

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 15 November 2024
7.30pm

Llŷr Williams piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann in F sharp minor Op. 9 (1854)

6 Klavierstücke Op. 118 (by 1893)

*Intermezzo in A minor • Intermezzo in A •
Ballade in G minor • Intermezzo in F minor •
Romance in F • Intermezzo in E flat minor*

Interval

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor Op. 5 (1853)

*I. Allegro maestoso • II. Andante espressivo •
III. Scherzo. Allegro energico • IV. Intermezzo.
Andante molto • V. Finale. Allegro moderato ma
rubato*

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A prodigiously gifted pianist, Brahms was born and raised in Hamburg by supportive parents (his father was a professional musician). In 1853, aged 20, he met the renowned violinist Joseph Joachim; and Joachim soon arranged his introduction to Robert and Clara Schumann in Düsseldorf. The Schumanns – like Joachim – became central figures in the young Brahms's life, as dear friends and mentors. But the joy of their meeting was followed all too quickly by the drama of Robert Schumann's attempt to end his own life in February 1854 and his removal (at his own request) to a sanatorium near Bonn, where he would live out the remaining two years of his life.

Variation sets were a common form in the early 19th Century for demonstrating bravura display and the ingenious working-out of pre-existing themes. Brahms's own catalogue is full of theme-and-variation opuses and movements (not always explicitly labelled as such); but the *Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann* Op. 9 were his first to be published under that title. The theme is drawn from the first 'Albumblatt' from Robert's *Bunte Blätter* Op. 99, and significantly, Clara Schumann had written her own intensely beautiful set of variations on the same theme in 1853. Now just a year later, in the summer of 1854, Brahms set himself the same challenge. He sent the work piecemeal to Joseph Joachim, requesting feedback, and finished the whole by November. The manuscript bore a dedication to Clara Schumann, with whom Brahms was clearly enchanted by the time he composed the work: he wrote excitedly to Joachim that in one of the final variations he composed, 'Clara speaks!', and his letters are full of adoring, admiring remarks about her.

Brahms's *Variations* begin with the tearful theme he has borrowed from Robert. What follows initially extends and revoices this heartsore melody, before pushing us through stormy allegros and bleak, emptied-out textures in alternation – a glimpse into the musical laboratory, so to speak, of this highly creative young composer-pianist. Brahms sent the completed manuscript of the *Variations* to Eendenich, the sanatorium where Robert had been living for the past six months, in November 1854. He was enthusiastic, praising individual variations and remarking on his young friend's originality: 'one recognises you in the richest brilliance of your imagination and again in your profound artistry'. But strikingly, neither Brahms nor Clara Schumann ever performed the work in public. It was clearly too private, and too personal, to share with an audience of strangers.

We jump next to the other extreme of Brahms's career. In the last few decades of his life, he composed a number of single-movement pieces for solo piano which were published in a series of small groups – a clutch of *Intermezzi*, and several volumes of *Klavierstücke* – between 1879 and 1893. (Entirely characteristically for this ferociously self-critical composer, we know that more pieces were written than eventually made it into print.) The *Klavierstücke* Op. 118 bring together four *Intermezzi* (literally 'interludes', and of wildly varying character) with a brief *Ballade*, all fire and energy, and a warmly beautiful

Romance. In every case these are pieces of many moods, often with contrasting material at their core. The more we listen, the more subtle details and expressive ambiguities become audible, including subtle phrases and gestures which link the whole together.

Brahms sent the *Klavierstücke* to Clara Schumann in the summer of 1893 for her approval. Forty years after their first meeting, with not a few ups and downs in between, these two remained incredibly close. And although Brahms played these pieces in the home of friends in Vienna later that year, it was one of Clara Schumann's pupils who was entrusted with their public première: the young Hungarian pianist Ilona Eibenschütz, who performed the entire opus first in England in 1894, and later recorded the *Ballade* in 1903.

We end as we began, with the youthful, virtuoso Brahms of the 1850s. When he met the Schumanns, he was hard at work on a Piano Sonata in F minor, which he played in its entirety to Robert and Clara 'aus dem Kopf' (i.e. from memory, without the aid of a written score) on 2 November 1853. The Schumanns helped to secure Brahms a publishing deal for the piece in February 1854 – the month before Robert was removed to Eendenich.

The Sonata is littered with literary and musical allusions: to Beethoven, Schubert, Robert Schumann and Liszt. Everywhere there is contrast: subtle shifts of mood, tempo, tonal areas and rhythmic devices carry the texture from dense fistfuls of chords into quasi-chorales, lyrical melodies, closely imitative counterpoint and, in the *Scherzo*, a witty reworking of the finale of Felix Mendelssohn's C minor Piano Trio into dazzling triple-time. The *Finale*'s second section, after the initial statement of the rondo theme, begins with the note sequence 'F-A-E' – a hat-tip to Joseph Joachim, whose motto was 'Frei aber einsam' – 'Free but lonely'. The second movement bears a rather more direct literary reference in the form of a poetic epigram by CO Sternau (the pseudonym of Otto Julius Inkermann, a contemporary of the composer):

*Der Abend dämmert, das Mondlicht scheint
Da sind zwei Herzen in Liebe vereint
Und halten sich selig umfangen.*

*'The evening draws in, the moonlight shines
Two hearts are united in love
And hold themselves surrounded in bliss.'*

Perhaps the most intriguing movement in the Sonata is the fourth – a 'Rückblick' (roughly translatable as 'Looking back', or 'Remembrance'). Over the course of just two pages, Brahms seems to recall shapes and fragments of previous movements without ever referring to them directly. In certain ways, his entire artistic career is a continuation of this: glancing ever backwards over his shoulder, to conjure the music of his here and now.

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