

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 13 June 2023
7.30pm

Eric Lu piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in C D840 'Reliquie' (1825)
I. Moderato • II. Andante

Ungarische Melodie in B minor D817 (1824)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Sonata in A minor K310 (1778)
*I. Allegro maestoso • II. Andante cantabile con
espressione • III. Presto*

Interval

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Liebesbotschaft from *Schwanengesang* S560 (1838-9)
based on Franz Schubert

Der Müller und der Bach S565 No. 2 (1846) *based on
Franz Schubert*

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Piano Sonata No. 3 in B minor Op. 58 (1844)
*I. Allegro maestoso • II. Scherzo. Molto vivace •
III. Largo • IV. Finale. Presto non tanto*

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In the final examination of my music degree, candidates were invited to complete an unfinished string quintet by Mozart. Taken together, the one thing our various attempts clarified was why Mozart had left it unfinished. Like a master chess player, he had spotted the underlying problems of his idea at an early stage, and stopped. We all played it out to the bitter checkmate. It may have been something similar that prevented **Schubert** from polishing off the scherzo and finale of the sonata he half-composed in 1825, but at least the movements he did complete show him at his best. When it was published in 1861, it was thought to be his last work, hence the 'Relics' of its title. The first movement ranges through the keys with typical Schubertian subtlety, taking an early opportunity to introduce the key of A flat major, but settling into B minor for the second subject. The recapitulation appears to begin in B major (!), but eventually the second subject reappears in A minor, which is halfway normal for a sonata in C. Before the movement finally ends in the right key, A flat major looms up again. The slow movement, too, though in C minor, leans into A flat major at every opportunity. Perhaps Schubert gave up on the third movement (sketched in A flat major and minor) because he'd exhausted A flat already. He was, at any rate, careful to avoid that key in what he wrote of the finale. Schubert wrote the little Hungarian melody we hear next in 1824; it was not published till 1928.

There is very little **Mozart** in A minor. Its chief manifestation is the great piano sonata he wrote in Paris. He had been on tour, accompanied by his mother, having a wonderful time in Mannheim, where the brilliant orchestra inspired him to a magnificent C major Sonata that incorporated a musical portrait of the conductor's daughter. (Leopold Mozart's letters at this point became very insistent that Wolfgang should move on.) But in Paris, success was elusive, and Mozart's mother died. The bereft 22-year-old was comforted by his friend, Johann Christian Bach, whom Mozart had met in London in 1764, and who was in France to cast his latest opera.

A good deal of this angst and consolation found its way into the A minor Sonata, and into its tempo markings – 'majestic', 'singing expressively'. But this raises a question: Mozart in this sort of mood usually chooses the key of G minor. Why would he choose A minor this time? The Cobbe Collection of Keyboard Instruments at Hatchlands in Surrey may possess the answer: a tiny square piano of 1778, signed by JC Bach himself. It was found in an auction near the great house where Bach was the guest of the Maréchal de Noailles, and it's possible that Mozart played the

piano when he visited in his turn. The piano has two damper levers rather than a sustaining pedal, and so you can only 'change the pedal' when you have a hand free. One lever controls the dampers from middle C upwards, the other from B downwards. This means that the hammered-out chords at the beginning, if they were in G minor, would blur, since the B flat and the A would both be sustained. But transposed to A minor, the C can be sustained whilst the B is not: the sort of thing Mozart would have discovered as he improvised the opening in a variety of keys, perhaps. Of the many harmonic details that perfectly suit themselves to Johannes Zumpe's damper mechanism, perhaps the most beautiful is the musette 'trio' section of the final rondo.

Liszt was always careful to include the words in his Schubert transcriptions. 'Love's Message' is an incomparable treatment of the poetic trope familiar from Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte* and many, many other songs, where the brooks (and sometimes the breezes) are besought to bear messages to the beloved. The brook changes character for 'The Miller and the Brook', from the song cycle 'The Fair Maid of the Mill' – the dialogue the young man sings with the brook just before drowning himself for love.

Of **Chopin's** three piano sonatas, the last (in B minor) is the real one. The first was a student-ish attempt in the significant Beethoven key of C minor: the second, in B flat minor, was written around rather a good Funeral March that Chopin had prepared earlier. But in the summer of 1844, he was a mature and successful artist deliberately writing a sonata from scratch. Now, what is it that differentiates a sonata from a 'string of pieces'? An over-riding unity, surely, a meaning – and a meaning for the whole of each movement, and for the whole piece. What this sonata's about, at the simplest level, is falling and then climbing back up again. And it uses other means of unification. For instance, the first movement ends on a B major chord with a D sharp at the top. The *Scherzo* takes that D sharp, calls it an E flat, and sets off in the key of E flat major. The slow movement turns it back into a D sharp, and the *Finale* does what a sonata finale should, when it somehow reaches an E flat chord (from B minor!), allowing player and listeners to muse on their musical journey. Both second and third movements have huge middle sections which can easily overbalance the form – careful tempo selection is more than usually crucial to this delicate formal tightrope.

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