

# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 12 May 2022 7.30pm

**Francesco Piemontesi** piano

Supported by the Rubinstein Circle

**Franz Schubert** (1797-1828)

Allegretto in C minor D915 (1827)

6 Moments musicaux D780 (1823-8)

*Moment musical No. 1 in C • Moment musical No. 2 in A flat •  
Moment musical No. 3 in F minor • Moment musical No. 4 in C sharp minor •  
Moment musical No. 5 in F minor • Moment musical No. 6 in A flat*

*Interval*

Piano Sonata in A D959 (1828)

*I. Allegro • II. Andantino • III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace •  
IV. Rondo. Allegretto*

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Francesco Piemontesi's **Schubert** series continues with the composer private and public, the fragile security of the Biedermeier drawing-room side-by-side with the chaos of the abyss, self-contained charm squaring up to symphonic ambition.

Schubert wrote his Allegretto in C minor D915 in April 1827, although the piece was not published until 1870. He had finished the first part of *Winterreise* and had visited Beethoven just before he died. He presented the piece as part of a farewell gift to Ferdinand Walcher, a young singer and a recent addition to the Schubert circle, who was leaving Vienna to take up a civil service post in Venice. The scale and emotional ambivalence of the Allegretto makes it an honorary 'Moment musical'. In the first section, Schubert rotates a unison melody with arpeggios contrasting C minor and C major, heightens a sense of anxiety with extreme dynamics and a brief recourse to some tense counterpoint, before consigning the music back to its pervasive melancholy. The reflective middle section, in A flat major, is one of those many moments where Schubert fills time by seeming to make it stand still, in a quiet procession of spacious chords and a memory of the opening melody, then a shortened reprise of the first section. The piece is in 6/8 time, like a barcarolle, with Venetian connotations.

As a title, *Moments musicaux* sells the six pieces of D780 short, but on the other hand it would be hard to come up with another that embraced their variety, intimacy and mystery. They were written with the competent amateur pianist in mind, and two of them, No. 3 and No. 6, were composed in 1823 and 1824 for a publisher's mixed Christmas albums of the same years. No. 3 had the title 'Air russe' and No. 6 'Les plaintes d'un troubador'. Schubert wrote the other four pieces probably in 1827, and all six were published as *Moments musicaux* in 1828, just a few months before he died. The first, a Moderato in C major, has some hallmark Schubert elements – major-minor contrasts, the main theme introduced in unison, and a songlike sense of dialogue. Its obvious grace is more balletic than actually danceable. The middle section, in G major and minor, has a fluid triplet accompaniment, and the shortened reprise of the opening brings the piece to a quiet, oddly abrupt end. The second piece is an Andantino in A flat, with Schubert's signature harmonised block chords and major/minor contrasts over a lilting 9/8 rhythm. The music shifts down a tone to F sharp minor for the second section's gentle lament, then turns back to the opening, this time slightly extended with the addition of a strange chiming figure on one note between the two hands. The lament returns, much more anxious, leading once again to the A flat opening, shortened but still with the chiming figure.

No. 3, the most familiar of the set, is an Allegro moderato in F minor, a gnomic, common-time dance, with a smoother middle section in the relative major key of A flat, then a return to the opening, developed and extended to end, again quietly, in the major. No. 4 is a Moderato in C sharp minor, the first part of which could be mistaken for a Bach Invention with its steady, controlling left hand. This opens up into the middle section in the major over a short-long rhythm and with its own minor-mode variants. The piece has its own little coda, a look back to the middle section before a brusque sign-off in the opening's style. The fifth is a furious and technically demanding Allegro vivace in F minor, with a very brief close in F major, and the set closes with an Allegretto in A flat major, back in triple time. Even by Schubert's standards, this is a strange, chilly piece, a minuet and trio in this world but not quite of it, with a bizarre modulation to an unstable E major, in which the piece nearly ends before an almost grudging return to the home key.

Schubert wrote the Sonata in A D959 in that extraordinary month, September 1828, during which he also produced its two companion sonatas in C minor and B flat as well as the String Quintet. His health was declining fast, and two months later, on 19 November, he died. The Sonata in A is on an epic scale, technically and spiritually, and while deferring to Beethoven, shows how completely Schubert was his own man. With its three main elements, the first movement moves briskly into extension and development, so much so that the sonata-form 'real' development sounds harmonically fairly static with decorative passage-work giving the illusion of activity, capped by a reprise of unequivocal and Beethovenian decisiveness. It does not remotely anticipate the astonishing slow movement that starts as a bleak lament in F sharp minor then derails into an episode that can only be described as seeming psychotic, a collision of broken musical expectations that defies the opening lament to re-establish any sort of order. Who knows where this savage madness and its dismayingly accurate expression came from? The bracing, fleet-footed *Scherzo* redresses the balance before Schubert launches his spacious finale, a sonata-rondo with its lovely main theme borrowed from the slow movement of his Sonata in A minor D537 and the movement as a whole modelled on Beethoven's finale to his Sonata Op. 31 No. 1, including the presto dash to the close and a brief recall of the first movement's opening gambit.

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