

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 14 July 2024
7.30pm

Bruce Liu piano

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Piano Sonata in B minor HXVI/32 (by 1776)
*I. Allegro moderato • II. Menuet • III. Finale.
Presto*

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor Op. 35
'Funeral March' (1837-9)
*I. Grave - Doppio movimento • II. Scherzo •
III. Marche funèbre • IV. Finale. Presto*

Interval

Jean-Philippe Rameau (1683-1764)

Les tendres plaintes (pub. 1724)
Les cyclopes (pub. 1724)
Menuet I and II (c.1729-30)
Les sauvages (c.1729-30)
La poule (c.1729-30)
Gavotte et 6 doubles (c.1729-30)

Fryderyk Chopin

Variations on 'Là ci darem la mano' Op. 2 (1827)



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Joseph Haydn's Piano Sonata in B minor HXVI/32 is part of a group of six piano sonatas that Haydn himself circulated in manuscript copies in 1776. It is a dark, agitated work that asserts its austere qualities from the outset, with even seemingly lighter moments in the exposition of the first movement being transformed into something more serious by the end. Eschewing a slow movement, Haydn subsequently plunges into a *Menuet* and trio, but one of extremes: although the *Menuet* appears innocuous and cheerful, set in a high register in the major mode, the trio is low and grim, and back in B minor. The *Finale*, marked *Presto*, is a violent movement based around an obsessive, driving theme largely made up of repeated notes.

Fryderyk Chopin's Sonata in B flat minor Op. 35 began life in 1837 as a single movement, a *Marche funèbre*; it was only two years later, during the first of many summers spent at George Sand's house at Nohant, that he expanded it into its four-movement form. It was not Chopin's first sonata - he had already written one as a student - but it nonetheless broke new ground in synthesising elements of other genres of piano music within the formal framework of a sonata. The first movement is characterised by an agitated bass accompaniment, over which we hear the main theme, distressed and breathless. The calmer second theme, in D flat major, plays a deceptively important role: what appears to be a new melody introduced in the development is, in fact, the second theme in inverted form. It also returns in the recapitulation, but this time (unusually for sonata form) without the first, leading to a triumphant conclusion. An explosive *Scherzo* that resembles a mazurka follows as the second movement, with only a brief respite given by the more lyrical trio.

The main theme of the celebrated 'funeral march' draws on melodic material already heard in the first two movements, with a bleak chordal accompaniment in the left hand that mimics the tolling of a funeral bell. A contrasting nocturne-like trio brings some light amidst the darkness, but only fleetingly. The sonata ends with a short but turbulent movement that Anton Rubenstein said represented 'wind howling around the gravestones'. Like Chopin's Prelude in E flat minor (Op. 28 No. 14), it is constructed almost entirely of relentless parallel octaves. In their strange chromaticism, they imply some truly daring harmonies that anticipate the 20th Century and the disintegration of tonality itself.

Adventurous harmonies of a different sort are found in the keyboard suites of **Jean-Philippe Rameau**, who was not only a superb organist and composer but also, in his day, a noted music theorist. The selections in tonight's concert are drawn from the suites that make up his *Pièces de clavecin*, published in three volumes over a period of twenty years (1706-26/7). In addition to dance movements such as the *Menuets* or the *Gavotte*,

the suites contain a number of character pieces, with titles such as *Les tendres plaintes* ('The tender complaints') and *Les cyclopes* (both found in the *Suite in D minor*). *Les sauvages*, from the *Suite in G minor*, was inspired by a performance Rameau attended in 1725 of a dance by Indigenous Americans brought to Paris, and became so popular that he reworked it for inclusion in his opera *Les indes galantes*. *La poule*, meanwhile, is full of dramatic contrasts and features a theme made up of repeated notes that musically represents the clucking of the hen.

The final piece in tonight's programme formed the centrepiece of the teenage Chopin's debut concert in Vienna, at the Kärntertortheater (which housed the première of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony) in August 1829. This work, his Op. 2 *Variations on 'Là ci darem la mano'* from Mozart's *Don Giovanni*, has come down to us in two versions, one for piano and orchestra and one for solo piano. In the original opera, the duet is heard during the first act, where Don Giovanni tries to seduce Zerlina into coming to his castle, and sings to her, 'There we will give each other our hands, there you will say "yes" to me. See, it's not far; let's go, my dear, from here'. Mozart's charming melody was very popular in the early 19th Century and formed the basis of numerous other pieces, including a set of variations for cello and piano by Beethoven (WoO. 28). It is therefore hardly surprising that the 19-year-old Chopin chose his own *Variations* on this theme to introduce himself to the Viennese public.

The work opens with a slow, improvisatory introduction, imbued with a sense of expectation. When the theme does appear, it is presented cheerfully and simply; however, Chopin soon launches into his first variation, a virtuosic miniature in the so-called 'brilliant style', which then rapidly gives way to an even faster variation, where the theme is presented in demi-semiquaver motion in the right hand. In the more lyrical third variation, it is the left hand's turn at delicate figuration, against the melody in the right hand. The fourth variation, marked 'con bravura', is full of treacherous leaps, just as exciting to watch as to listen to, whilst the fifth takes a dramatic and deeply expressive turn into B flat minor. Chopin saves his best until last, however, with a spectacular finale in which Mozart's theme is cast as a brilliant polonaise. With these *Variations*, dedicated to his school friend Tytus Woyciechowski, the young virtuoso was propelled to stardom. As Chopin wrote to his parents after the Vienna concert, 'at the end, there was so much clapping that I had to come out and bow again'; the work's publication the following year, meanwhile, inspired Robert Schumann to famously remark: 'Hats off, gentlemen - a genius!'

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