

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 13 July 2023
7.30pm

Mozart Piano Sonata Cycle

Mao Fujita piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

10 Variations on 'Unser dummer Pöbel meint' K455
(1784)

Piano Sonata in E flat K282 (1775)

I. Adagio • II. Menuetto I-II • III. Allegro

Piano Sonata in G K283 (1775)

I. Allegro • II. Andante • III. Presto

Interval

Piano Sonata in B flat K333 (1783-4)

*I. Allegro • II. Andante cantabile •
III. Allegretto grazioso*

Piano Sonata in F K533/494 (1786-8)

I. Allegro • II. Andante • III. Rondo. Allegretto

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Like Beethoven a decade later, Mozart dazzled Viennese audiences in the early 1780s with his improvisations, often on popular airs from recent operas. After his triumphant concert in the Burgtheater in March 1783, he reported to his father that as an encore he improvised variations on the air '**Unser dummer Pöbel meint**' ('The stupid rabble believes...') from Gluck's opera *La rencontre imprévue*. Gluck himself was in the audience. In August 1784 Mozart wrote out his extemporised variations, refining and expanding them in the process. He evidently savoured adorning and refining the lumpen, quasi-Oriental theme, sung in the opera by the comic servant Osmin. Following tradition, the ten variations trace a gradual crescendo of brilliance, with a reflective minor-keyed variation (No. 5) and an ornamental adagio variation (No. 9) for contrast.

Alone among the six sonatas Mozart composed in Salzburg and Munich in the winter of 1774-5, the **Sonata in E flat K282** opens with an *Adagio* rather than the usual allegro. This exquisite movement seems to mingle the lyrical suavity of JC Bach with the *Empfindsamkeit*, or 'heightened sensibility', of his half-brother Carl Philipp Emanuel. In a subtle play on the performer and listener's expectations, Mozart never repeats the opening phrase verbatim: obliquely recalled at the start of the brief development, the phrase is omitted from the recapitulation and only reappears, reshaped and embellished, in the very last bars.

Next comes a *Menuetto* whose *galant* decorum is slightly ruffled by irregular phrasing. Its first part consists of a pair of two-bar phrases answered by one of six bars, and a little two-bar tailpiece. The trio then defies expectation by being both longer and more assertive than the minuet. The capricious *contredanse* finale makes witty capital from the theme's paired repeated notes. There is an arresting moment of harmonic suspense in the brief development, and a deft, blink-and-you'll-miss-it chromatic lead-back to the recapitulation.

Long a favourite teaching piece, the **Sonata in G K283** is today the most popular of the 1774-5 sonatas. Mozart himself played it in public in what he called 'the fancy Stube-Academy' in Augsburg in October 1777. The spirit of JC Bach lies behind the first two movements: a fast minuet of mingled urbanity and ebullience, made piquant with syncopations and 'Scotch-snap' rhythms; and a guileless C major *Andante* that trickles along mellifluously over an Alberti-bass. The most fetching movement is the finale, a racy 3/8 *Presto* replete with abrupt dynamic contrasts and quickfire repartee between the hands. Perhaps surprisingly to us, Mozart described these sonatas as 'difficult'. The finale's explosive development helps explain why.

During Mozart's early years in Vienna, he earned a significant part of his income from teaching the wives and daughters of the Viennese aristocracy and the newly affluent bourgeoisie. While he will have played his four sonatas K330-333, composed between 1781 and 1783, in the salons of patrons, they were probably initially

intended for pupils. The last of the group, the **Sonata in B flat K333** has a smiling homogeneity of mood. Yet for all the music's urbane *galanterie*, Mozart has plenty of surprises up his sleeve. The euphonious flow of the opening *Allegro* is disturbed in the development, first with an intensification of the upward leap in the theme's first bar, then in a turbulent minor-keyed outburst that dramatises the syncopations in bar six.

Still more arresting is the start of the development of the *Andante cantabile*, where tortuous chromaticism twists the main theme out of shape and into remote new keys. Living up to its *grazioso* billing, the finale reminds us of the proximity of Mozart's great piano concertos. Its vivid contrasts of 'solo' and 'tutti' are embodied in the twofold presentation of the rondo theme. The concerto associations are reinforced by an extended written-out cadenza (marked 'in tempo') that mingles bravura display with further thematic development.

After the six quartets dedicated to Haydn and *Don Giovanni* Mozart was being branded a 'difficult', 'esoteric' composer in some quarters. The **Sonata in F K533/494** was just the kind of music to fuel such a reputation. Mozart entered the first two movements in his thematic catalogue on 3 January 1788 as 'Ein Allegro und Andante für das Klavier allein'. For publication he then appended a 'little rondo' he had composed in 1786, upping its tempo from andante to *Allegretto* and adding an intricate contrapuntal cadenza near the end. Counterpoint is, in fact, a unifying feature of the whole sonata, whose sinewy two- and three-part textures often suggest string chamber music.

The unaccompanied opening may have led 18th-century listeners to expect a fugue. But although Mozart quickly foils expectations by changing to a *galant* theme-plus-accompaniment texture, he uses both this opening theme and a second theme based on cascading triplets with marvellous contrapuntal ingenuity. The climax comes in the expanded recapitulation, where Mozart combines several different ideas in a grand polyphonic imbroglia worthy of the 'Jupiter' Symphony.

The *Andante*, highly chromatic in flavour, shares the first movement's contrapuntal leanings while heightening its tendency to harsh linear writing. Already in the second bar Mozart introduces a piercing dissonant suspension – far earlier in the piece than contemporary listeners would have expected. After such a searching movement, the companionable theme of the *Rondo* finale comes as necessary relief. But this opening is deceptive. The sonata's preoccupation with counterpoint is confirmed firstly in the beautiful central F minor episode, and then in the climactic final cadenza. This begins like a fugal stretto and ascends majestically through the whole compass of Mozart's five-octave keyboard before ending, strangely and memorably, with a hushed statement of the theme in the bass.

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