

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 12 December 2023
7.30pm

Mariam Batsashvili piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Sonata No. 23 in F minor Op. 57 'Appassionata' (1804-5)
*I. Allegro assai • II. Andante con moto •
III. Allegro ma non troppo - Presto*

Franz Liszt (1811-1886) Vallée d'Obermann from *Années de pèlerinage, première
année, Suisse* S160 (1848-55)

Interval

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) Piano Sonata in D K576 (1789)
I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegretto

Franz Liszt Bénédiction de Dieu dans la solitude S173 No. 3 (1848-53)
Hungarian Rhapsody No. 2 in C sharp minor S244

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The programme has changed slightly since these programme notes were written.

The title 'Appassionata' was bestowed by **Beethoven's** publisher, but is peculiarly appropriate – few of Beethoven's works keep up their sense of tragedy to the very end, preferring triumph or serene resignation. This work's emotional struggle is intensified by Beethoven's sudden idea, some way into sketching the work, of turning the first movement's theme to the major key – an idea he was to revisit in the first movement of the Ninth Symphony, where the major chord at the recapitulation merely makes everything even more terrifying. The slow movement owes its stillness to its sublime constant harking-back to the chord of D flat as it moves through its variations. The first published composition of the adult Beethoven, the *Righini Variations*, already shows him a master of variation form. 15 more sets followed before the set of 32 in his favourite key, C minor, composed in 1806. Op. 76 followed in 1809. Besides such independent sets, variation was an important part of Beethoven's sonata and symphony style. The slow movements of the 'Archduke' Trio, the Violin Concerto, the Ninth Symphony; the A flat Sonata Op. 26 (following Mozart by beginning with the variations), the C minor Sonata Op. 111, several String Quartets; and, back in the Ninth Symphony, the mighty finale itself – all present wonderful sets of variations. In tonight's sonata, Beethoven keeps us off-balance to the very end of the stormy finale by suddenly introducing a completely new theme. How much more effective it is to interrupt a *moto perpetuo* than simply to keep it going.

The music critic Johann Friedrich Rochlitz witnessed a great occasion during **Mozart's** visit to Leipzig in 1789. 'The St Thomas Choir surprised Mozart with the performance of the double-chorus motet *Singet dem Herrn*. Mozart knew this master more by hearsay than by his works, which had become quite rare; at least his motets, which had never been printed, were completely unknown to him. Hardly had the choir sung a few bars when Mozart sat up, startled; a few bars more and he called out: "What is this?" And now his whole soul seemed to be in his ears. When the singing was finished he cried out, full of joy: "Now, there is something one can learn from!" Tonight's sonata, with its sparkling counterpoint and crystal-clear two-part writing, is one of the results of that epiphany.

'Suddenly there appeared the most extraordinary person I had ever seen. Tall, extremely thin, pale, with large, sea-green eyes flashing with sudden brilliance like waves glinting in the sun, strong features shot through with suffering, hesitant in his movements and seeming to glide rather than walk, seemingly preoccupied yet at the same time restless, like a ghost waiting for the clock to strike and summon him back to the shades.' Thus wrote the Countess Marie d'Agoult, who bore **Liszt's** three children. George Eliot was just as

impressed, later on, in a different way. She wrote: 'Liszt is the first really inspired man I ever saw. His face might serve as a model for a St John in its sweetness when he is in repose, but seated at the piano he is as grand as one of Michelangelo's prophets. He is a glorious creature in every way – a bright genius, with a tender, loving nature, and a face in which this combination is perfectly expressed.'

Having established himself as the greatest pianist the world was ever likely to see, Liszt retired from solo performance at the age of 36, and set about mastering the orchestra. He invented sectional rehearsals, he introduced new signs – A & R – for something rather less than an *accelerando* or a *ritardando*. He was stern with other conductors: 'It is my wish that the mechanical, bar by bar, up and down beating of time, which obtains in so many places, should as far as possible be discarded, and that only the periodic divisions, with the prominence of certain accentuation and the rounding off of melodic and rhythmical nuances should alone be regarded as indispensable.' That this remarkable man's music is not constantly in our ears is partly explained by a remark from his grandson, Siegfried Wagner (the Siegfried of the *Idyll* rather than the *Ring*): 'A man who is a musician and nothing but a musician can establish no relationship to Liszt's works. One has to bring to them a certain poetic empathy.'

Liszt began his *Harmonies poétiques et religieuses* around 1834. They were published in 1853, with a suitably poetic preface by Lamartine, which specifically recommends solitude, for meditative souls, as a means of reaching ideas of the infinite. Liszt's spiritual bent took a religious turn later in his life, when he took minor orders and became 'the Abbé Liszt'. His three volumes of *Années de pèlerinage* are a musical autobiography of his tours (he of course preferred the more spiritual word, 'pilgrimage') around Europe. Their contents are often revisions of the *Album d'un voyageur*, which he published in 1842.

A terrible Danube flood in 1840 took Liszt back to his Hungarian homeland (having raised money in Vienna for charitable relief) for the first time since he left it in 1823. He became captivated by the music of Hungarian Romani, and left detailed descriptions of how he found it. (Later Hungarian folklorists, like Bartók, drew more careful distinctions between Hungarian Romani music and other sorts of Hungarian music.) Liszt makes Vaughan Williams look like a dilettante. He longed to incorporate everything he heard into a single massive work: 'a National Epic', he wrote, 'and the strange tongue in which its strains would be delivered would be no stranger than everything else done by the people from whom it emanated.'

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