

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 20 November 2022
7.30pm

Leif Ove Andsnes piano

Aleksandr Vustin (1943-2020)

Lamento (1974)

Leoš Janáček (1854-1928)

Piano Sonata 1. X. 1905 ('From the Street') (1905-6)
I. Foreboding • II. Death

Valentin Silvestrov (b.1937)

Bagatelle Op. 1 No. 3 (2005)

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 31 in A flat Op. 110 (1821-2)
*I. Moderato cantabile molto espressivo •
II. Allegro molto • III. Adagio ma non troppo - Fuga.
Allegro ma non troppo*

Interval

Antonín Dvořák (1841-1904)

Poetic Tone Pictures Op. 85 (1889)
*Night journey • Joking • At the old castle •
Spring song • Peasant's ballad • Reverie •
Furiant • Goblins' dance • Serenade •
Bacchanalia • Tittle-tattle • At a hero's grave •
At the holy mountain*

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In 2019 I invited composer **Alexander Vustin**, then 70 years old, to the Rosendal Chamber Music Festival in Norway. It was only his second time traveling outside Russia and he was clearly affected by having lived for so many years under the oppressive regime there. I found it very touching, not only to get to know him and his music, but also to see him listening with his whole being to festival performances of Shostakovich. Later I was deeply saddened to learn that Vustin passed away during Moscow's first wave of COVID infections, in April 2020.

I follow Vustin's *Lamento* with **Leoš Janáček**'s Piano Sonata 1.X.1905, 'From the Street'. Paying tribute to a worker killed in a demonstration on 1 October 1905, the sonata is still chillingly relevant today. As I write these lines in late September 2022, young Iranian demonstrators are being killed in the streets of Tehran, and brave Russians are out voicing their resistance to the devastating war that threatens their lives. Janáček's sonata is full of the anger and sadness we feel as we confront the meaningless war in Ukraine. As an epilogue, I follow it with one of the *Bagatelles* by Ukrainian composer **Valentin Silvestrov**. The *Bagatelles* are dreamy fragments that seem to evoke memories of times past, or perhaps hopes of something better.

Vustin's *Lamento* anticipates the 'Song of mourning' ('Klagender Gesang') in **Beethoven**'s Piano Sonata No. 31 Opus 110. A most profound operatic aria, the song represents the heart of this compact sonata, in which Beethoven juxtaposes the 'high art' of the last movement's spiritual arias and fugues with the 'low art' of the scherzo's child-like folk songs.

The theme of 'high and low' also runs through the 13 programmatic pieces of **Dvořák**'s *Poetic Tone Pictures* Op. 85. Poetic short stories like 'Night journey' and 'At the old castle' rub shoulders with the triviality of 'Joking' and 'Tittle-tattle'. There is intimacy in 'Reverie', drama in 'At a hero's grave', wild virtuosity in 'Bacchanalia', and a 'Serenade' that develops into the most touching of love songs. The pandemic gave me the chance to study this strangely neglected cycle at last. It has been a most wonderful discovery, for this is life-affirming music of the greatest invention and imagination.

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'This time, I am not only an absolute musician, but also a poet', Dvořák wrote of his *Poetic Tone Pictures*, highlighting the programmatic nature of the set. Most of the music featured in this evening's recital similarly goes beyond the sphere of what we might term 'absolute' or 'pure' music and instead arose from a poetic impetus or came into being as a response to an extra-musical stimulus. Several of them were triggered by a tragic or traumatic event or experience.

The *Lamento* by **Vustin** fuses a recollection of the composer's feelings on attending the funeral of a friend with an auditory impression of the event. During the

ceremony, a bird began to sing and would not stop until the funeral was over, heightening the emotional impact of the occasion. In Vustin's piece, the bird is represented by a soaring and swooping melody in the treble that refuses to be held down by the dirge-like chord sequence in the bass.

Janáček's sonata 'From the Street' was inspired by the death in 1905 of a young Czech worker at the hands of Austrian troops attempting to subdue a demonstration calling for a Czech university in Brno. This tragic event not surprisingly induced a sense of outrage in Janáček – a fervent Czech nationalist – and it prompted him to write a work of intense emotion. Shortly before the first performance of the sonata, he began to have reservations over the artistic validity of his response to the tragedy and went so far as to destroy the original finale (said to have been 'a gloomy funeral march'). But there can be no doubting the sincerity of the emotions expressed by the two surviving movements: both build to a powerful climax before dying away to nothingness in their closing bars.

Ukrainian composer **Valentin Silvestrov** only rarely hints at a specific programmatic content in his piano music, though much of it looks to the music of the past for inspiration. In his *Bagatelles*, which the composer himself has described as 'sublime insignificances in which there is nothing but music', the emphasis is very much on pure melody.

Beethoven wrote his Piano Sonata No. 31 in A flat after emerging from a long period of ill-health during which he found it almost impossible to compose. The work expresses the profound gratitude and relief he felt on the restoration of both his physical health and his creative powers. He alludes directly to the experience he had just undergone at several key points in the music. One such moment, the *arioso* of the third movement, is headed 'Klagender Gesang' ('Song of mourning'). When a transformed version of the *arioso* returns midway through the final fugue, it is marked 'Ermattet, klagend' ('Wearied, lamenting'). But the return of the fugue, marked 'Nach und nach wieder auflebend' ('Gaining new life'), leaves us in no doubt as to the ultimate outcome – a triumphant resurgence underlined by the glorious fortissimo of the concluding bars.

Dvořák's *Poetic Tone Pictures* were inspired by the happy times spent by the composer at his country retreat – a villa in the grounds of the Vysoká estate in central Bohemia – and the titles of several of the pieces reveal how taken he was by the landscape, traditions and myths of the area. However, he made a point of informing his publisher Simrock that while the work was indeed 'a kind of programme music', this designation had to be understood 'in the Schumann sense' – showing that for Dvořák, the purpose of the poetic titles was more to evoke a mood than to suggest a detailed scenario.

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