

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 1 December 2021 7.30pm

Leon McCawley piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) Piano Sonata in B flat K570 (1789)
I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegretto

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809) Piano Sonata in E flat HXVI/52 (1794)
I. Allegro moderato • II. Adagio • III. Finale. Presto

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) Piano Sonata in C minor D958 (1828)
I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Menuetto. Allegro • IV. Allegro

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Mozart entered the B flat sonata in his personal catalogue in February 1789, noting it as 'a sonata for piano alone'. When it was first published, five years after Mozart's death, it had somehow sprouted a dull violin part; and for many years, it was regarded as a violin sonata. It's one of those pieces where it's difficult to establish exactly what Mozart wrote, since the autograph is lost, except for the last half of the first movement. One thing we can be sure about is that the publisher changed the phrase-marks that Mozart put over the first seven notes, because he wrote those notes into his catalogue. Phrase-marks in Mozart's piano music have become extremely contentious since the great fortepianist Malcolm Bilson began to use the F major Sonata as his ubiquitous example. A new book by Bilson's pupil David Breitman (*Piano-Playing Revisited: What Modern Players Can Learn from Period Instruments*) goes into the matter in great detail. At least we can learn from this sonata that there was no general agreement even in 1796!

Mozart was busy on a remarkable variety of projects around the time he composed this piece. For his patron, Gottfried van Swieten, he had made an arrangement of Handel's *Acis and Galatea*, which proved so popular that he repeated it for his own benefit concert in November 1788. In the Spring of 1789, having spent the profits, Mozart borrowed enough to go on a tour with Prince Lichnowsky, visiting Dresden, where he premièred his 'Coronation' Concerto; Leipzig, where he played Bach's organ; and Berlin, where he played for the King of Prussia. The rest of the year was taken up with the Clarinet Quintet and the opera *Così fan tutte*, which had a sing-through in Mozart's flat on New Year's Eve. Haydn came along.

Haydn composed his great E flat Sonata for Teresa de Janson (to adopt Haydn's spelling on his manuscript), the daughter of a German dancing-master with a clientele drawn entirely from high society. The business was so lucrative that Teresa (or Therese) carried it on herself for some years. She married an Italian art dealer (Haydn was an official witness at the wedding), and a daughter of that marriage became the celebrated Mme Vestris, London's favourite Cherubino, whose signature tune was 'Cherry Ripe' by Charles Horn (son of another German musician), whose cradle Haydn himself had rocked. Small world.

Haydn mingled much amongst scientists while he was in London, travelling out to Slough, for instance, to look through William Herschel's telescope and be inspired by the night sky – 'The heavens are telling' from *The Creation* is the result. (Herschel was another German, originally an army bandsman and composer but now the Astronomer Royal.) One of the things such scientists were interested in was piano tuning. Thomas Young (the subject of a recent biography entitled *The Last Man*

Who Knew Everything) found time – in between working out Young's Modulus, discovering rods and cones in the retina and translating the Rosetta Stone – to create the perfect way of tuning pianos, and he was merely the glorious tip of an iceberg of experiment. Not all Young's semitones were the same size, and that fact may lie behind the surprisingly frequent passages of fairly steady semitone scales in this sonata, as if Haydn were marvelling over some precursor of Young's ingenious system, which was codified after Haydn left London for the second and last time, but well within Haydn's lifetime. New ways of tuning certainly would account for Haydn's tonal boldness in works composed in the light of his London experiences, this sonata being a case in point: the slow movement is in a key a semitone above the main tonic. (As far as I recollect, this is a unique procedure, though both Elgar and Saint-Saëns tried the key a semitone below, in the slow movements of their violin concertos.)

Haydn's piano writing reflects the sophistication and size of the London pianos. He took one back to Vienna with him. This instrument is now in the Cobbe Collection at Hatchlands, near Guildford.

The C minor Sonata is the first of the three piano masterpieces **Schubert** composed in the last September of his life. Unable to afford a holiday, he had spent August composing his last great songs, to poems by Rellstab and Heine that he had come across at his book club (as we would now call his 'reading circle'). In September, sick of the city, and suffering increasingly from the symptoms of his syphilis, he went to stay with his brother Ferdinand in a new suburb of Vienna. His visit didn't last long, though it did also see the composition of the wonderful String Quintet and 'The Shepherd on the Rock'. Whether it was typhoid from the too-shallow courtyard well, or simply the insanitary conditions hastening his malady to its end, he stopped eating at the beginning of November and died on the 19th. Ferdinand's flat is now one of the most moving of Vienna's wealth of musical shrines.

In the slow movement of this sonata, Schubert experiments with those keys a semitone higher that Haydn had signposted in his E flat Sonata. A subsidiary theme is heard first in A flat, and later in A – but when it tries the same trick at the end of the movement, Schubert firmly, if reluctantly, shuts the book in A flat. The colossal concluding tarantella also has a section in the key a semitone higher – always straining upward. The overall impression we take away from the piece is of the incredible intellectual vigour of the dying man.

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