

# WIGMORE HALL 125

Thursday 16 October 2025  
1.00pm

Illia Ovcharenko piano

John Corigliano (b.1938)

Fantasia on an Ostinato (1985)

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Etudes in Variation Form on a Theme by Beethoven WoO. 31  
(1832-5)

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

II. Allegretto from Symphony No. 7 in A Op. 92 (1811-12) *arranged  
by Franz Liszt*

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Piano Sonata in B minor S178 (1852-3)  
*I. Lento assai • II. Andante sostenuto •  
III. Allegro energico • IV. Andante sostenuto*



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The first three works on Illia Ovcharenko's programme are either literally based on or inspired by the second movement of Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, that rare conflation of melody, harmony and rhythm, sewn into an ostinato of elemental simplicity, all in the volatile and tragic key of A minor.

The prolific American composer **John Corigliano** is probably best known for his film score for *The Red Violin* (1998), adapted as his Violin Concerto for Joshua Bell in 2003, and for his opera *The Ghosts of Versailles* (premiered in 1991). Corigliano wrote his *Fantasia on an ostinato* as a test piece for the 1985 Van Cliburn Competition. He described it as his 'first experiment in minimalist techniques', giving the performer considerable licence in the duration of repeated passages, to the extent that the duration of the piece can vary hugely. The *Fantasia* circles the famous theme of the *Allegretto* movement from Beethoven's Symphony No. 7, which is revealed in full at the end of the piece, while the central section's obsessive repeated notes evoke the games Beethoven played with the same device in his symphony. Corigliano later orchestrated the work, with the notation leaving nothing to chance.

**Robert Schumann's** *Etudes in variation form on a theme by Beethoven* are repertoire rarities. He wrote them in his early 20s, around 1833 and the time that his hand problems would rule out any hopes of a career as a virtuoso pianist. As with the *Symphonic Studies*, Op. 13, the *Beethoven Variations* are as much studies as variations, and both sets had a complicated gestation. Unlike the later *Symphonic Studies*, the *Beethoven Variations* never came near a final version and were consigned to the status of *Werke ohne Opuszahl* (WoO, works without opus number), only published posthumously in 1976. Between 1831 and 1835, Schumann wrote 15 variations, organised into three versions, the first with 11 variations, the second with nine, and the third with seven; one variation was pressed unchanged into service as 'Leides Ahnung' ('Foreboding'), the second piece in his *Albumblätter*, Op. 124. The whole project is a thicket of unfinished business, sketches and later editorial intrusion, but Schumann's skill in expanding the narrow range of the tune – almost a melody on one note in places – with great eloquence, especially in the slow canonic chorale supporting the main tune as a solemn *cantus firmus* and in his treatment of the counter-melody, suggesting that Schumann knew Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* well. For the record, Mr Ovcharenko's selection is: Variations 1, B7 (that is, from the third version), 4, A10 and A11 (from the second version), B4; then 2, 3, 7 (from the first version); followed by A6, B5 ('Leides Ahnung' in *Albumblätter*) and B3, then ending with a repeat of Variation 1, in total a sequence of 13 variations.

**Beethoven** apparently could not abide child prodigies, and biographers' and critics' reports of the 12-year-old Franz Liszt's audience with the profoundly

deaf composer in April 1823 and the latter's 'kiss of consecration' on the child's brow were wildly imaginative. The event quickly became the stuff of musical myth, but it seems that they did meet, once. Many years later, after Liszt had turned his back on the life of a touring virtuoso, he worked generously on keeping the Beethoven flame alight for the next generation, most notably in the piano transcriptions of the nine symphonies he made between the mid-1830s and 1863. He kept scrupulously close to the originals, without the Lisztian glitter that figure in his arrangements of other composers' music. He was guided by the capabilities of the human hand as much as by the significant technological development of the piano as an instrument of ever-greater range, tonal colour and expression. The transcriptions demand superlative technique as much as great musicianship, and the Symphony No. 7 has the reputation of being the most challenging. For the performer's benefit Liszt makes Beethoven's instrumentation clear in the score, and the contrapuntal element in the *Allegretto* second movement is a model of lucidity.

Schubert, not Beethoven, provided the model for **Liszt's** Sonata in B minor, which appeared in 1853, by which time Liszt had settled in Weimar, at the start of his 40-year relationship with Princess Carolyne zu Sayn-Wittgenstein. Schubert had composed some marvellous Fantasies, including the F minor for piano duet, the one for violin and piano, and the mighty 'Wanderer' Fantasy for solo piano, which Liszt greatly admired. Not only did he play it often in recital but he also arranged it for piano and orchestra around the time he was working on his own Sonata.

Beethoven and Schubert played a central role in expanding the form's emotional and psychological reach, far removed from the formulaic. In the 'Wanderer' Fantasy, Schubert had made whole sections function both as movements of a sonata and of the formal sonata process. Liszt's approach is much the same, although, not surprisingly, Liszt piles on the drama, especially in developing his themes. Each one has its own character, but they relate strongly to each other. They also provide a coherent sense of drama that can be at once visionary, noble and intensely dramatic. The music is so instantly characterised that it sounds like an unfolding story – the quiet opening, with octave Gs followed by a sinister descending motif, leading to a volcanic eruption of energy, presents three main elements that return in various guises showing off Liszt's genius for manipulating his material to maximum expressive effect. Liszt's love of Goethe's version of the Faust legend has been cited as the programme of the Sonata, referring to Faust, Gretchen and Mephistopheles, although the composer apparently did not allude to this. The four sections, with a slow movement and a fugato *Scherzo*, are rounded off by a transcendent, redemptive epilogue.

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