

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 16 February 2024
7.30pm

Daniel Lehardt piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

4 Ballades Op. 10 (1854)

*Ballade in D minor 'Edward' • Ballade in D •
Ballade in B minor • Ballade in B*

György Ligeti (1923-2006)

Automne à Varsovie from *Etudes Book 1* (1985)

Aleksandr Skryabin (1872-1915)

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F sharp minor Op. 23 (1897)

*I. Drammatico • II. Allegretto • III. Andante •
IV. Presto con fuoco*

Interval

Aleksandr Skryabin

Vers la flamme Op. 72 (1914)

György Ligeti

Vertige from *Etudes Book 2* (1988-94)

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

3 Studies Op. 18 (1918)

*Allegro molto • Andante sostenuto •
Rubato - Tempo giusto*

György Ligeti

White on White from *Etudes Book 3* (1995-2001)

Béla Bartók

Out of Doors BB89 (1926)

*With Drums and Pipes • Barcarolla • Musettes •
The Night's Music • The Chase*

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Bartók and Ligeti are compatriots of tonight's Hungarian-born pianist, Daniel Lehardt. But **Brahms's** music too is replete with Hungarian influences, and he was close friends with the Hungarian violinists Eduard Reményi and Joseph Joachim.

Soon after writing his *Variations on a Hungarian Song* for solo piano, Brahms turned in 1854 to the ballade. Chopin had completed his fourth and final work in the genre around a decade earlier, and it can be no accident that Brahms produced four of his own. As a type, the ballade suggests a narrative quality but Brahms's *Ballade No. 1* goes further: its inspiration was a specific tale, that of the Scottish ballad 'Edward' from the folk-poetry collection *Stimmen in der Völker* ('Voices of the people') compiled by JG Herder and published (in its second edition) in 1807. The text is a dialogue in which a mother asks her son whose blood drips from his dagger. A hawk, or a horse, he says, before admitting he has slain his own father. Brahms's response follows the question-and-answer form of the poem, alternating stark, widely spaced chords – frozen with despair – with softer, chorale-like replies. The middle section blazes bright with grand fanfares but the end (returning to the opening music) is darkly unsettled.

By contrast, the *Ballade No. 2* opens in autumnal lyricism, its spread-out chords proudly displayed like plumage, and gently swayed by the syncopated bass line accompaniment. Its middle section begins with rhythmic insistence and continues with a staccato episode that could have been written by Schumann.

Labelled 'Intermezzo', No. 3 is a scherzo – somewhat bony and lolloping in movement. Schumann called it 'demoniacal'. The hushed middle section is less earthbound: a celestial chorale, gently punctuated by a cuckoo call.

The splendid melodic arc and descending arpeggio-like figuration of No. 4 marks another return to the realm of Schumann. But the intimate middle section explores a semi-observed texture, setting groups of two notes against groups of three, a combination for which Brahms had a particular affection.

Like the ballade, the étude was another form elevated by Chopin. Debussy tipped it into the 20th Century and **György Ligeti** dragged it into the 21st, writing 18 in all, many of which test to the limit not only the physical dexterity but also the mental capacity of the pianist.

Automne à Varsovie ('Autumn in Warsaw'), with the twice-contradictory marking 'Presto cantabile, molto ritmico e flessibile' ('Fast and lyrical, very rhythmic and flexible'), was dedicated to 'my Polish friends'. The seasonal reference of the title is borne out in the falling chromatic line (like drifting leaves), often overlaid and circling at different speeds, amid a perpetual-motion, repeated-note accompaniment.

Vertige ('Vertigo') is one of the most dizzying – and dizzyingly difficult – of the *Études*, related to the spiral forms found in nature and also reflecting the composer's fascination with the impossible, illusory repeating staircases of the Dutch graphic artist MC Escher. It features

apparently endlessly descending chromatic runs, which Ligeti said 'break over each other like waves from different directions'.

There is slower spiralling in *White on White* – played until near the end only on the white keys of the piano. The first section is gently lyrical and eventually winds itself down, before breaking into a wild, brilliant section, showcasing Ligeti's fondness for overlapping circular patterns.

Skryabin's Third Piano Sonata stems from the 1890s, at which time he was hailed as the 'Russian Chopin'. It presents a much more straightforwardly Romantic style than the later *Vers la flamme*, which we hear after the interval. The sonata's third movement is especially fetching: luminous and transparent. Tatiana Schloezer, Skryabin's mistress, penned an accompanying text, titled *State of the Soul*. Tracing a soul's journey in four stages, one for each of the sonata's four movements, it starts with the 'free, untamed soul ... [in] pain and strife' and continues with 'illusory peace' even though the soul remains 'uneasy, wounded'. In the third movement the soul 'floats on a sea of gentle emotion and melancholy'. This leads directly to the final *Presto*, where the soul 'struggles as if intoxicated', only to fall dramatically 'into the abyss of nothingness'.

According to the great pianist Vladimir Horowitz (a notable champion of Skryabin), *Vers la flamme* ('Towards the flame') was inspired by the idea of the Earth's eventual fiery destruction, a suitably apocalyptic vision for a composer who had a Messiah complex and was planning a magnum opus – *Mysterium*, combining music, dance, lights and perfume – so epic that it would transfigure humanity. *Vers la flamme* is more humble but opens in heady, chromatic mysticism and undergoes a continuous escalation, amid blazing tremolos.

Excellent pianist though he was, **Bartók** admitted that he couldn't play his brilliant and aggressive *3 Studies*. No. 1 is a thrilling, motoric blur with characteristic irregular rhythmic patterns and subtle shifts of tempo. The hand stretches border on cruelty. No. 2 makes a feature of widely spaced rippling arpeggios in the right hand, later transferring into the left hand and breaking into handfuls of chords. We hear some of the harmonic washes that also occur in Bartók's disturbing psychological drama *Duke Bluebeard's Castle*. Apart from requiring fierce independence of the hands, the challenges of No. 3 include rapidly shifting time signatures.

Bartók's *Out of Doors* suite, formed of five descriptive pieces, comes from 1926, the year the composer began the 153 'Progressive Piano Pieces' that make up the collection *Mikrokosmos*. *With Drums and Pipes* is the rhythmic, percussive opener. It is followed by a *Barcarolle*, a form derived from the gently rocking Venetian gondola song, though here the lilt is subtly irregular. The haunting *Musettes* makes a feature of drones and dissonances, while *Night Music* is one of the many eerie nocturnal nature-evocations that punctuate Bartók's works. *The Chase* is self-explanatory, propelled by rattling, continuous left-hand semiquavers.

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