# WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 1 June 2023
7.30pm

Cédric Tiberghien piano

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| Jan Sweelinck (1562-1621) | 6 Variations on 'Mein junges Leben hat ein End' |
| Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750) | Chaconne from Partita No. 2 in D minor for solo violin BWV1004 (1720) *transcribed by Johannes Brahms* |
| George Benjamin (b.1960) | Shadowlines (2001)<br>*Cantabile • Wild • Scherzando • Tempestoso • Very freely, solemn and spacious • Gently flowing, flexible* |
| Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) | 32 Variations on an Original Theme in C minor WoO. 80 (1806) |
| | *Interval* |
| Ludwig van Beethoven | 24 variations on Righini's arietta 'Venni amore' in D WoO. 65 (c.1790-1) |
| Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) | Piano Sonata in A K331 (c.1783)<br>*I. Andante grazioso - Adagio - Allegro • II. Menuetto • III. Alla Turca. Allegretto* |
| Ludwig van Beethoven | 6 Variations on an Original Theme in D Op. 76 (1809) |

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A programme of variations, beginning with one of the great classics of Renaissance keyboard music. Sweelinck was one of the means of injecting the sophisticated keyboard writing of William Byrd and his followers into the European mainstream. The religious upheavals in England following the death of Henry VIII led to a number of English composers seeking refuge in the Netherlands, amongst them John Bull, the first Gresham Professor of Music, and the most prominent virginals virtuoso. Sweelinck probably knew him, and passed on his ideas to his own pupils, who included most of the important organists in northern Germany. Sweelinck's hymn-tune variations could have stepped straight out of the *Fitzwilliam Virginal Book* – a collection long thought to have been copied out by one Francis Tregian whilst imprisoned in the Tower for recusancy, but, after scholarly detective work by Ruby Reid Thompson two decades ago, now once again a mysterious collection of masterpieces with no backstory.

JS Bach's son, Carl Philipp Emanuel, wrote of his father's string-playing: 'As the greatest expert and judge of harmony, he liked best to play the viola, but from his youth and right into old age, he played the violin cleanly and penetratingly, keeping the orchestra in better order than he could have done with the harpsichord. He understood to perfection the possibilities of all stringed instruments. This is evidenced by his solos for the violin and for the violoncello, without bass'.

The second solo violin Partita at first seems the most modest of all the pieces – the *Gigue* comes to its conclusion after about a quarter of an hour. Bach's first audiences, doubtless deprived of printed programmes, had no way of knowing they were only half-way through, and their wonder must have grown and grown as the magnificent *Chaconne* unwound itself majestically. The medical missionary and Bach scholar Albert Schweitzer thought that 'out of a single theme Bach conjures a whole world' (so, another set of variations). Brahms, whose piano arrangement of the *Chaconne* thoughtfully limits itself to the left hand alone, in order to match the 'limitations' of an unaccompanied violin, told Clara Schumann that it was 'one of the most wonderful and incomprehensible pieces of music'.

George Benjamin's *Shadowlines*, a set of six canonic preludes, was premièred at the Barbican in 2003 by the composer's lifelong friend Pierre-Laurent Aimard, for whom it was written. A reviewer wrote: 'each stretches the old canon-form in some different way, superbly conceived … far more than a brilliant academic-pianistic exercise.'

A standard work on Mozart frowningly describes K331 as a 'showpiece sonata with fashionable 'Turkish' flavour. Makes no use of sonata form.' Despite this supposed deficiency, it is one of Mozart's most popular keyboard works. The first movement is a set of variations on a singularly lovely theme, the minuet is gracefully fluid, and the rondo *Alla Turca* continues to exert its charm after 240 years. It was published about 1784 with the sonatas in C major K330 and F major K332.

When Beethoven was a child, his ambitious father published some of his compositions, lying about his son's age to make him seem even cleverer. Unfortunately, no-one was impressed, and Beethoven published nothing more, all through his teens. At the time of the French Revolution, Beethoven was working in Bonn's opera house, playing the viola in a truly revolutionary opera – *The Marriage of Figaro*. A little later, his employer, the Elector of Cologne, sent him off to Vienna to meet its composer. After meeting Mozart, he plucked up the courage to publish some music again: 24 variations on a tune by Righini. He was nearly 21 now, getting a local reputation as a performer on the new-fangled piano. Beethoven was a trained harpsichordist and organist, but the piano, he had to work out for himself. One of his admiring friends admitted that his piano-playing was 'rough and hard', but went on to claim that 'It's by a path of his own discovery that he has attained that height of excellence whereon he now stands'.

He threw every new idea he could think of into the Righini variations. Long, long trills, lurching louds and softs, teasing scales, complicated adagios in triple time, 'wrong' keys leapt to, irreverent snooks cocked: thirty years later he was still exploring the same devices in his late piano sonatas.

This, the first published composition of the adult Beethoven, already shows him a master of variation form. 15 more sets followed before the set of 32 in his favourite key, C minor, composed in 1806. Op. 76 followed in 1809. Besides such independent sets, variation was an important part of Beethoven's sonata and symphony style. The slow movements of the 'Appassionata', the 'Archduke', the Violin Concerto, the Ninth Symphony; the A flat Sonata Op. 26 (following Mozart by beginning with the variations), the C minor Sonata Op. 111, several String Quartets; and, back in the Ninth Symphony, the mighty finale itself – all present wonderful sets of variations.

The theme of the C minor variations in its blunt left-hand chords bears a certain resemblance to Bach's *Chaconne*. After proudly flaunting his ability to play repeated notes, Beethoven's fourth variation looks ahead five years or so to the Seventh Symphony – one more instance of how he explored certain ideas all through his career. The other variations range from sadly expressive to furious.

Beethoven's D major theme has a Hungarian flavour, both through its stamping vigour and its unexpected use of those folksy scales called modes, which supply a big surprise half-way through the theme. The variations get more and more active, culminating in a presto waltz before the theme returns – after a typical Beethoven joke, where he pretends to lose his way.

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