

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 15 January 2024
7.30pm

à la Hongroise

Bertrand Chamayou piano
Basel Chamber Orchestra

Baptiste Lopez violin, director
Valentina Giusti violin
Laura Morales Rejas violin
Séverine Cozette violin
Nina Candik violin
Antonio Viñuales Pérez violin
Kazumi Suzuki Krapf violin
Tamás Vásárhelyi violin

Fanny Tschanz violin
Katya Polin viola
Anne-Françoise Guezingar viola
Bodo Friedrich viola
Martin Zeller cello
Georg Dettweiler cello
Peter Pudil double bass
Stefan Preyer double bass

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Young Apollo Op. 16 (1939)

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este from *Années de pèlerinage, troisième année* S163 (1877-82)

La lugubre gondola S200 (1882-5)

Malédiction S121 (1833-40)

Interval

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Divertimento in B flat K137 (1772)

*I. Andante • II. Allegro di molto •
III. Allegro assai*

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Divertimento for string orchestra BB118 (1939)

*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Molto adagio •
III. Allegro assai*

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All tonight's composers were travellers: we have British Britten in North America and Hungarian Bartók in Switzerland, both in August 1939, then Hungarian Liszt and Austrian Mozart (probably) in Italy in the 18th and 19th centuries.

The two pieces here called 'Divertimento' could not be more different. We know very little of Mozart's K137 except that he probably wrote it for his trip to Italy in 1772. To build on the great success of previous visits, he needed to return with a portfolio full of new work, the more adaptable the better. A piece like this could be chamber music or (by adding bass, horns, oboes or bassoons) orchestral fare: K137 is also known as 'Salzburg Symphony No. 2'. In any format it would be unusual as it opens with its slowest and longest movement followed by two faster, dance-like movements. Only one common genre in Mozart's time did this: the Sonata da Chiesa (church sonata), whose grave opening reflected its sacred purpose. This music, with its flourishes and leaps from high to low registers, is more theatrical than holy.

Bartók harked back to Mozart's era as he wrote his *Divertimento*: 'I feel like a musician of the olden time, the invited guest of a patron of the arts.' That patron was a real hero of 20th-century music - Paul Sacher, who founded the Basel Chamber Orchestra in 1926. His passion for new music led him to commission Bartók, Stravinsky, Hindemith and Berio, to name just a few. He and Bartók were in contact throughout the 1930s, a contradictory decade for the composer; he loathed the Hungarian regime and watched the rise of the Nazis with particular fear as his wife was Jewish. Musically, however, he was blessed with successful commissions - Sacher alone commissioned *Music for strings, percussion and celesta* (1936), the *Sonata for 2 pianos and percussion* (1937), and this *Divertimento* (1939). One concern Sacher returns to repeatedly in his correspondence on the *Divertimento* is that it should not be too long or complicated and must be suitable for touring. Bartók responded: 'I have the idea of a kind of concerto grosso...' Making the principal players a soloistic group against the full ensemble, he offers constant shifting perspectives from intimate to grand, solo to *tutti*, close-up to remote, nowhere more so than in the slow movement with its magical soft chords like distant echoes.

We do not know why Bartók called this piece 'Divertimento', a choice he made very late in its creation. Indeed, he was notably cagey when asked anything about it. 'I can't say anything at all about the work except perhaps the form. I. movement, sonata form, II. approximating ABA, III. Rondo-like.' For a 'diversion', this piece has a lot of darkness, above all in the *Molto adagio*. Bartók seems to have written it

after the other two more upbeat movements, and some have sensed that it reflects his state of mind as he faced a terrible dilemma. He knew that with war looming, he and his wife should leave Hungary for good, but... 'my mother is here: now, in the last years of her life, to abandon her forever - no, this I cannot bring myself to do!' After she died in December 1939, the Bartóks fled to the USA, but in August of that year he was still torn.

Britten and Bartók were probably writing the music we hear tonight at the same time on either side of the Atlantic. *Young Apollo* is a flamboyant fanfare that was commissioned by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation for one of its Sunday music programmes and was premièred on 27 August 1939. It would be fascinating to know what impact it made as it burst onto the airwaves - this extrovert, brilliant and combative encounter between piano and strings which ends in what sounds like a musical face off. It is quite the crowd pleaser, so why did Britten withdraw it after just two performances? He never explained, but some suggest that the sun god of the title is an allusion to a former lover, Wulff Scherchen, so his deepening relationship with Peter Pears might have made this unpalatable.

Britten's *Young Apollo* and Liszt's *Malédiction* are young man's music, both written in their composers' 20s. Liszt is clearly out to test limits in his single movement fantasy - there is nothing like it written before. *Il più presto possibile* ('as fast as possible'), *sempre più di fuoco* ('with ever more fire') and *colla più gran forza e prestezza* ('with the greatest force and speed') are just three of the more notable directions to the players. The strings' first chords are marked *con furore*, and they set the Grand Guignol tone for this drama without words. To hear it alongside tonight's solo works is to meet the young and the mature Liszt (in his 60s and 70s) on the same evening. The luminous water fantasy of *Les jeux d'eaux à la Villa d'Este* touches on his deep faith: at a key moment, he quotes the Gospel of John on the score: *Sed aqua quam ego dabo ei, fiet in eo fons aquae salientis in vitam aeternam* ('...but the water that I shall give him shall be in him a well of water springing up into everlasting life.'). In contrast, *La lugubre gondola* is saturated in death and foreboding. The sight of funeral gondolas in Venice in 1882 gave Liszt a premonition of his son-in-law Richard Wagner's death. If you know Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde*, you may recognise Liszt's allusions to it as he transforms a gondoliers' folksong into music of deep grief and loss.

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