

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 18 July 2023
7.30pm

Joseph Moog piano

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Piano Sonata No. 1 in C minor Op. 4 (1828)
*I. Allegro maestoso • II. Menuetto •
III. Larghetto • IV. Finale. Presto*

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Barcarolle No. 1 in A minor Op. 26 (?1881)
Barcarolle No. 3 in G flat Op. 42 (1885)

Aleksandr Skryabin (1872-1915)

Piano Sonata No. 4 in F sharp Op. 30 (1903)
I. Andante • II. Prestissimo volando

Interval

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

6 Etudes pour le pianoforte d'après les caprices de Paganini
Op. 3 (1832)
*Etude in A minor • Etude in E • Etude in C •
Etude in B flat • Etude in E flat • Etude in G minor*

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Variations on a Theme by Paganini Op. 35 (1862-3)

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Chopin's First Piano Sonata, in C minor Op. 4, remains something of a rarity. Unlike his two later masterpieces in the genre, it was composed before Chopin left Warsaw and reveals the influence of his teacher Józef Elsner. A composer in his own right, Elsner immersed his pupils in 18th-century counterpoint and structures. Always beginning with smaller forms, including the manifestly patriotic polonaise, he then encouraged his students to look to creating a four-movement work.

Chopin responded to that challenge during the summer of 1828, by which time he had been studying with Elsner, the Sonata's dedicatee, for five years. His crucial Viennese sojourn and subsequent creation of the two piano concertos were still around the corner, but the Sonata is as indicative of later maverick tendencies as it is a tribute to tradition. For instance, the first movement may be indebted to Beethoven in its choice of key and to Bach in its counterpoint, though Chopin's approach to the structure, delaying the expected differentiation of keys in the outer sections to the recapitulation, is certainly novel.

He then returns to the Viennese Classical tradition by creating a charming E flat major *Menuetto* and (minor-key) trio, before the *Larghetto*, with five beats in the bar, breaks another mould, while hinting at the *cantabile* style that would characterise much of Chopin's output. There can be no doubt, however, that it is in the *Finale* that his imagination takes wing: a sizeable *Presto* fusing Beethovenian tenacity and Chopin's inimitable pizzazz.

The Polish-born composer never visited Venice, though he was far from immune to its charms, as revealed in his Barcarolle in F sharp Op. 60, written just a few years before his death. **Fauré**, who would eventually visit *La Serenissima* in the 1890s, went further with the gondoliers' distinctive song by penning 13 piano works in the form, as well as an earlier vocal setting of Marc Monnier's 'Gondolier du Rialto'. Like that 1873 song, both the c.1881 Barcarolle No. 1 in A minor Op. 26 and the 1885 Barcarolle No. 3 in G flat Op. 42 preceded Fauré's first trip to Venice, though any lack of knowledge did not prevent him from offering deft evocations of the lagoon-crossing ferrymen, with Op. 42 exploring innovative, quasi-improvisatory variations on its original theme.

Fauré was a modest but amiable performer, judging by his own piano rolls, while **Skryabin**, another of Chopin's successors, was a towering virtuoso. His technique knew no bounds, much like his compositions, including a last, incomplete work, *Mysterium*, which was to have taken the form of a multi-sensory experience in the Himalayas. The Piano Sonata No. 4 in F sharp Op. 30 is modest in comparison, though it likewise demands much, as Skryabin indicated in a poem appended to the score:

Thinly veiled in transparent cloud
A star shines softly, far and lonely.
How beautiful! The azure secret
Of its radiance beckons, lulls me...
Vehement desire, sensual, insane, sweet...
Now! Joyfully I fly upward toward you,

Freely I take wing.
Mad dance, godlike play...
I draw near in my longing...
Drink you in, sea of light, you light of my own self...

The text's ellipses find voice in the opening *Andante*, its attractive theme reminiscent of Chopin's nocturnes. Here, however, the melody is delivered without breath, the harmonies as luscious as they are diaphanous. The second movement, continuing without break, may indicate a dance, thanks to its skipping gait, though it proves much more extrovert, even Nietzschean in its aims, and should, according to Skryabin, be performed like 'a flight at the speed of light, straight towards the sun'.

Another indomitable and, purportedly, demonic virtuoso informs the second half of tonight's concert: Niccolò Paganini. The celebrated violinist built his reputation as a magnetic practitioner on tour in Italy in the 1810s. By 1828, he had reached Vienna, where Schubert was enchanted by his playing, followed by performances in the Czech lands and, in 1829, in Germany, where he met figures such as Spohr, Hummel, **Robert Schumann**, Clara Wieck and Goethe.

All would have known of Paganini's *24 Caprices for solo violin*, first issued in 1820. Although never intended for public performance, they helped foster Paganini's celebrity and were, surely, played as encores, their well-balanced fusion of technical exercise and musical content inspiring violinists and composers alike. Schumann, for example, wrote piano accompaniments for Ferdinand David's 1854 edition of the *Caprices*, though he had in fact already completed his *6 Etudes pour le pianoforte d'après les caprices de Paganini* Op. 3. Conceived as part of an 1832-3 piano tutor, these studies embraced both the music and the pedagogical intent of Paganini's original.

Schumann's young charge **Brahms** went much further when he composed his 1862-3 Studies for piano, more famously subtitled *Variations on a Theme by Paganini* and published as his Op. 35 – no doubt as much in tribute to the Schumanns as it was to the Italian violinist. Yet if Clara was in Brahms's thoughts when he was composing, that did not stop her calling the work the 'Witch's Variations'. Taking Caprice No. 24 in A minor as its theme, Brahms fully embraced his inspiration's flair for devilish virtuosity.

Responses to the work were mixed. Its dedicatee, Carl Tausig, wrote to Brahms that 'everybody considers them unplayable', but he also remarked how intrigued they were, 'furious that the fruits hang so high'. The bounty is nonetheless worth seizing. As highly contrasted figurations pass from hand to hand, the *Variations* become ever richer in texture. And then, in the second book of two, each featuring 14 separate variations, the interest derives from Brahms's compositional multiplicity, including his Hungarian and Viennese idioms, before ending with a suitably fleet-cum-ferocious farewell.

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