

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 12 March 2024
7.30pm

Steven Osborne piano

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Arabeske in C Op. 18 (1838-9)

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

From *Children's Corner* (1906-8)

The Snow Is Dancing • *Jimbo's Lullaby* •
Serenade for the Doll • *The Little Shepherd*

2 Arabesques (c.1890)

Arabesque No. 1 • *Arabesque No. 2*

Robert Schumann

Kinderszenen Op. 15 (1838)

Von fremden Ländern und Menschen •
Curiose Geschichte • *Hasche-Mann* • *Bittendes Kind* •
Glückes genug • *Wichtige Begebenheit* • *Träumerei* •
Am Camin • *Ritter vom Steckenpferd* • *Fast zu ernst* •
Fürchtenmachen • *Kind im Einschlummern* •
Der Dichter spricht

Interval

Marion Eugénie Bauer (1882-1955)

White Birches from *From the New Hampshire Woods* Op. 12
(1921)

Meredith Monk (b.1942)

Railroad (Travel Song) (1981)

Frederic Rzewski (1938-2021)

Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues from *4 North American Ballads*
(1978-9)

Steven Osborne (b.1971)

Improvisation

Keith Jarrett (b.1945)

My Song (1977) *transcribed by Steven Osborne*

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

I Loves You, Porgy from *Porgy and Bess* (1934) *arranged by*
Bill Evans transcribed by Steven Osborne

James F Hanley (1892-1942)

Indiana (pub. 1917) *arranged by Oscar Peterson transcribed by*
Steven Osborne

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Steven Osborne is an award-winning concert and recording artist, known for his versatility in piano repertoire ranging from Beethoven through to jazz. Tonight's concert is a prime example of his eclecticism, combining Romantic compositions with modern American music, jazz transcriptions and his own improvisations.

The first half of the programme compares music by Robert Schumann and Debussy, with a focus on the lighter side of piano writing. The term 'Arabesque' derives from the Moorish-influenced decorative arts, and is meant to suggest a pleasantly decorative aesthetic. **Schumann** was somewhat dismissive of his *Arabeske* Op. 18, describing it (rather chauvinistically) as suitable 'for the ladies'. But the trivialising sentiment is unwarranted - it's a charming piece, with a bubbly main theme in C major that switches, like a rondo, with elegant minor-mode diversions, before a wistful conclusion. Similarly, around a half century later, when the young **Debussy** composed his two *Arabesques* he may not have guessed that an ostensibly lightweight work would deliver one of his most popular piano pieces. But the supple and sensual arpeggiation of the first *Arabesque*, with rippling triplet and duplet rhythms, is a straightforwardly gorgeous creation. Its partner piece, though less well known, is an enjoyably crisp and playful affair - perhaps a witty sidekick to the more glamorous star.

Both composers also wrote suites on childhood themes, though with marked differences in approach. The 13 vignettes of Schumann's *Kinderszenen* Op. 15 show the scope of his poetic imagination, with titles evoking the capricious moods of long childhood days, from curiosity to fright and sleepiness. These fleeting moments find repose in the exquisite and much-loved *Träumerei* ('Dreaming'), a singular movement which seems to hold the key to this nostalgic work. Crucially, Schumann was not yet a father when he wrote *Kinderszenen* - he was an adult dreaming of childhood. Debussy, on the other hand, dedicated his *Children's Corner* suite to his three-year-old daughter Claude-Emma, nicknamed 'Chouchou'. There is a storybook character to these pieces, with a charming integration of naive gestures into a sophisticated harmonic language. He creates magical impressionism in *The Snow is Dancing* and moments of gentle mystery in *The Little Shepherd*. *Jimbo's Lullaby* sends Chouchou's toy elephant plodding off to sleep, while *Serenade for the Doll* is brisk and lively. Interestingly, these titles are not translations - Debussy used English here, possibly in homage to little Chouchou's English governess.

As we voyage across the Atlantic for the second half, we begin with a less familiar name. **Marion Bauer** (1882-1955) was born in the American North West, but later taught composition and music history at New York University. She spent summers composing at the MacDowell Colony, a working retreat for creative artists in New Hampshire, and this leafy state is called upon in her piano suite *From the New Hampshire Woods*. *White*

Birches combines delicate textures with richly chromatic harmony, and its score quotes lines by the poet William Rose Benét: 'What is the meaning of their secret gleaming / What language is in their leaves, that glitter and whisper / Where the ghostly birches glimmer under the moon?'

Meredith Monk was born in New York in 1942, and has forged a varied and experimental career as a singer, dancer and choreographer as well as composer. Her short *Railroad (Travel Song)* uses the ostinato technique of the minimalist school, though Monk has argued against the use of that term for her music. The score is marked 'grounded', and the left hand maintains a steady, static figure, while the right hand strikes a variety of rhythms, sometimes in opposition to it. This mechanistic sound-world resonates with *Winnsboro Cotton Mill Blues*, from **Frederic Rzewski's** *North American Ballads*. Rzewski (1938-2021) was another experimentalist, an avant-garde pianist-composer known for his engagement with socialist themes. *Winnsboro* begins with a thunderous imitation of the machinery of a South Carolina cotton mill, and gradually integrates strains of a protest song which laments its exploitative working conditions, before finally breaking out into an authentic blues piano style. Both riotous and inventive, it's a pianistic tour-de-force.

When it comes to Osborne's engagement with improvisation, Keith Jarrett is a talismanic figure. As he's written on his website, recordings of Jarrett's improvised solo piano concerts became his 'catnip' as a student, and spurred him on to try public improvisation himself - 'much to my teacher's dismay', he recalls. Tonight we'll hear **Osborne** improvise, followed by his transcription of **Jarrett's** *My Song*, an introspective composition which appeared on the 1978 jazz quartet album of the same name. Osborne writes of the esteem in which he holds this artist: 'there are other jazz musicians with Jarrett's spontaneity, but none with his supreme control of keyboard sonority. There are classical musicians with Jarrett's control but without his boundless spontaneity'.

We finish the concert with two further transcriptions by Osborne of jazz piano legends. **Bill Evans** appeared on perhaps the most famous jazz album of all - Miles Davis's *Kind of Blue* - and was a hugely influential figure, admired for his refined harmonic palette and sensitive lyricism. These qualities are shown to great effect in his take on 'I Loves You, Porgy', an aria from **Gershwin's** opera *Porgy and Bess*. At the more spectacular end of the spectrum is Canadian pianist **Oscar Peterson**, one of the great jazz virtuosos. Dubbed 'the Maharaja of the Keyboard', he was often compared to the lightning-fast Art Tatum. **James F Hanley's** 1917 song 'Back Home Again in Indiana' was an early Dixieland jazz standard before becoming a favourite of Louis Armstrong and his band. Osborne's take on Peterson's rendition of this upbeat number promises to ensure a rousing end to the evening.

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