

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 12 January 2023
7.30pm

Samson Tsoy piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

4 Klavierstücke Op. 119 (1893)
Intermezzo in B minor
Intermezzo in E minor
Intermezzo in C
Rhapsody in E flat

Variations and Fugue on a Theme of Handel Op. 24 (1861)

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in B flat D960 (1828)
I. Molto moderato
II. Andante sostenuto
III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace con delicatezza – Trio
IV. Allegro ma non troppo

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Brahms might have become a truly great pianist, had he not discovered that he could actually earn his living from composing alone. Late in his career, when he had more or less stopped practising, the pianist Fanny Davies wrote: 'When Brahms played, one knew exactly what he intended to convey to his listeners: aspiration, wild fantastic flights, majestic calm, deep tenderness without sentimentality, delicate, wayward humour, sincerity, noble passion'.

It is no surprise, then, to find the piano at the heart of Brahms's music. In 1861 he moved out of his parents' house in Hamburg into a flat of his own, taking with him the Graf piano that had belonged to Robert Schumann. Robert's widow Clara, with whom Brahms had a complex but long-lived musical relationship, had given the piano to Brahms. She was the dedicatee of the first big solo piece written in his own flat, the Variations on a Theme of Handel. A year later, Brahms played the piece himself in his first solo performance in Vienna – even Wagner had to admit how much could still be done in the 'old forms'. Critics as diverse as Schoenberg and Tovey have put the Handel variations on the same pinnacle as Beethoven's 'Diabelli' variations. 'Brahms stands alone in his grip of his theme', says Tovey.

That grip was the result of long thought. In 1856, the 23-year-old Brahms wrote to his friend, the violinist and composer Joseph Joachim:

'Variations should surely be kept stricter and purer. Composers used to keep strictly to the bass of their theme – to their real theme. But more recent composers (we two!) wallow more in the theme, sticking anxiously to the melody...'

Years later, in a letter to another friend:

'If I vary the melody, I can't easily be more than ingenious or attractive. But through the bass, I find truly new things. I discover new melodies in it...'

Amongst the discoveries of these 25 variations are a Handelian *siciliano* and a pair of Hungarian dances (*lassan-friska*), while the fugue itself is derived from the theme, but wickedly starts on the wrong foot as it were, a device that gives it colossal impetus. And everywhere we find new extremes of piano technique. No wonder Brahms chose it to startle Vienna.

The last three sets of piano pieces, Opp. 117, 118 and 119, are linked by a certain personal intimacy, almost a secrecy of meaning. Brahms called the three pieces of Op. 117 'lullabies to my sorrows', and of Op. 119 No. 1 he wrote: 'Every note must sound like a *ritardando*, as if one wished to suck melancholy out of every single note, and with delight and pleasure out of the teeming dissonances.' The extreme motivic concentration of his technique at this stage is simply summed up by the fact that each of the six numbers of Op. 118 begins with a permutation of the same

intervals – a tone and a semitone, forming together a minor third. The pianist Ilona Eibenschütz was the first person to hear Brahms play Op. 119. She wrote: 'He played as if he were just improvising, with heart and soul, sometimes humming to himself, forgetting everything around him.'

In that fit of self-improvement that often strikes about the age of 30, **Schubert** arranged to take a course of counterpoint with the great teacher, Simon Sechter. His few exercises were discovered in 1969 – what a find that must have been! – but within a fortnight he was dead. He probably knew he was dying from syphilis, and so had moved to the fresher air of the newly built apartment of his brother, Ferdinand. Unfortunately, it seems that the courtyard well wasn't deep enough, and it's likely Schubert died of typhoid instead. Sad though this is, an even sadder fact is that getting even to 31 was doing pretty well for Viennese men in those early throes of the Industrial Revolution.

Schubert's contrapuntal ambition is more likely to have been spurred by his sense of his possibilities, rather than dissatisfaction with what he was actually producing. The great B flat Sonata, at one point the most recorded work in the repertoire – I *Built a Library* on it for Radio 3 a few years ago, and it was quite a handful – shows Schubert at the top of his game, from the sinister trill on his piano's very bottom note ('the note the cat died on', my grandmother always called it), through the astonishing lyrical inventions of the first two movements (and their odd key relationship – B flat major to C sharp minor) and the fleeting twinkle of the *Scherzo*, to the finale's oblique approach to the tonic via a sort of gathering-note, like the one in the *Finale* of the 'Trout' Quintet. My favourite moment in the sonata is shortly before the return of the opening theme in the first movement, when we hear the melody in D minor twice, but in between we hear it actually in B flat major, which is where Schubert's mighty structure has been heading all the time. It's an incredibly bold anticipation which somehow works as a distant glimpse of home as you trudge along the weary road.

How good a pianist was Schubert? He played this sonata himself, but left his piano trios to the virtuoso Carl Maria von Bocklet, perhaps out of consideration for the string players. The detailed expression marks in the last two movements make me suspect that he played them quite slowly. Perhaps we're in that world where composers play as if they were just improvising, with heart and soul, sometimes humming to themselves, forgetting everything around them.

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