no smoking venue. No recording or photographic equipment may be taken into the auditorium nor used in any other part of the Hall without the prior written permission of the management.

In accordance with the requirements of City of Westminster persons shall not be permitted to stand or sit in any of the gangways intersecting the seating, or to sit in any other gangways. If standing is permitted in the gangways at the sides and rear of the seating, it shall be limited to the number indicated in the notices exhibited in those positions.

Disabled Access and Facilities - full details from 020 7935 2141.

Wigmore Hall is equipped with a 'Loop' to help hearing aid users receive clear sound without background noise. Patrons can use this facility by switching hearing aids to 'T'.



Please ensure that watch alarms, mobile phones and any other electrical devices which can become audible are switched off. Phones on a vibrate setting can still be heard, please switch off.

The Wigmore Hall Trust Registered Charity No. 1024838
36 Wigmore Street, London W1U 2BP • [Wigmore-hall.org.uk](https://www.wigmore-hall.org.uk) • John Gilhooly Director

Wigmore Hall Royal Patron HRH The Duke of Kent, KG

Honorary Patrons Aubrey Adams OBE; André and Rosalie Hoffmann; Louise Kaye; Kohn Foundation; Mr and Mrs Paul Morgan



Supported using public funding by
ARTS COUNCIL ENGLAND



Haydn seems to have taken a sincere delight in writing for young and amateur performers. In 1784 he published three short piano sonatas dedicated to one of the younger members of the aristocratic household in which he worked for most of his adult life: the 16-year old Princess Marie Hermenegild Esterházy. It's fair to assume that these concise, playful works – with their occasional, startling surges of emotion – are closely tailored to the young Princess's piano-playing abilities and personal tastes.

This sonata in G major comprises just two movements – a set of variations, in which a graceful, lilting melody ('*innocente*') experiences ever more extravagant and unpredictable flights of fancy; and a bustling *Presto* with a surprisingly disruptive sense of humour. An English critic commented that the first movement made its performer seem 'like an accomplished, tasteful singer' – but the finale's elegant mayhem suggests that Haydn knew the Princess rather better than that.

'Dear **Beethoven!** You go to realise a long-desired wish [...] By diligent study, receive the spirit of Mozart from the hands of Haydn.' That, at any rate, was the plan. On 29 October 1792, Ferdinand, Count von Waldstein, sent this message to his 22-year-old protégé Beethoven as the composer set out from Bonn for Vienna. Waldstein was the younger son of a great Bohemian noble family, and as a diplomat at the court of Bonn, he was an early supporter of Beethoven – whose gratitude endured even after Waldstein's financial expenditure on the war against Napoleon rendered him all but insolvent.

Possibly that idealism is the reason why, of all the works that Beethoven dedicated to his friend and patron, the Piano Sonata in C Op. 53 is the one that is still known by his name. Beethoven completed it in the summer of 1804, and originally conceived it in three expansive movements (he removed the second and published it as *Andante favori*). This came shortly after Beethoven had completed (and renamed) his 'Eroica' symphony; like the symphony, the sonata innovates on a monumental scale, and not merely in its sonic brilliance and formal breadth.

In October 1803 Beethoven had taken delivery of a new piano from Erard of Paris, an up-to-the-minute instrument with an intensely focused tone and an extended range. The 'Waldstein' Sonata uses its potential to the full – with main themes that seem to emerge, bristling with possibility, from the very texture and sonority of the instrument. And in place of a slow movement comes a hushed, searching *Introduzione* charged with potential energy. Message and medium have become one; no wonder Beethoven's early biographer Wilhelm von Lenz described this sonata as 'a heroic symphony for the piano'.

Nuages gris, Trübe Wolken, Szürke felhők, even Gloomy Clouds... the quantity of names by which this next piece is

known gives some idea of the imaginations that it has inspired, and the artists – from Debussy to Kubrick – who have heard, in three minutes of piano music, a composer holding open the door to unimagined possibilities. It comprises just 48 bars, written down in Weimar on 24 August 1881 (perhaps one of those late summer days in which the clouds press low and close). **Liszt** is too civilised to leave that ambiguous, unharmonised opening phrase floating indefinitely. But he doesn't need to: these lowering sonic clouds contain, as yet unbroken, the storms and consolations of a century to come.

'I know that I am compromising myself by speaking up for Liszt,' wrote Alfred Brendel, as recently as 1961. The perception of Liszt as a keyboard showman still persists; in his lifetime, it coloured reactions to almost everything he touched. Clara Wieck wrote to her future husband Robert Schumann that 'after hearing and seeing Liszt, I feel like a student'. Yet when she received the score to Liszt's B minor Sonata on 25 May 1854, she confessed to her diary (after the young Brahms had played it to her) that it was 'sheer racket - not a single healthy idea, everything confused'. Liszt had laboured over the Sonata between 1849 and February 1853, and had dedicated it to Robert Schumann.

The Sonata is unquestionably the work of a virtuoso. Equally unquestionably, it has an emotional narrative; the tempestuous grandeur of its climaxes, as well as its passages of lyrical sweetness, all seem to demand a poetic explanation. But Liszt never supplied any programme – though programmes were not something of which the inventor of the symphonic poem (*Les préludes* was premièred in February 1854) fought shy. And although he could play the Sonata from memory, he always performed it from the written manuscript.

Liszt's point was clear: this was a composition, not an improvisation – and however brilliant its writing, however seamless its thematic and formal processes, and however unprecedented its 30-minute symphonic arc of music, from sombre opening to the final, radiant transfiguration of the opening motif – he expected it to be heard on its own terms. The B minor Sonata is a peak from which the whole of Romantic piano music, before and after, can be surveyed: but its creator knew (if his contemporaries didn't), that even a great pianist cannot do it justice unless they're a supreme artist as well. Brendel again, in 1986: 'Anyone who plays Liszt without nobility passes sentence on himself'.

© Richard Bratby 2021

Reproduction and distribution is strictly prohibited.