

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 12 January 2024
1.00pm

Album launch: Robert Schumann Piano Works

Llŷr Williams piano

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Papillons Op. 2 (1830-1)

*Introduzione • No. 1 • No. 2 - Prestissimo • No. 3 •
No. 4 - Presto • No. 5 • No. 6 • No. 7 - Semplice • No. 8 •
No. 9 - Prestissimo • No. 10 - Vivo • No. 11 •
No. 12 - Finale*

Nachtstücke Op. 23 (1839-40)

*Mehr langsam, oft zurückhaltend
Markiert und lebhaft
Mit grosser Lebhaftigkeit
Einfach*

Faschingsschwank aus Wien Op. 26 (1839-40)

*I. Allegro • II. Romanze • III. Scherzino •
IV. Intermezzo • V. Finale*



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Schumann and Beethoven have in common the fact that both would have remained more of a concert pianist than a composer were it not for some physical failing – deafness, in Beethoven's case; an unwise indulgence in a practising short-cut – some sort of finger-exercise-machine – in Schumann's. And like Beethoven, Schumann played the piano in a way all his own.

Schumann's great respect for Beethoven caused him to compose symphonies and sonatas, quartets and trios. But his sources of inspiration were very different, and so his most typical piano music falls into categories that Beethoven never imagined, as tonight's recital makes clear. Words and music were very closely linked in Schumann's mind – he, of all composers of the Romantic period, is the one most likely to give a piece a title, something more than a generic description like Mazurka or Song without Words. Schumann's father was a publisher, and young Robert was inspired to write stories, poems and plays. He always remained a literary man, an editor and a critic. So, reading a romantic novel could lead to a piano suite, while a poem might not confine itself to becoming a song – it could start a symphony: the motto theme of the First Symphony, for instance, perfectly fits the poetic line that inspired it.

A school-friend of Schumann's wrote: 'He was dominated by his certainty of soon becoming a celebrated man, though in what direction he was not clear. He was not only the most ambitious man I have ever known but also the most assiduous and tireless, and I'm inclined to share the opinion that he became a great musician less perhaps by force of genius than by his iron will.'

Schumann's literary imagination led him to people his music with characters, many of them simply Schumann in disguise. He could be Eusebius or Florestan or David, always fighting the Philistines (a personification of artistic ignorance that seems to have originated with Schumann). And if you notice that Clara (his wife), David, Eusebius and Florestan form an alphabetical sequence, you'll start to get some idea of how Schumann's mind worked.

His piano music, besides the three completed solo sonatas, includes the famous C major *Fantasie*, which began life explicitly titled as a sonata in homage to Beethoven, and is the most successful of the extended works, probably because it was conceived as a whole, rather than compiled. Otherwise, the piano works are a series of collections – sets of variations, studies, and sets of 'character pieces', some of which – tonight's 'Carnival jest from Vienna' Op. 26, for instance – are like suites, and some like nothing existing before or since: pre-eminently such flights of imagination as *Carnaval* or the *Davidsbündlertänze*, a line of work first put in hand in *Papillons* Op. 2, a set of 12 pieces with an introduction and a wistful reprise, begun in 1829.

Gerald Abraham seizes upon *Papillons* as a prime example of the secret meanings Schumann built into

much of his music. 'Constructed partly from earlier waltzes and four-hand polonaises written in imitation of Schubert; provided with a programmatic finale suggesting the end of a ball, and related number by number to paragraphs in a chapter of Jean Paul's *Flegeljahre* (though the relationship was never made public); and finally published with an enigmatic title bearing no relation to the work's origin or its acquired connection with Jean Paul and fully significant only to the composer himself ('larvae' and 'butterflies' played important parts in his private world of thought): it is clear that his music meant more to him than it can ever mean to anyone else.' Repeated exposure to sympathetic interpretation is the key here, clearly.

The 'Night Pieces' Op. 23 date from 1839-40. Schumann planned titles, as usual – 'Funeral Procession', 'Strange Company', 'Night Revels' and 'Carol with Solos' – but eventually published the pieces without them. He conceived the pieces during an abortive trip to Vienna, seeking a publisher for the music magazine he edited, and hoping to find a way of life for himself and Clara, who became his wife the following year. They were bound up in a most macabre way with a premonition of the death of his brother Eduard.

Faschingschwank aus Wien dates from the same trip, and illustrates the latent destabilising nature of Schumann's Eusebius/Florestan dichotomy. Where the *Nachtstücke* are dark, this set is, in the main, exuberantly brilliant. It may be the remnant of a work described by Schumann as 'a big *romantic sonata*'. Something of Schumann's methods of compilation may be gleaned from the fact that he published this *Intermezzo* in his magazine in December 1839 as 'a fragment from the Night Pieces which are to appear shortly.' The first movement works itself towards a quotation from *La Marseillaise*, recently banned for the third time (Napoleon and Louis XVIII found themselves in unexpected agreement here, and Napoleon III agreed after the July Revolution of 1830). Schumann was light-heartedly embracing controversy here. Ten years later, when he met actual revolution in Dresden, it wasn't so much fun, and he prudently escaped.

In the mid-1830s, the youthful Schumann penned a column for his magazine in which he confessed: 'The older I grow, the more convinced I am that the pianoforte is especially prominent in three leading qualities peculiar to it – fulness and variety of harmony (Beethoven and Schubert), pedal effect (Field), and volubility (Czerny, Herz etc.). The large, broad player exhibits the first, the fantastic artist gives the second, a pearly touch displays the third quality. Many-sided, cultured composer-performers, like Hummel, Moscheles, and, finally, Chopin, combine all these.' Schumann's perceptive analysis of the piano's strengths is a model for all his interpreters.

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