

# WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 14 December 2022  
1.00pm

## Leeds Piano Competition 2021 prizewinner recital

Ariel Lanyi piano

**Johann Sebastian Bach** (1685-1750) The Well-tempered Clavier Book I, Prelude and Fugue No. 4 in C sharp minor BWV849 (1722)

**Ludwig van Beethoven** (1770-1827) Piano Sonata No. 29 in B flat Op. 106 'Hammerklavier' (1817-8)  
*I. Allegro • II. Scherzo. Assai vivace •  
III. Adagio sostenuto • IV. Largo - Allegro risoluto*

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It seems likely that **Bach** never intended to publish *The Well-tempered Clavier*. His first book of 24 preludes and fugues was compiled in manuscript form in 1722 to serve a variety of purposes. As so often in his keyboard works, Bach created a series of pieces that embraced innovation and tradition, virtuoso display and profound contemplation. The anthology, he explained, was conceived for 'the use and improvement of musical youth eager to learn and for the particular delight of those already skilled in this study'. The Bach scholar Richard DP Jones observes that students 'are [here] taught to read and play in all keys and in a wide range of styles and textures; composition students are instructed how to handle all the essential contrapuntal techniques and are provided with a comprehensive collection of compositional models in both strict and free forms.' Austere contemplation and tradition receive equal billing in the Prelude and Fugue in C sharp minor from Book I. The *Prelude* falls into two sections, both formed from imitative counterpoint based on two related themes that are varied as the piece unfolds. The *Fugue* offers students a masterclass in triple counterpoint and listeners the chance to witness the complex evolution of a hymn-like fugal subject and a flowing countersubject that deepens the composition's meditative character.

Bach, his family and pupils, and their pupils in turn, distributed manuscript copies of Books I and II of *The Well-tempered Clavier*. Christian Gottlob Neefe, who moved from Leipzig to Bonn in 1779 and became court organist there soon after, owned a copy of Bach's 48 preludes and fugues and used it to teach the young **Beethoven** the art of composition. The 'youthful genius', as Neefe described his gifted pupil, later received instruction in contrapuntal technique from Johann Georg Albrechtsberger, Kapellmeister at Vienna's Stephansdom. Strict counterpoint established a central place in Beethoven's creative process during the last decade of his life, often used as a means to develop thematic ideas within a large-scale movement in sonata form. It may be that the discipline of contrapuntal writing offered an absorbing diversion from the composer's failing health, his almost total deafness and the difficulties of his personal life, notably those arising from a protracted legal dispute over the guardianship of his young nephew.

Beethoven's chronic unhappiness weighed heavily on him in 1817, so much so that he was unable to compose anything of consequence. Although he had accepted a commission from the Philharmonic Society of London for two symphonies, he struggled to do little more than top up his tally of folksong settings for the Edinburgh publisher George Thomson. Beethoven suspended the Philharmonic Society project, which eventually resulted in his Ninth Symphony, and abandoned a proposed visit to London. And then, late in 1817, he began to break free from the mind-forged manacles that had long prevented him from composing anything more ambitious than a song or

chorus. He started work on a new piano sonata without precedent in terms of its breadth of invention and difficulty. The Piano Sonata in B flat Op.106, aptly described on the title page of its second edition as a *Grosse Sonate für das Hammerklavier*, gradually took shape during 1818 and was ready for publication the following year. Beethoven found the requisite tools for his revolutionary work in the traditional form of the four-movement sonata and the cerebral world of counterpoint, using them to transcend form and function in pursuit of something far beyond the small self. 'O God, give me strength to conquer myself, nothing must fetter me to life,' he had written in his diary long before creating the 'Hammerklavier'; the fetters had been truly cast aside by the time he finished his 'Great Sonata'.

The 'Hammerklavier' gives expression to human striving for the absolute in the opening *Allegro*, immediately present in the surging upbeat leaps and chords of its opening bars. There is no let up in what follows: the initial chords, integral to the movement's first subject, set the scene for an intense musical dialogue, momentarily lightened by the exposition's second subject before the arrival of a coda which comprises a gritty third theme. The development section launches a fugal subject related to the rhythm of the first theme's chordal opening and interweaves it with echoes of the movement's second subject. Beethoven's flirtation with fugal counterpoint, preparation for what is to come in the sonata's finale, is replaced in the recapitulation by the modified return of material from the exposition, sudden modulations and – following a moment's silence – a coda based on material from the first subject.

A single idea pervades the opening of the *Scherzo*, an assertive rhythmic pattern that is both breezy and unsettling. The short movement's trio section recalls the first subject of Beethoven's 'Eroica' Symphony, here deconstructed to create a rather wistful interlude before the wild presto transition to the recapitulation of the movement's main theme. Beethoven abruptly ends the *Scherzo's* playtime to usher in a sublime *Adagio sostenuto*, a sonata-form movement longer than both its predecessors combined. While scholars continue to debate the origins of musical Romanticism, it is fair to claim that the slow movement of the 'Hammerklavier' served as a defining model for what one 19th-century theorist called 'free, untrammelled expression' in music. Beethoven strips away Romantic excess in the finale's *Largo* introduction to reveal the simple building blocks of musical creation: bare octaves, close-spaced chords, basic intervals and scales. They prove volatile elements, potentially explosive, until a series of trills makes way for their detonation in the course of a three-voice fugue. An array of archaic contrapuntal techniques, inversion, augmentation and cancrizans among them, are channelled here into the substance of an eternally 'modern' work.

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