

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 19 January 2024
7.30pm

Igor Levit piano

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*

3 Intermezzi Op. 117 (1892)

*Intermezzo in E flat • Intermezzo in B flat minor •
Intermezzo in C sharp minor*

Interval

6 Klavierstücke Op. 118 (by 1893)

*Intermezzo in A minor • Intermezzo in A •
Ballade in G minor • Intermezzo in F minor •
Romance in F • Intermezzo in E flat minor*

4 Klavierstücke Op. 119 (1893)

*Intermezzo in B minor • Intermezzo in E minor •
Intermezzo in C • Rhapsody in E flat*

At the end of this evening's concert, John Gilhooly will award the Wigmore Medal to Igor Levit.



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The music of Brahms's final years is permeated with forebodings of death. His last work, composed in the wake of Clara Schumann's funeral in 1896, was a set of 11 organ *Chorale Preludes*, ending with 'O world, I must leave thee'. That year he had composed his 4 *Serious Songs*, one of them setting the words 'O death, how bitter art thou' to a descending chain of thirds – a melodic interval which came to stand in Brahms's late music almost as a symbol of death. The same interval is prominent in several of the piano pieces in this evening's concert, all of them written in the year 1892. Listening to them we may imagine Brahms deriving solace as he composed, or perhaps initially improvised, them.

The 7 *Fantasien Op. 116* are framed by stormy *Capriccios* in the key of D minor. The first is followed by a melancholy sarabande-like *Intermezzo* with a more fleeting, shadowy middle section. The passionate G minor third piece, with its grandiose trio section, functions as the scherzo of the set. Its initial phrase, which returns in a more imposing form to round off each of the two outer sections, is again characterised by descending thirds; and the same intervals return in the decorated reprise of the following E major *Intermezzo's* main theme. The latter piece, which Brahms originally called a nocturne, is an object-lesson in how to fashion a deeply satisfying composition with extreme economy of means.

The sighing two-note phrases of the E minor *Intermezzo* at first give no hint of the music's actual metre, which is revealed only in the smoother second half. The E major penultimate piece, on the other hand, begins without any preamble in the style of a nostalgic, bittersweet minuet. Its theme is two-stranded, with a broad and expressive chromatic inner line surmounted by a series of stepwise descending phrases. The concluding *Capriccio* is in Brahms's most agitated style, reaching a peak of restlessness in its middle section. Nor does the sudden turn to the major at the end do anything to relieve the tension.

Brahms once described the 3 *Intermezzi Op. 117* as 'the cradle songs of my sufferings', though only the first of them is an actual lullaby. At its head stand two lines from Johann Gottfried Herder's translation of an old Scottish poem: 'Sleep gently, my child, sleep gently and well. It grieves me much to see thee weep.' In the minor-mode middle section, with its gently drooping intervals, we can almost picture the tears flowing.

The second piece is more troubled, though it turns for its middle section from minor to major, in a consolatory transformation of the opening material. The deeply melancholy final number has a restlessly syncopated middle section, and the reprise of the opening theme is prefaced with heavy-laden phrases whose falling intervals once again evoke Brahms's symbol of death foretold.

With the 6 *Klavierstücke Op. 118*, two new titles make their appearance: *Ballade* and *Romance*. Both pieces in question have a middle section in a distant key, casting a glow of warmth over the music. The opening *Intermezzo*, on the other hand, appears to unfold in a single spontaneous sweep. Having begun with a vacillation between F major and C major, it comes to a gentle rest on the chord of A major. The second *Intermezzo* is among Brahms's most famous short pieces. The melody at the start of its middle section is answered in the left hand by a hidden canon, and some pianists choose to bring out this line when this short section is repeated. Following the *Ballade*, Brahms offers a tenebrous *Intermezzo* whose subdued agitation is countered by a middle section of extreme stasis in which the pianist's hands continually echo each other in curiously out-of-phase fashion.

The forlorn melody of the final *Intermezzo*, in the bleak key of E flat minor, is punctuated by sweeping harp-like arpeggios that cut through the music like a chill wind.

The first of the 4 *Klavierstücke Op. 119* is permeated with descending thirds, each note sustained until the chain is complete. In the second half of the piece they actually overlap with each other, creating discords on a larger scale. Despite the music's relative brevity, Brahms is able to introduce a more consolatory middle section in the major whose melody carries with it a strong sense of yearning.

The second *Intermezzo* also has a middle section in the major. This time it is clearly related to the opening subject, whose breathlessly agitated phrases undergo not only a change from minor to major, but also a rhythmic transformation that allows them to unfold in the form of a tender melody.

The penultimate number is a playful C major *Intermezzo* entirely built on the melodic shape of its staccato opening bars. More melodically generous is the concluding *Rhapsody*, whose confident opening subject is followed by a shadowy idea in the minor, which, in turn, engenders the ingratiating theme of the middle section. Brahms follows the middle section with a return of the idea, maintaining the air of mystery with a subdued reprise of the opening subject in the 'wrong' key. Only in the final moments does the first subject return in its initial form and key, but the music's pent-up energy and tension build up to such a pitch that the piece actually ends forcefully in the minor. This conclusion, with the music appearing to spiral out of control, is one that Brahms may well have learned from Schubert's *Impromptu* in the same key of E flat major D899 No. 2, which, from its delicate opening similarly accelerates in its final moments to produce a minor-mode ending of wild despair.

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