

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 12 May 2025
1.00pm

Elisabeth Leonskaja piano
Mihály Berecz piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

From *21 Hungarian Dances* WoO. 1 (1858-80)
No. 2 in D minor • No. 4 in F minor •
No. 6 in D flat • No. 7 in A •
No. 8 in A minor • No. 11 in D minor •
No. 17 in F sharp minor

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

4 Impromptus D899 (1827)
*I. Allegro molto moderato • II. Allegro •
III. Andante • IV. Allegretto*



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The issue of national styles in music needs handling with care. We think of Chopin's polonaises and mazurkas as paradigms of 19th-century cultural nationalism, but already in the 18th Century there was a 'Polish style' commonly adopted by composers such as Handel, Telemann and Wilhelm Friedrich Bach. In their hands, the polonaise was a cosmopolitan genre, albeit with a splash of exotic Polish *couleur locale*. And much the same was true of a 'Hungarian style', with movements or episodes *alla ungharese* in works by Haydn, Boccherini, Mozart and Schubert, among many others. Again, this was not about cultural nationalism. In the late 19th Century, however, the threads of politics and culture could become a bit more entangled, and especially so if the composer was himself Hungarian. Thus, depending on where one stood, Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsodies could be a national music, or they could be an exotic music. Either way, their stylisation of gypsy band idioms was influential, inspiring numerous composers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, not least **Johannes Brahms**.

The first 10 of Brahms's *Hungarian Dances* were published in 1869 and the remaining 11 in 1880. They were originally written for piano four hands, as performed in this concert, but the composer arranged some for solo piano and some for orchestra. Aside from Liszt, a major stimulus was Brahms's collaboration with the Hungarian violinist Ede Reményi, for whom he had acted as an accompanist back in the early 1850s. Most of the themes used in the dances were in wider circulation at the time, and are not exclusively Hungarian (they spill across to present-day Romania, Bulgaria, and North Macedonia), but some, including the main theme of No. 11, were composed by Brahms himself. At the core of the style are two popular dance genres, the *czárdás* and the *verbunkos*, both characterised by alternating slow sections (*lassú*) and fast sections (*friss*), with lively cross rhythms and syncopations in the *friss* sections. No. 8 is typical. Other stylisations of the gypsy band include tremolo passages imitating the traditional cimbalom, as in No. 4, and modal features incorporating the 'oriental' augmented second, as in No. 17, reminding us that the Ottoman empire was a major source for such idioms. If this feature looks eastwards, there are also passages of swaying thirds and sixths that look rather to Viennese dance music, as in Nos. 4 and 6. And finally, we might observe that folk ornamentation is everywhere, whether spiky acciaccaturas in the fast sections, which we find in one of the central episodes of No. 4, or the decorative 'pointing' of melodic shapes, as in No. 7.

Genre titles were often used permissively, and even interchangeably, in the practice of early 19th-century pianism. The 'impromptu' is a case in point. Indeed, if we trust the etymology, the impromptu might seem to defy any generic definition whatever. Many commentators have noted that among the earliest pieces to carry this title were the Impromptus, Op. 7 by

the Czech composer Jan Václav Voříšek (1791-1825), himself a friend of **Schubert**. However, these pieces, composed in 1822, were named by the publisher rather than the composer. And it was also the publisher, in this case Tobias Haslinger, who suggested the title for Schubert's 4 Impromptus D899, composed in 1827, though only the first two of them were actually issued during the composer's lifetime. Later in the same year, Schubert composed a second set, the 4 Impromptus D935, and this time it was he who opted for the title. Indeed, on the autograph of D935 he originally numbered the pieces 5-8, suggesting that he intended them as a continuation of the earlier set.

The four impromptus of D899 are probably best thought of as mutually compatible pieces within a multipartite opus rather than as a true cycle, for they lack both the tonal closure of D935, and any discernible thematic links. No. 1 in C minor, whose nine-minute duration somewhat belies any categorisation as a 'piano miniature', already exemplifies Schubert's capacity to build musical forms from sustained, song-like melodies, avoiding dynamic, goal-directed narratives in favour of more leisurely scenic routes, where similar melodic materials ('breathing the same life', as Schumann put it) unfold in a gradual, spacious teleology, often underpinned by a third-related tonal architecture. Schumann's characterisation perfectly describes the two main themes here. The first, in C minor, has more than a hint of funeral procession about it, and on subsequent appearances it is presented against increasingly elaborate backgrounds. The second, in a third-related A flat major, is really an extension of the first, and becomes increasingly enmeshed with it as the impromptu unfolds.

The ensuing impromptus in D899 are all couched in a ternary design. In the outer sections of the second, in E flat major-minor, a stream of beautifully flowing, *étude*-like figuration is released, followed by a contrasted middle section in B minor, again third-related. This is insistent, even assertive in tone, and especially so when it returns as a coda, but for this concert it holds special interest for the hint of a 'stile ongroise', allowing for some cross-referencing between the two parts of our programme. The third and fourth impromptus, which were first published as late as 1857, are certainly the most familiar of the set, the province of amateur pianists everywhere. Interestingly, the publisher initially issued No. 3 in the 'safe' key of G major rather than Schubert's more arcane G flat major, which may have been considered less marketable. The tripartite design here is subordinate to a uniformity of mood, a study in quietude, though there are darker hues in the middle section. As to the fourth impromptu, one wonders if Schubert had been playing Haydn's D major Sonata, HXVI/24 before devising the sparkling arpeggiated figuration of those outer sections.

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