WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 15 September 2024
7.30pm

Boris Giltburg piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 1 in F minor Op. 2 No. 1 (1793-5)
I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Menuetto. Allegretto • IV. Prestissimo

Piano Sonata No. 18 in E flat Op. 31 No. 3 'Hunt' (1802)
I. Allegro • II. Scherzo. Allegretto vivace • III. Menuetto. Moderato e grazioso • IV. Presto con fuoco

Interval

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

In 1795, the young Ludwig van Beethoven dedicated his Op. 2 piano sonatas to his former teacher, Joseph Haydn, with whom he had studied after moving to Vienna three years earlier. These were not his first: in 1782-3, whilst still a teenager in Bonn, he had written three piano sonatas (WoO. 47) dedicated to the Elector Maximilian Friedrich. Nonetheless, as his earliest published sonatas, Op. 2 marked the beginning of Beethoven's unique contribution to a genre that would accompany him throughout his life, documenting both his development as a composer and the evolution of the piano itself.

From the opening notes of the Sonata in F minor Op. 2 No. 1, a characteristic sense of drama is present: a broken chord, propelled upwards, that moves from *piano* to *fortissimo* and then suddenly pauses. This motif is then passed between the hands, leading into a second theme that is reminiscent of the first, but now descends. Both themes are explored further in the development section, before the opening material is reintroduced with renewed vigour. Following the beautiful slow movement, which features a lyrical, ornamented theme that comes from the 1785 Piano Quartet No. 3 in C (WoO. 36 No. 3), a strange *Menuetto* appears: far from elegant, it has an unsettled, almost gloomy character, featuring unexpected off-beat accents and sudden dynamic changes that keep the listener on edge. The *Prestissimo* finale is stormy and agitated, featuring whirling arpeggios in the left hand and terrifying chords in the right, and although peace seems to come in the operatic middle section, it is short-lived.

The Sonata in E flat Op. 31 No. 3 is the last in a set written in the summer of 1802, when Beethoven had retreated to the town of Heiligenstadt to 'rest his ears' and come to terms with his increasing deafness. It shares its key with other famous works from Beethoven's so-called middle period, such as the Third Symphony ('Eroica') and the Fifth Piano Concerto ('Emperor'). Far from anticipating the grand openings of these 'heroic' pieces, however, this sonata begins with a question: a repeated off-tonic seventh chord that then rises chromatically with a crescendo, until finally an answer comes with a cadence in E flat. Contrasting with this first theme is a second, cheeky and genial, and the subsequent manner in which Beethoven plays with both ideas makes this one of his most delightful sonata movements.

Beethoven eschews a slow movement in favour of a witty *Scherzo*, featuring a light and rapid staccato texture. The following *Menuetto* is pure elegance - Charles Rosen called it 'one of Beethoven's most sophisticated lyric inspirations' - although a touch of humour returns in the trio, with its persistent large chordal leaps. The finale is a tarentella-like movement full of energy and brilliance, and, according to Carl Czerny, 'must…produce nearly the effect of a hunting piece' (hence why this work is sometimes known as the 'Hunt' sonata).

From October 1816 to late 1817, Beethoven hardly composed at all; not only was his hearing continuing to deteriorate, but he suffered prolonged illness. At the end of 1817, he began to sketch what would become the *Grosse Sonata für das Hammerklavier* ('Grand Sonata for the Pianoforte') in B flat Op. 106. Scholars analysing this colossal work, renowned for its length and difficulty, have shown that it is permeated by two features at multiple melodic, harmonic and structural levels: the interval of a third, and the exploration of the tension between B flat and B natural. Even the huge fanfare-like chords that begin the first movement are structured around rising and falling thirds, as are many of the key relationships. Beethoven employs six different themes in the exposition, and then develops them using complex harmonic and contrapuntal techniques, including a *fugato* that eventually lands in the remote key of B major. This magical moment is just one example of the oppositional relationship between flats and naturals that is exploited everywhere in this movement, one that is also emphasised in the coda of the following *Scherzo*. The second movement is otherwise generally playful, although a darker mood prevails in the trio.

The slow movement, one of Beethoven's most profound creations, is marked 'Appassionato e con molto sentimento', but its outpouring of tragic emotion is layered, spun out across a vast canvas that plumbs the depths of spiritual expression. Although the main theme, in F sharp minor, is an evocation of great pain, Beethoven still reaches for the light at many points across the movement, firstly with a wondrous shift to G major after the theme's initial statement, and then a more static, murmuring theme in D major that later returns in F sharp major. In between these radiant glimpses, the main theme returns in several highly embellished, operatic-like variations that sing out in lament. This is a movement of powerful contrasts, between melodic and chordal textures, consonance and dissonance (particularly evoked through lingering diminished seventh chords), motion and stasis, desolation and hope.

After ending the *Adagio* in F sharp major, Beethoven steps down to F natural, launching into a partly Bach-inspired improvisatory transition to the final movement, again featuring a falling third and modulating through several keys to finally land us back in B flat major. The massive three-voice fugue that follows is notable not just for its extreme technical demands but its aggressive counterpoint and audacious dissonances. Here, Beethoven wields (albeit with 'some freedom' - *alcune licenze*) a range of polyphonic devices in the service of what Donald Tovey calls 'a dramatic force at white heat'. Whilst a brief *cantabile* section in D major gives a moment of respite, the fugue then resumes, building up to a wild, jubilant climax. It is as if Beethoven has finally achieved true liberation - as, indeed, he had, from the formal restrictions of the Classical sonata, transforming it, 23 years on from Op. 2, into something almost unrecognisable.