

# WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 17 September 2023  
7.30pm

Elisabeth Leonskaja piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Sonata No. 1 in C Op. 1 (1852-3)

*I. Allegro*

*II. Andante (nach einem altdeutschen Minneliede)*

*III. Allegro molto e con fuoco - Più mosso*

*IV. Allegro con fuoco - Presto non troppo ed agitato*

Piano Sonata No. 2 in F sharp minor Op. 2 (1852)

*I. Allegro non troppo, ma energico*

*II. Andante con espressione*

*III. Scherzo. Allegro - Trio. Poco più moderato*

*IV. Finale. Sostenuto – Allegro non troppo e rubato*

Interval

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor Op. 5 (1853)

*I. Allegro maestoso*

*II. Andante espressivo*

*III. Scherzo. Allegro energico*

*IV. Intermezzo. Andante molto*

*V. Finale. Allegro moderato ma rubato*



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For the boyish 20-year-old **Brahms** the year 1853 was nothing short of miraculous. Family life was borderline-dysfunctional, presided over by Brahms's father, a jobbing musician in Hamburg. Financially he flew by the seat of his pants, but he quickly discerned his son's precocious musicality. Two piano teachers, Otto Cossel and later Eduard Marxsen, not only guided the boy to acquiring his impressive technique but also helped him make up his mind between a career as performer or composer. Brahms's childhood had been an odd mixture of nurture, luck and chaos, including the period when, barely a teenager, he played piano in the sordid brothels of Hamburg to bolster the family finances. Brahms was also a voracious reader, and this singular background seemed to guarantee his status as one of the 19th Century's great Romantic figures.

Yet it wasn't so straightforward. In 1850 Brahms had first met and accompanied the firebrand Hungarian violinist Eduard (or Ede) Reményi. Their recital tour late in 1852 led to two fateful meetings. The first, in May 1853 in Hanover, was with the 22-year-old violin virtuoso Joseph Joachim, marking the start of an enduring, often tortured friendship. It also quickly led to an introduction to Franz Liszt - high-priest of the New German School and champion of Richard Wagner. But Brahms, while humbled by Liszt's playing, knew that the older man's music was not for him; and this sowed the seed for the famous divide between conservative, Beethovenian Brahms and the new music of Wagner. Then, as the autumn of 1853 drew in, and having met some of the biggest names in music, the young man travelled to Düsseldorf and rang the Schumanns' doorbell.

The visit was life-changing. Robert and Clara Schumann could not have been warmer or more extravagant in their praise. Both were as impressed by his music as they were by his arresting blond-haired, blue-eyed good looks, and while the young man was socially diffident, at the piano he assumed total control. This meeting, of course, occurred 25 years before Brahms took to curmudgeonly, bearded self-protection. The Schumanns quickly discerned his extraordinary self-possession and fierce self-criticism, which would later be filtered through extremes of taciturn privacy. The Schumanns very likely also saw in the young man's music a corrective to Lisztian, Romantic hyperbole. Brahms was, certainly, a gifted melodist, but one who learned to deploy classical structures both to contain and heighten expression, a less-is-more approach that increasingly gave his music its substance, integrity and emotionally charged ambiguity.

Two of the 'veiled symphonies' (Robert Schumann's words) that Brahms played to the Schumanns were the first two works in tonight's programme. The Piano Sonata No. 1 in C (dedicated to Joachim) was completed after the Piano Sonata No. 2, but was

published first. The mighty opening is in the spirit of Beethoven's 'Hammerklavier' Sonata, but already marked by Brahms's pianistic signatures – a heroic statement he then deconstructs into something more fluid and polyphonic. The *Andante* is based on a medieval German love song (the words, full of moon imagery, are printed in the score under the tune). It is in Brahms's beloved variation form, with the fourth turning from C minor to major, in a more extended meditation that also prepares the way for the fiery scherzo. Both movements are already full of Brahms's inventiveness in dissolving certainties of rhythm and bar-lines. The finale is a rondo peppered with time-signature changes, with a central episode in A minor given to a melody inspired by Robert Burns's poem 'My Heart's in the Highlands'.

The Sonata No. 2 in F sharp minor (dedicated to Clara Schumann as 'a small token of my reverence and gratitude') opens in a similar dramatic vein, followed by a figure in the bass that drives the movement's organic development. The slow movement is a set of variations based on the 13th-century love song 'Mir ist Leide'. Again, the fourth turns to the major, dwelling on the sad melody while preparing the way for the minor-key *Scherzo*, which follows without a break as a fifth variation. After the Schubertian hunting-horn *Trio*, the abbreviated return to the *Scherzo* ends with some Beethovenian long trills. The *Finale*, not a rondo but in sonata-form, opens with a slow, cadenza-like improvisation – Brahms would do something similar in the finales of his Piano Quintet and Symphony No. 1 – that returns, blissfully recast as a slow coda in F sharp major.

Brahms worked on his Sonata No. 3 in F minor while staying with the Schumanns as a guest. Its most obvious feature is the addition of an *Intermezzo* between the *Scherzo* and the *Finale*. This casts a look back to the passionate *Andante* second movement, at the top of which Brahms briefly quoted a poem by CO Sternau about lovers in the moonlight. The closing bars, where the measure changes from three to four beats in a bar, magically discharge some of the most erotic music Brahms wrote.

In the first movement, Brahms takes the deconstruction of the opening bars' heavy heroics much further than in the Sonata No. 1, and his transformations of theme and gesture is remarkably organic. The ultra-dynamic *Scherzo* has a strangely veiled and static central trio, while the rondo finale takes its time to commit to the main rondo motif, which is then blown away by the grandeur of the triumphant F major coda. This was the last solo piano sonata Brahms wrote, all three with many a debt to Beethoven. Brahms did, though, play the *Intermezzo* of No. 3 as a solo piece, and there were many more elusive *Intermezzi* to come in his late piano music.

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