WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 17 March 2024
7.30pm

Katya Apekisheva piano

We kindly request the audience holds applause between Bartók's 3 Hungarian Folk Songs and Liszt's Hungarian Rhapsody which will run attacca

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)
15 Hungarian Peasant Songs BB79 (1914-8)
1-4: Four Old Tunes • 5: Scherzo •
6: Ballad. Theme with variations •
7-15: Old Dance Tunes

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)
7 Fantasien Op. 116 (by 1892)
Capriccio in D minor • Intermezzo in A minor •
Capriccio in G minor • Intermezzo in E •
Intermezzo in E minor • Intermezzo in E •
Capriccio in D minor

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)
3 Klavierstücke D946 (1828)
Klavierstück in E flat minor • Klavierstück in E flat •
Klavierstück in C

Béla Bartók
3 Hungarian Folksongs from Csík BB45b (1907)
Rubato • L'istesso tempo • Poco vivo

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)
Hungarian Rhapsody No. 12 in C sharp minor S244 (1846-53)

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Bela Bartók knew the difference between a *Csárdás* and a *Verbunkos* before he could talk, and when he started formal piano lessons with his mother at the age of five, he already had a repertoire of 40 pieces. He gave his first recital at the age of 11. He was an enthusiastic Hungarian patriot. His early tone-poem *Kossuth*, about a Hungarian hero of 1848, alienated all the Austrians both in his audience and his orchestra, and he turned down an Imperial scholarship to study in Vienna in favour of paying his own way as a student in Budapest. From 1906, Bartók collected Hungarian folksongs with a phonograph; a number of professional disasters in 1910 discouraged Bartók from original composition, and he redoubled his folklore efforts. By 1918, he had collected 2721 Hungarian, 3500 Romanian and 3000 Slovak folksongs. The *15 Hungarian Peasant Songs* were published in 1920, but the set of three from Csík had to wait till 1942, when they were published as a homage to Paderewski, who had died in 1941.

Johannes Brahms's supporters vied to dominate the musical arguments of the late 19th Century, setting up their hero much as Gladstone to Wagner's more colourful Disraeli. It's easy to see the conventionally bearded Brahms as a symbol of the Establishment, whatever that was. Yet the romantic details of his career are well-known – his upbringing on the sleazy side of Hamburg; his scraped acquaintance with Schumann, who nearly devoured him, spiritually; his role as the only link between Robert and his wife Clara, once he was in the asylum and she forbidden to visit him; his – was it an escape? – to Vienna, after Schumann's death; his close but prickly life-long friendship with Clara. The critic WR Anderson summed him up: 'He was at times a too self-conscious democrat: magnificently sure in his art, he never quite mastered the art of life; nor did he ever adventure upon marriage.'

Brahms confided his secret passions to his piano in four late sets of piano pieces published in 1892 and 1893 – some, he said, were 'lullabies to his sorrows'. Op. 116 was his first solo piano work for more than a decade. Like Op. 76 of 1878, it consists of capriccios and intermezzi, but whereas in Op. 76 they were 'pieces', in Op. 116 they're 'fantasies'. Not an insignificant detail.

On 26 March 1828, **Schubert** gave his public concert – just the one, in his whole lifetime. It dropped like a very small pebble into the Viennese musical pool, completely eclipsed by the enormous splash made by Paganini that same week. The receipts were soon spent, and Schubert, his health affected by the early industrial fug of Vienna, was so hard-up that he had to refuse offers from well-wishers even of almost free holidays in the country. That May he composed these three piano pieces, which were not published till 40 years later, edited by Brahms. In September, in an attempt to find cleaner air, he went to stay with his brother Ferdinand in his new apartment in a developing suburb. He was expecting to die from syphilis: but because the well in Ferdinand's courtyard was not dug deep enough, syphilis found itself in a race with typhoid. On 19 November, at the age of 31, Schubert died.

The pieces are carefully contrasted. The first, tempestuous in E flat minor, moves to a consoling B major for a slower middle section. The second, in a serene E flat major, seems to be winding to a conclusion when it suddenly takes a quiet plunge into A flat minor (a key even more extreme than E flat minor), and then to B minor, before resuming A flat minor again. The eventual brief return of E flat major scarcely resolves the unsettling undercurrents. The third piece, in C major, is taut, nervous and unexpected in its pacing, until it relaxes into a very broad waltz in D flat, very similar to the finale of the B flat Piano Trio that he wrote about this time.

'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: '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.'

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. Liszt returned to his Hungarian homeland for the first time since he left it in 1823, pausing in Vienna on the way to raise money. Back in Hungary at last in 1840, Liszt became captivated by the music of the Hungarian Romani people, and left detailed descriptions of how he found it. (Later Hungarian folklorists, like Bartók, drew more careful distinctions between Hungarian Romani music and other sorts of Hungarian folk music.) Liszt longed to incorporate everything he heard into a single massive work: 'a National Epic', he wrote, 'and the strange tongue in which its strains would be delivered would be no stranger than everything else done by the people from whom it emanated.'

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