

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 20 March 2024
7.30pm

Alexandre Kantorow piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Rhapsody in B minor Op. 79 No. 1 (1879)

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Chasse-neige from *Etudes d'exécution transcendante*
S139 (pub. 1852);

Vallée d'Obermann from *Années de pèlerinage,*
première année, Suisse S160 (1848-55)

Béla Bartók (1881-1945)

Rhapsody Op. 1 (1904)

Interval

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Piano Sonata No. 1 in D minor Op. 28 (1907)
I. Allegro moderato • II. Lento • III. Allegro molto

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Chaconne from Partita No. 2 in D minor for solo violin
BWV1004 (1720) *arranged by Johannes Brahms*

The London
Community
Foundation

COCKAYNE

This concert is supported by Cockayne Grants for the Arts, a donor advised fund at the London Community Foundation



Our Audience Fund provides essential unrestricted support for our artistic and learning programmes, connecting thousands of people with music locally, nationally, and internationally. We rely on the generosity of our audience to raise £150,000 each year to support this work. Your gifts are, and continue to be, indispensable.

To donate, please visit <https://wigmore-hall.org.uk/audiencefund>

Wigmore Hall is a no smoking venue. No recording or photographic equipment may be taken into the auditorium nor used in any other part of the Hall without the prior written permission of the management.

In accordance with the requirements of City of Westminster persons shall not be permitted to stand or sit in any of the gangways intersecting the seating, or to sit in any other gangways. If standing is permitted in the gangways at the sides and rear of the seating, it shall be limited to the number indicated in the notices exhibited in those positions.

Disabled Access and Facilities - full details from 020 7935 2141.

Wigmore Hall is equipped with a 'Loop' to help hearing aid users receive clear sound without background noise. Patrons can use this facility by switching hearing aids to 'T'.



Please ensure that watch alarms, mobile phones and any other electrical devices which can become audible are switched off. Phones on a vibrate setting can still be heard, please switch off.

The Wigmore Hall Trust Registered Charity No. 1024838
36 Wigmore Street, London W1U 2BP • Wigmore-hall.org.uk • John Gilhooly Director

Wigmore Hall Royal Patron HRH The Duke of Kent, KG
Honorary Patrons Aubrey Adams OBE; André and Rosalie Hoffmann; Louise Kaye; Kohn Foundation; Mr and Mrs Paul Morgan

Department
for Culture
Media & Sport

ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND
LOTTERY FUNDED

Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**

Registered with
FR FUNDRAISING
REGULATOR

Brahms was especially thoughtful with the dedications of his works, particularly for the *Rhapsodies* of Op. 79 which are both dedicated to his close musical confidant Elisabeth von Herzogenberg. Brahms had sent her the manuscripts of the two works for her opinions and she replied with a great enthusiasm for them: 'It is hard to believe that there ever was a time when I did not know them, so quickly does the barely acquired treasure become incorporated with the accumulation of long standing'.

That familiarity that Elisabeth felt must have been partly due to the frugality and imagination with which Brahms handles the material. The opening of forceful octaves connected by triplet flourishes is used and transformed to create the two outer sections of the work, ambiguously in B minor, but constantly shifting and never still. These tumultuous bookends contain at their centre a quiet lullaby, derived from music again in the opening section, which as it begins to die down is interrupted by the return of the opening music. The two of them were unsure of what to call these pieces, *Klavierstück* ('piano piece') seeming inadequate, and despite the tight control of the structure, settled on *Rhapsody*, perhaps to capture what Elisabeth described as its 'rugged beauty'.

Liszt's *Chasse-neige*, or 'Snow whirls', is the final of his set of *Transcendental études*. Surpassing any description of a simple study, these *études* are virtuosic showpieces for any pianist, and this particular one mimics the blowing winds of snow with a focus on the tremolo technique, which rolls to a great climax alongside leaps and rumbling chromatic scales.

From the virtuosic side of Liszt to his more poetic in perhaps one of his most inward facing pieces. *Obermann* is the title of a book by Étienne Pivert de Sénancour, whose title character is a lonely and melancholic man in search of an ideal - though non-existent - valley in the Swiss mountains to finally find peace. Its opening descending phrase is full of weariness, preparing us for the intensity and dissonance that will follow. This descending figure will wind its way through the entire score, transforming along with its literary character. This first section then opens into a more naïve passage that recalls the innocence of his younger years and the way in which he set out on his wandering, but storm clouds appear and this is gradually taken over by a turbulent passage filled with octaves and tremolos in a great rage. In a final benediction, the opening motif is transmuted, harmonised now with warmth and heroicism, finishing in a triumphant finale.

In 1904 **Bela Bartók** began a new catalogue of his composed works to mark a new style primarily derived from the folk music of his native Hungary and Romania. Bartók was at the time pioneering in the collection of folk melodies with early recording machines, taking them deep into remote villages. While this eventually became the percussive and angular style we now know, this early work is much more indebted to the

style and pianism of the great Hungarian composer of the previous generation, Franz Liszt.

The *Rhapsody* is in two large sections, the first an expansive adagio on its opening theme, which then turns into a more energetic allegretto. Throughout, the melodies and harmonies of Hungarian music are featured, but the piano writing is Romantic in nature. Several years later, Bartók returned to this work and created a kind of concerto for piano and orchestra from its music.

In 1908 **Rachmaninov** moved to the quieter city of Dresden in a break from his concertising and an attempt to end the writer's block induced by the public and personal failure following the performance of his first symphony three years earlier. The First Piano Sonata is the hard-won product of this change of scenery, but despite the difficulty of its composition and the beauty of its music, it has long remained in the shadow of its sibling second sonata.

This work also takes an especially Lisztian approach to formal ideas and themes: originally conceived as a programmatic work on the story of Faust, the idea was dropped although many elements of the story remain. The despair of Dr Faust preoccupies the large first movement, with an opening section depicting his inner struggle. This then shifts as the echoes of religious plainchant take over its middle episode, which builds to a grand climax that hints of redemption.

The second movement is a passionate weaving together of melodies in a love duet against moving figurations. The third movement begins with furious, stormy music, eventually including the *Dies irae* theme. We hear it first as a short reference in staccato bass notes, but a valiant major section submerges it for a while until it resurfaces in terrifying power in the finale in a struggle that goes straight to the very end.

From the very nearly limitless variety of this sonata we then turn to the purposefully limited transcription of **Bach's** D minor *Chaconne*, originally for solo violin. Within the limits of four strings there are huge chords, multiple voices and an expression of grief and awe. Brahms wrote that 'If I imagined that I could have created, even conceived the piece, I am quite certain that the excess of excitement and earth-shattering experience would have driven me out of my mind'. His transcription for the left hand also served a joint purpose: in taking the limited means of the violin, rather than creating an enormous showpiece for the piano, as Busoni did, there is still a physical struggle in expressing the entire piece. It was also written out for Clara Schumann, who at the time was suffering from right-hand tendinitis. While resting her hand, Brahms sent his transcription of this piece they both loved and admired, solely for the purpose of personal exploration in the absence of a violinist.

© Mark Rogers 2024

Reproduction and distribution is strictly prohibited.