

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 13 July 2022 7.30pm

Conrad Tao piano

CLASSIC *f*M Wigmore Hall £5 tickets for Under 35s supported by Media Partner Classic FM

Conrad Tao (b.1994)

Improvisation

John Adams (b.1947)

China Gates (1977)

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D minor BWV903 (before 1723)

Jason Eckardt (b.1971)

Antennaria plantaginifolia: 'Pussytoes' from *A Compendium of Catskill Native Botanicals, book 2* (2014-21)

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

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

Fred Hersch (b.1955)

Pastorale (Dedicated to Robert Schumann) (2011)

Conrad Tao

Keyed In (2021)

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 31 in A flat Op. 110 (1821-2)

I. Moderato cantabile molto espressivo • II. Allegro molto • III. Adagio ma non troppo - Fuga. Allegro ma non troppo

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In 2020, while benched from my usual touring, I spent a lot of time alone in my New York apartment developing my toolkit as an improviser at the piano. I suspect that, with time feeling so surreal and liquid, a musical practice like improvisation, which required active listening to my immediate environment and real-time decision-making, was very welcome; it was a practice that demanded I stay present in my body, my life, and my time.

Improvisation makes its way into this program from different angles. The *Fantasia* from **Johann Sebastian Bach's** *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue* is a glimpse into what Bach's improvising may have been like at the keyboard, and at times the piece explicitly calls for the performer to extemporise on given chords. Similarly, Fred Hersch's *Pastorale* has improvisation baked into its AABA form. And this programme opens with an improvisation on tones generated by magnets dropped onto piano strings.

These magnets arrived in the mail on 10 March 2020, right as I got home from my last pre-shutdown performance, a gift from a fellow New York-based pianist, the late Adam Marks. I dropped a few in my instrument, improvised from what I heard, and went to bed. The following morning I woke up itching to play **John Adams's** *China Gates*, neglecting to realise the magnets were still in my piano; the result grabbed my ear, the unplanned magnet placement offering a new incidental layer atop the piece, unpredictably illuminating Adams's chosen notes and the gently shifting patterns he organizes them in.

This opening sequence of magnets to Adams is part of what I've started calling my 'pandemic repertoire' - pieces that I got intimately familiar with during the pandemic lockdowns, when most of my music making comprised live-streamed performances from home. Also from that repertoire is **Jason Eckardt's** *Antennaria plantaginifolia*, from the second volume of his ongoing series *A Compendium of Catskill Native Botanicals*. The piece arrived in my inbox in the early months of 2021; its title refers to a perennial colloquially known as 'pussytoes', as its blooms resemble cat paws. Jay's piece, a delicate and contemplative reflecting on plants, reminds me of the countless walks I have taken in Riverside Park over the past two years, which I am pretty sure kept me sane.

I knew I wanted to pair these pieces with **Robert Schumann's** *Kinderszenen*, a work that has wistful reflection baked into it. *Kinderszenen* is such astonishing music, all the more so for its simplicity. Nearly every movement follows a straightforward AABA structure, and nearly every movement has a dreamy window within it - a shift from minor to major, or vice versa, or a swirl of chromatic harmony - that subtly draws attention to the fact that these are scenes observed from a distance, after the luxury of time. And so while this programme is itself a looking back at the past couple of years, it is also about the act of looking back, the act of remembering.

Fred Hersch's aforementioned *Pastorale* presents an imagined scene, inspired both by Schumann's music (the piece's harmonies and shapes echo *Kinderszenen's* 'Von fremden Ländern und Menschen' and 'Träumerei') and a dream Hersch had, while deep in a two-month-long coma brought about by severe pneumonia, in which the two composers met. Similarly, **Beethoven's** Piano Sonata in A flat Op. 110 both engages with music that came before it and reflects on an experience of being near death, most vividly in its poetic last movement, which includes two 'sad songs' (so marked by Beethoven himself) both of which quote 'Es ist vollbracht' ('It is finished') from Bach's *St John* Passion. The first iteration is full of long, continuous lines, to my ears a more confident performance of the emotion, as though for an audience; the second time around the lament is viscerally broken down into halting, gasping half-phrases. Each of these songs is followed by a fugue, evidence of the curiosity about older forms so unique to late Beethoven; the second in particular, marked *Nach und nach wieder auflebend* ('Bit by bit, again revived') makes powerful use of fugues' inherent unfolding, additive nature to suggest a coming back to life.

And then there's my piece, *Keyed In*, which is my first attempt at answering some piano-specific questions I've been thinking about for years: can you play the harmonic series, from the keys, with precision and intention? Can you use composition to draw ears to specific partials in the piano sound? Could you write music in which the guiding melody lives in the harmonics of the instrument, beyond merely the keys being pressed? - a melody that lives at the edge of perception and imagination? What could this open up in how we hear the assigned equal temperament of the piano? I am interested in both highlighting the limitations of the given 88-key frame and celebrating the particular sonority of the instrument, the inner life of the key.

With this piece, and really, this whole programme, I am hoping to cultivate active listening from all sides. I am hoping for a heightened awareness of what is already there, what is present in the sound that we may have conditioned ourselves to ignore. I am hoping to draw attention to the fact that all of us in the concert hall are connected on the plane of listening, and that therefore all of us are contributing something. The nature of *Keyed In* - in which the overtones of the instrument, the resonance of the sound, is the music to listen for - is such that the piece will sound different depending on where one sits, depending on how one moves their ears while listening. And this, of course, is also true of all acoustic music.

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