

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 16 January 2023
1.00pm

Shani Diluka piano

Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

Arietta from *Lyric Pieces* Op. 12 (1866-7)

To the spring from *Lyric Pieces* Op. 43 (1886)

From *Lyric Pieces* Op. 54 (1889-91)

Notturmo • March of the Trolls

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

From *12 Lieder von Schubert* S558 (1837-8)

Ständchen • Auf dem Wasser zu singen

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

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 8 in C minor Op. 13 'Pathétique' (1797-8)

I. Grave - Allegro di molto e con brio •

II. Adagio cantabile • *III. Rondo. Allegro*

BBC
RADIO



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3

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Grieg was a tiny man – the life-sized statue in his home city of Bergen is hard to believe – and a lucky one: a countryman inspired by folk-fiddle and dance, happily married to the singer of his dreams. He is the composer of the most typical and beloved of what I think of as Darwinian piano concertos, where the 19th Century's increasingly technologised pianos were set to subdue the forces of nature, represented by the orchestra. This great work and the violin sonatas show that he possessed musically expansive powers. But the body of work that most defines him consists of pieces as surprisingly short as their author, and a new genre, at that. Just as the Mendelssohns had developed the 'Song without Words', so Grieg invented the 'Lyric Piece'.

Even within the technical limits Grieg allowed himself for the sets of *Lyric Pieces* that Peters Edition was so keen for him to produce, Grieg's originality of harmony, national twists of melody and dance rhythm, and occasional folk-fiddle textures, enabled him to produce remarkable tiny masterpieces, sometimes astoundingly advanced in sound. 'To the Spring' is one of the pieces Grieg himself recorded. 'March of the Trolls' reminds us of Grieg's country home overlooking a fjord south of Bergen: as he wrote to a friend when describing his plans for a fund-raising concert, 'I shall pocket the money and bury it beneath Troidhaugen, the name of my villa: *Trold* means goblin, and *Haug* is hill. It would be great if a real crowd of musical goblins took up their abode there!'

Troidhaugen houses the piano that Steinway gave Grieg towards the end of his life, and in the grounds is a concert hall with a window behind the stage giving an extraordinary view down the fjord. Bergen's popularity as a cruise-ship port ensures a constant flow of visitors from around the world, all of whom know Grieg's melodies. In the great rock beneath the villa are entombed the bodies of Grieg and his wife, Nina. A remarkable place, that breathes the spirit of Grieg.

'Suddenly there appeared the most extraordinary person I had ever seen. Tall, extremely thin, pale, with large, sea-green eyes flashing with sudden brilliance like waves glinting in the sun, strong features shot through with suffering, hesitant in his movements and seeming to glide rather than walk, seemingly preoccupied yet at the same time restless, like a ghost waiting for the clock to strike and summon him back to the shades.' Thus wrote the Countess Marie d'Agoult, who bore **Liszt's** three children. George Eliot was just as impressed, later on, in a different way. She wrote: 'Liszt is the first really inspired man I ever saw. His face might serve as a model for a St. John in its sweetness when he is in repose, but seated at the piano he is as grand as one of Michelangelo's prophets. He is a glorious creature in every way – a bright genius, with a tender, loving nature, and a face in which this combination is perfectly expressed.'

In March 1838, sipping a coffee in the Piazza San Marco, Liszt glanced over someone's shoulder to read the headlines of their German newspaper, to discover that Budapest had suffered a catastrophic flood. He immediately set off from Venice, arriving after a few weeks in Vienna, where he had studied with Czerny. He quickly arranged charity concerts to raise money for the flood victims further down the Danube. (He had not returned to his native Hungary for 15 years, and this was the event that suddenly made him feel Hungarian.) His concerts included performances of Schubert songs in which he accompanied Benedict Randhartinger, the Director of the Court Opera. His appetite thus whetted, he proceeded to transcribe Schubert songs for solo piano, including them in his charity concerts too.

Ständchen or 'Serenade' is a setting of Shakespeare's 'Hark, hark! the lark', from *Cymbeline*. *Auf dem Wasser zu singen* ('To be sung upon the waters') records an evening boat-trip, ending with an anticipation of boat-trips to come.

The third piece, 'The fountains at the Villa d'Este' at Tivoli in the hills above Rome, is an audio souvenir of Liszt's frequent visits to the acting Cardinal who lived there, given a religious aspect by a biblical quotation about 'The Water of Life'.

Beethoven moved to Vienna from Bonn in 1792, so by 1798 he was a familiar star in the city's musical life. The three Op. 10 piano sonatas came out in September that year, as Beethoven was revising his Second Piano Concerto, ready for a trip to Prague. The year also saw the publication of the Op. 12 violin sonatas, the beginning of the composition of Beethoven's most popular work, the Septet, and the composition of the 'Pathétique' Sonata, which alone of all the works mentioned shakes off the formal garlands of the 18th Century and sweeps us on into the 19th.

Yet it does retain one surprising 18th-century virtue – it can be played on the harpsichord. Indeed, the title-page explicitly says 'for the harpsichord or piano'. Certain aspects of the writing work very well on the harpsichord. The opening chords sound marvellous, 'rolled' in the harpsichord fashion; the hand-crossing in the first movement is much more effective on two keyboards; and the strange layout of the tune and accompaniment in the slow movement – so familiar that we rarely register it – is carefully calculated to make it possible to play *without* sustaining pedal – which is absent from the harpsichord, of course. The piano is not forgotten – Beethoven also marks *crescendos* and *diminuendos*. I like to imagine the impetuous Beethoven improvising cadenzas in the pauses before each return of the rondo theme.

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