

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 14 October 2024
1.00pm

Maxim Rysanov viola
Dasol Kim piano

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Märchenbilder Op. 113 (1851)

*Nicht schnell • Lebhaft • Rasch • Langsam, mit
melancholischem Ausdruck*

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Viola Sonata in E flat Op. 120 No. 2 (1894)

*I. Allegro amabile • II. Allegro appassionato • III. Andante
con moto - Allegro*

Robert Schumann

Fantasiestücke Op. 73 (1849)

*Zart und mit Ausdruck • Lebhaft, leicht • Rasch und mit
Feuer*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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Gerald Abraham wrote that '**Schumann's** chamber music may, even more than the orchestral, be regarded as an extension of his piano music', and time and again in his chamber works Schumann uses a carefully chosen second instrument (or group of instruments) to complement and enrich the expressive range of his piano writing. It's no surprise that the instruments that (after the piano) he loved best were those with the duskiest, most Romantic timbres, and the richest voices with which to sing: the cello, horn, clarinet and viola.

Schumann wrote these four pieces for viola and piano ('viola tales' as he initially called them) in Düsseldorf between 1 and 4 March 1851, and he quickly settled on the title *Märchenbilder* – 'Fairy tale pictures'. The term was meaningful: the poet Ludwig Tieck defined German fairy tales, or *Märchen*, as stories possessing 'a quietly progressive tone, a certain innocence...which hypnotises the soul without noise or clamour'. Schumann was more reticent. He never identified which (if any) fairy tales had inspired him, and on 15 March 1851, when the four pieces were played through by Clara Schumann and the violinist Wilhelm Joseph von Wasielewski, Wasielewski reported that 'he said with a smile: "Childish pranks! There's not much to them."'

Wasielewski was one of Schumann's few kindred spirits in Düsseldorf's fractious and catty music scene; it's possible that these pieces, with their ardent, lyrical spirit and radiant epilogue, were intended to express an artistic understanding that went beyond words. In any case, recalled Wasielewski, 'he made no objection when I called them delightful'.

By the end of 1890 **Brahms** had decided that his career was at an end. He polished off a handful of miniatures, and then systematically destroyed all his unfinished works. Sketches for a fifth symphony were amongst the 'lot of torn-up manuscript paper' which, he told his publisher Simrock, he'd thrown into the River Traun at the end of his summer stay in Bad Ischl. And having cleared his thoughts, his creativity started to bubble up anew.

'I was so happy, felt so free and secure', he told Simrock, 'that the loveliest and most amusing things kept flying into my mind!' In March 1891, on a visit to Meiningen, he heard the principal clarinet of the Court Orchestra, Richard Mühlfeld (1856-1907), in performances of a Weber concerto and Mozart's quintet. He was enraptured by Mühlfeld's playing. The two clarinet sonatas Op. 120 – in F minor and E flat major, the keys of Weber's clarinet concertos – emerged from Ischl in the summer of 1894. The alternative version for viola was authorised by Brahms himself.

Amabile is the instruction that Brahms writes at the top of the second sonata, his last full-length instrumental work. The viola leads off, and if Brahms's E flat mood is rather mellower than Weber's, he doesn't for a moment forget that he has serious business in hand. The second movement is a big E flat minor scherzo: the

viola clammers and soars around mountainous piano peaks before sinking into twilit melancholy. And to finish...well, Mozart ended his Clarinet Quintet with a theme and variations. Brahms's theme sounds at first almost too guileless; it's only as the six variations progress that we sense both deepening calm and lengthening shadows, before the final run for the finish.

Brahms and Mühlfeld performed the two sonatas together for the first time in a private concert at Berchtesgaden for Georg, Duke of Saxe-Meiningen, towards the end of September 1894. Brahms's few written remarks on the sonatas were off-hand, and no account survives of that Ducal première. But his pupil Florence May saw him at a performance of the Clarinet Quintet during those last years, and noted his reaction. 'My place,' she wrote, 'was only two or three away from his, and so situated that I could see him all the time the work was being played. He wore an unconscious smile, and his expression was one of absorbed felicity from beginning to end'.

A truly terrible spectacle met my eyes, as I crossed the parts of the town in which preparations had been made for hand-to-hand fighting. The constant thunder of big and small guns dwarfed all the other sounds of armed men calling from the barricades and occupied houses. Torches of burning pitch blazed here and there; pale-faced figures lay prostrate around the watch-posts, half-dead with fatigue... – Richard Wagner: My Life

Dresden during the Revolution of May 1849 was not a safe place to be. Wagner was in too deep; shortly after he witnessed these scenes a warrant was issued for his arrest. His colleagues Robert and Clara Schumann, meanwhile, had already left Dresden for the rural safety of nearby Maxen, where Robert continued to compose. 'Strange that the terrors of the outside world should kindle his poetic instincts in so contrary a fashion', confided Clara to her diary.

But then, just weeks earlier, as Dresden lurched towards open insurrection, he'd written these three poetic miniatures for clarinet or viola and piano (he authorised – but probably didn't himself write – the alternative versions for cello and violin). He completed them on 13 February, tried them out with the court clarinetist Johan Gottlieb Kotte five days later, and went them to his publisher Luckhardt with the title *Soiréestücke*. Luckhardt suggested the change of name to *Fantasiestücke*, but there's definitely something about that first title that suggests the special intimacy, tenderness and humour of these three wonderfully characterful pieces: a composer turning inwards to domestic music as the skies darkened outside. To read a sign of the times into the brooding first piece, with its restless accompaniment, or to find a note of defiance in the exuberant third, might perhaps be going a little too far. But then: fantasy travels where it will...

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