

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 11 October 2022
7.30pm

Beatrice Rana piano

Aleksandr Skryabin (1872-1915)

Prelude in B flat minor Op. 11 No. 16 (1896)

Prelude in E flat minor Op. 16 No. 4 (1894-5)

Prelude in B Op. 11 No. 11 (1896)

Prelude in G sharp minor Op. 16 No. 2 (1894-5)

Etude in C sharp minor Op. 42 No. 5 (1903)

Etude in C sharp minor Op. 2 No. 1 (1886-9)

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor Op. 35 'Funeral March' (1837-9)

*I. Grave - Doppio movimento • II. Scherzo •
III. Marche funèbre • IV. Finale. Presto*

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 29 in B flat Op. 106 'Hammerklavier' (1817-8)

*I. Allegro • II. Scherzo. Assai vivace •
III. Adagio sostenuto • IV. Largo - Allegro risoluto*

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Skryabin's life, like Wagner's, was dedicated to the realization of a mighty opus, a *Gesamtkunstwerk*: the 'Mysterium'. Wagner managed to finish his: Skryabin only got as far as purchasing the land for his equivalent of Bayreuth; a plot in Darjeeling, India being the home of mysticism in Skryabin's mind. It all came to nothing after his death from sepsis.

As a youngster, Skryabin used to take the work of Chopin to bed with him – literally. He began composing by transforming familiar Chopin genres – Mazurkas, Nocturnes, Etudes and Preludes. The Mazurkas and Nocturnes are early works, but Etudes and Preludes continued throughout Skryabin's life. In this, he reflects a more general situation. Few Mazurkas and Nocturnes are written nowadays, but the Etude stretches from Cramer to Ligeti; the Prelude from Bach via Debussy and Gershwin to all the composers today who want to pay homage to Chopin's Op. 28. The universality of these genres must derive from something beyond passing style. The point of an Etude is clear enough – they explore technicalities. Preludes are more complex. Bach's Preludes are nearly always followed by the words 'and Fugue', which makes perfect sense of the word 'prelude'. (The Chorale Preludes, in theory, were followed by a Chorale.) Chopin, who didn't write fugues, kept just the 'in every key' aspect of Bach's 48 for his book of Preludes. Not everyone noticed that, but it does explain why he called them 'preludes'. Once pianists had developed a habit of playing just a few favourite Chopin Preludes, other composers were happy to jump aboard the Prelude bandwagon more indiscriminately. In the end, a Prelude could be just any short piece. Some are indistinguishable from Etudes, and some could quite easily be called something else – a Poem, perhaps. But, crucially, not the whole bookful. A set of Preludes can be in as many different styles as you like, and composers who didn't want to limit their stylistic options seized the opportunity.

Chopin's B flat minor sonata had its origin in just its most famous movement, the 'Funeral March', which was written in 1837, and which was performed at Chopin's own funeral. (It's one of Chopin's few mood-inducing titles, the other being the *Berceuse*.) The remaining three movements followed two years later, Chopin clearly wanting to big-up what must obviously have been a piece with a future, rather as Charles Dibdin wrote a whole opera as a vehicle for his existing hit, 'The Jolly Young Waterman'. The most remarkable part of Chopin's frame is the movement that comes after we've heard the kernel of the work. If you know it, no words are needed, and if you don't, any words at all would only spoil it. It's a remarkable solution to the problem of not turning the funeral march into just a slow movement.

The '*Hammerklavier*' was written during **Beethoven's** later stage of conscious German-ness. Tempo indications and performance instructions

were provided in German as well as Italian, and the pianoforte was called the 'hammer-keyboard'. It's not the only sonata Beethoven described as being for the *hammerklavier* – there's Op. 101 as well – but the name has stuck only on this summit of pianistic peril.

Rather like the '*Eroica*', 15 years earlier, the sonata vastly expands the customary time-scales. The first movement needs to be enormous, once Beethoven has established that G major (G major!) is going to be his secondary key – it's a long way home from G major. Beethoven rushes to embrace enormity with enthusiasm, hand-crossing, syncopating, exploring all the contrapuntal possibilities, for over four hundred bars. The *Scherzo* is much briefer (it's in the usual triple-time) partly because of its two prestos and one prestissimo. The *Adagio* restores length and profundity – Donald Tovey called its first two notes 'one of the profoundest thoughts in all music', and that's especially true the first time you hear the piece, before you know what's coming. The use of the 'soft pedal' is very specifically marked. In Beethoven's time, this pedal could move the keyboard sideways far enough for the hammer to play only one of the three strings allotted to each note – modern pianos can only get down to two. At one point, after marking *una corda* ('one string'), Beethoven writes 'bit by bit two and then all the strings'. The 'bit by bit' is important, because on early pianos, as the hammer slides gently across the three strings, one can hear not only one, two and finally three strings coming into play, but also the fascinating sound of each new string just being brushed by the leading edge of the hammer before being struck fully. It's one of those effects that on a modern piano must be done by beauty of touch alone. Both Mendelssohn and Brahms borrowed the idea. supremely interesting is the fact that the last chord here, the quietest moment – it's marked *ppp* – is to be played on all three strings. The preceding section, slightly louder at *pp*, has been played on one string. Indirect proof that the *una corda* pedal is all about tone, not dynamic.

The *Largo* is so slow that Beethoven himself added the instruction to count four semiquavers throughout. It's succeeded by a colossal fugue, in three parts ('with some license' adds Beethoven). All the familiarly brilliant contrapuntal devices of slower, faster, upside down, are supplemented by a new invention – starting themes on a different beat of the bar, a new technical resource very rarely used since. Hubert Parry particularly admired the way that Beethoven was able to bring into the tonally rather staid form of fugue the sort of kaleidoscopic key-structures found in the first movements of his sonatas. 'Ideally balanced', said the admiring Parry. The world had to wait for some time before it could hear what Beethoven had done. The sonata was first performed by Liszt, in Paris in 1836.

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