

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 20 September 2023
7.30pm

Brad Mehldau piano

14 Reveries for Piano *UK première*

Co-commissioned by Wigmore Hall, Cal Performances at University of California, Berkeley, 21C Music Festival at The Royal Conservatory and Carnegie Hall.

Selections from *Suite: April 2020*

and further works to be announced from the stage



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14 *Reveries* came from a similar impulse as the suite from three years ago, *April 2020*, to write shorter pieces. In both sets, I've eschewed larger-scale development, opting for brevity. Each piece is more like a distillation of emotion. If there is one link of mood here in this set, it is that of reverie. The music might accompany those moments during waking hours when we withdraw from our exterior environment. Reverie can be welcome, perhaps as a diversion from the banality of one's surroundings. At other times, it is an involuntary flight into melancholy. In all cases, it is an interior experience, exclusive to our own consciousness, independent from others. The music here accordingly expresses solitude – at turns enraptured, placid, nervous, lonely or ecstatic.

Reverie is not so much an emotional state itself, but the interior frame in which those emotions knock around. There is often an element of quiet in these pieces – not necessarily in dynamic volume, but the quietude of passivity, as one allows those feelings to wash over them, without broadcasting them to anyone else. Outward quietude masks a flow of inner action. The music is less a wilful display, and more like peeling back a curtain to reveal something.

Each piece is self-contained, and while there are no overt melodic themes or motifs which bind them together, they flow into each other, often *attacca*, with no pause, often connecting through their shared tonal centre. The first five, thus, make up a group in C major; 7-9 move between G major and G minor. Metric connections appear as well, as in #2 and #9, which share the same placid 5/8 meter.

There are several pianistic obsessions I've wrestled with as a player and composer through the years, which play out in some of the pieces. One is to place a melody within its accompanying figuration, so that even as it takes centre stage, it remains part of an undulating texture. One can hear that feature in the first, second and ninth pieces. Another compositional approach in the seventh piece was to avoid indicating the shifting time signatures in the written music, visually emphasizing for the player the fluid, gridless kind of state of the music. In the final more extended piece, as in *waiting*, the ninth piece from *April 2020*, the music has a clear pulse but no barlines at all, like a paragraph made up of one long sentence.

The more I've studied the masters over the years, the more I have been fascinated by what the composer 'tells' the pianist in the score – or doesn't tell – sometimes overtly, sometimes obliquely; concerning dynamics, articulation, tempi, pedalling and emotional direction. There is usually some balance of specificity and open-endedness. A composer like Brahms in his *Klavierstücke* gives the player everything they need to let the beauty and sublimity of the music reveal itself, but also leaves things to be discovered: there are all sorts of counter-melodies hiding between the hands which are not marked with accents. This is part of the reason for the longevity of that music – in its multi-dimensionality, it gives the player choices, and invites them to interpret it differently from one performance to another.

In some of the pieces here, I've exploited those kinds of hidden currents and made them more explicit, marking them with accents and tenutos. At other times, I've followed my master Brahms, and written only the notes. For the final 14th piece, there is the following direction on the top of the page:

Dynamics have not been given; the player is free to choose, and is encouraged to find melodies within the figuration and bring them out as they wish, through louder dynamic, marcato touch, and perhaps finger-pedalling. Time signature and barlines are not given; each system traces a possible phrase length, sometimes obvious, but they are only guidelines, allowing the player to feel the piece as a continuous stream.

The strongest model for open-endedness in many respects is Bach, who left us with little to no indications for tempo, articulation and dynamics. The listener can hear the inspiration I've drawn from many of his Preludes in *The Well-tempered Clavier* in the last piece here. Like one long wave from beginning to end, it nevertheless invites the performer to draw out a more segmented story with their own sentences, paragraphs and chapter, if they wish. In this regard, finally, the music I've written is not only inspired by composers, but by the great interpreters who have shaped their music.

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