

WIGMORE HALL 125

Wednesday 17 December 2025
1.00pm

Leeds Piano Competition 2024 Prizewinner Recital

Khanh Nhi Luong piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in A D664 (?1819)

I. Allegro moderato • II. Andante • III. Allegro

Kate Whitley (b.1990)

Five Tiny Piano Pieces (2015)

*Declamatory • Spacious • Aggressive •
Sad • Triumphant*

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Intermezzo in A minor Op. 118 No. 1 (1893)

Intermezzo in A Op. 118 No. 2

Henri Dutilleux (1916-2013)

Piano Sonata (1946-8)

I. Allegro con moto • II. Lied • III. Choral et variations



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Like Beethoven's modest, lighter Fourth Symphony, which falls between the heavyweight Third ('Eroica') and the mighty Fifth, **Franz Schubert's** Piano Sonata in A D664 presents an oasis of calm between its more sombre neighbours – the sonatas in F minor, D625, and in A minor, D784. Most sources suggest that D664 was written while the composer enjoyed a two-month summer holiday in Steyr, Upper Austria, with his friend the baritone Johann Michael Vogl. Schubert wrote of the 'unimaginably lovely' countryside there, but he was evidently equally enamoured of Josefine von Koller, the daughter of one of his hosts, to whom he dedicated the sonata. Despite its modest scale, D664 remains one of the most popular of Schubert's 14 completed piano sonatas, and the earliest to have established itself in the repertoire.

The first movement opens with a melody of delectable simplicity, buoyed by a regular quaver-movement accompaniment. The second idea makes use of a long-short-short rhythmic figure that Beethoven famously used in his Seventh Symphony (and to which Schubert returned often, including in his 'Rosamunde' and 'Death and the Maiden' quartets); the left hand here breaks into quicker triplets. The development contains the sonata's only suggestion of darkness, not least in a brief eruption of octaves. A single musical idea is the basis for the second movement, starting as a warm, sighing chorale and continuing as a song with running accompaniment. Already at this stage of Schubert's piano-sonata journey – what one commentator has called 'the end of the beginning' – there's a sense of revealing the fragile vulnerabilities of the human spirit, and turning them to the sublime. The opening of the *Allegro* skips along without a care, and whether whirling, rustic or waltz-like, the spirit of dance seems always present.

Aside from being a composer and pianist, **Kate Whitley** is also Artistic Director and co-founder of the Multi-Story Orchestra, known for its performances at the Bold Tendencies car park in Peckham. Written in her mid-20s, her *Five Tiny Piano Pieces* are nuggets of taut concentration. 'Declamatory' starts with starbursting gestures, whereas its successor, 'Spacious', inhabits a realm of quiet resonance. It acts almost as a transition to 'Aggressive', which speaks for itself, mainly in the lower register. The intensity of the penultimate piece, 'Sad', is drawn partly from its preponderance of trills (including in both hands simultaneously). 'Triumphant' is unsurprisingly the most ostentatious of the set – could bells be ringing? – but, as with its neighbours, it burns out fast.

The 20 short pieces contained in **Johannes Brahms's** late well-spring of piano works, Opp. 116-119, are among the most poignant, poetic and introspective in the piano repertoire – a culmination both of the composer's relationship with the piano and his expressive powers in his autumn years. More than half of each set (including all three of Op. 117) are classed as Intermezzos – 14 in all. The Op. 118 set was dedicated to Clara Schumann, to whom Brahms had been an intimate friend since the

death of her husband Robert in 1856. On receiving the published scores for Opp. 118 and 119, Clara wrote: 'Oh, if only I could find words to express what the new pieces mean to me, what a cordial they are to my soul!'

The Intermezzo in A minor has a passionate sweep, underpinned by the wide, surging arpeggios rippling across the hands. The tender A major Intermezzo, one of the most popular pieces from the four sets, carries an undercurrent of unspoken regret within its eloquent lyricism. The middle section features Brahms's much-loved overlaying of notes grouped in threes with notes grouped in twos, as well as a quietly ravishing bell-like chorale.

Henri Dutilleux was a giant in 20th- and 21st-century French music even if he was overshadowed by Olivier Messiaen and then by Pierre Boulez. Born during the lifetimes of Satie and Fauré, Dutilleux witnessed a succession of musical fashions and techniques, among them serialism, Minimalism and spectralism (composing based on the intrinsic timbral quality of sounds), and his life spanned the inventions of the theremin and ondes Martenot as well as the rise of electroacoustic and computer-based music emanating from the research centre, IRCAM, in Paris. His early Piano Sonata was written for his wife, the pianist Geneviève Joy, soon after the German occupation, during which Dutilleux had eked out a living by teaching harmony, coaching singers and playing in nightclubs, restaurants and cafés. This was the work he saw as his 'Opus 1' – composed, he said, at a time 'when I was busy trying to find my own voice'.

You can almost hear the spirit of Fauré in the easy-going motion and intertwined melody/accompaniment of the first theme, but we soon move into the spikier territory of Prokofiev or Bartók. Repeated heavy bass notes lead to a new idea, quite jazzy with its suaver harmonies and offbeat accompaniment. This builds to a climax which then clarifies in texture as the first theme returns. Marked by a darker, more contemplative mood, the second-movement *Lied* has an impression of the mystical, a feature Dutilleux shared with Messiaen though he didn't share his slightly older counterpart's religious devotion. The tightly controlled compass here creates a mood of intimacy, but one that tends towards claustrophobia. At the end, the languorous chromatic harmonies resolve, almost anticlimactically, in a simple, major-key resolution. The titanic 'chorale' theme of the finale is followed by four variations: the first rather like a spiky devil's dance, the second even quicker, working towards a climax but then receding in a haze of smoke.

Out of this emerges the third variation, with the theme flanked with harmonic elaboration above and below. The toccata-like final variation is underlined by brilliance and strands of crystal clarity before the monolithic chorale returns in conclusion.

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