

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 22 December 2022
7.30pm

Pavel Kolesnikov piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

4 Impromptus D899 (1827)

*Impromptu in C minor • Impromptu in E flat •
Impromptu in G flat • Impromptu in A flat*

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Toccatina in F sharp minor BWV910 (c.1712)

Interval

Work to be announced from the stage

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Kreisleriana Op. 16 (1838)

*Äusserst bewegt • Sehr innig und nicht zu rasch •
Sehr aufgeregt • Sehr langsam • Sehr lebhaft •
Sehr langsam • Sehr rasch • Schnell und spielend*

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The 4 *Impromptus* Op. 90 were composed in the second half of 1827, after **Schubert** had composed the first part of *Winterreise* and enjoyed a holiday in Graz. The first two *impromptus* were published straight away, but the remaining two had to wait for 30 years, and even then, No. 3 was published in the wrong key – G instead of G flat. The manuscript has a pencilled note from the publisher, telling the engraver to change the key and even the time-signature – Schubert had used a rare signature, a C for common time (4/4), cut in two by a vertical line to denote 2/2, and then the same sign immediately repeated, to indicate 4/2 – 4 minims in a bar, allowing the accompaniment to be written as quavers (just one beam) instead of semiquavers (two beams, which always looks fast), as would have happened in 4/4. The vandal publisher simply pencilled in twice as many bar-lines for the first two lines of the manuscript, leaving the engraver to get on with it for the rest of the piece. In the 1857 publication, therefore, the accompaniment remained in quavers, but there were twice as many downbeats – a bumpy ride, compared to what Schubert had in mind, but perhaps easier to read.

People often explain that the key was changed from G flat to G because it made it easier to play, but in fact it doesn't. The chord of G flat major is all on the black notes, which makes it very comfortable, especially on Viennese pianos, which had unusually long black notes. The answer lies, I think, in the way pianos were tuned. Nowadays, with all our semitones equal (the tuning system known as 'equal temperament'), G major and G flat major sound exactly the same (unless you suffer from perfect pitch). But in Schubert's day, semitones were of different sizes, giving different keys a genuinely different colour. G flat major was on the edge of the possible, with the interval from G flat to B flat being unusually wide. The same actual notes – keys on the keyboard – occur in the key of F sharp major, of course, and it's noteworthy that Schubert's only song in that key is his only happy song about sex – 'Die Mondnacht', from the Kosegarten *Liederspiel*. It took publishers 30 years to make up their minds to risk such a weird key. 'Die Mondnacht' wasn't published till the Complete Edition came along.

The last *impromptu* shares the same reason for delay. Its key signature is that of A flat major, but it actually begins in A flat minor, with the C flats written in as accidentals. The late, great Schubert scholar, Elizabeth Norman McKay, was so interested in all this that she wrote a book about it, called *Schubert: The Piano and Dark Keys* - fascinating. It's the two initially suppressed ones that have become the favourites of the group, with their beautiful lyricism and

imaginative figuration, but the first two have their different strengths. No. 1's solemn march develops into a colossal structure, ending with an endearing and typical uncertainty as to whether to be in C minor or C major. No. 2, in what would have been the relative major, E flat, if only the first hadn't eventually decided to end in the major, is a suave *moto perpetuo* exploring the very top notes of the latest, biggest, pianos, with a middle section in the remarkably remote key of B minor – down a diminished fourth! The lucky chance that both E flat and B minor were familiar keys to the publisher (unlike the G flat and A flat minor of the others) meant that this second piece was not suppressed, but Schubert is certainly pushing his harmonic boat out, even here.

In his F sharp minor *Toccata* **Bach** re-imagines the standard Italian plan, leaving his fingerprints all over it. The opening flourishes set out a rich pattern of harmony, culminating in a Bachian joke that writes his keyboard's lowest note, C, as a B sharp. This simple disguise never fails to puzzle student cellists – perhaps Bach had hopes of widening its audience. There follow three contrasting contrapuntal sections, the first in solemn triple time with drooping chromatic semitones, the second a *staccato* presto based on a falling minor scale. After a vigorous interlude that explores a new key practically every bar, the third contrapuntal section returns to the drooping chromatics, this time presented as a sad jig.

Words and music were very closely linked in **Schumann's** mind – he, of all composers of the Romantic period, is the one most likely to give a piece a title, beyond a genre description like Mazurka or Song without Words. Schumann's father was a publisher, and young Robert was inspired to write stories, poems and plays. He always remained a literary man, an editor and a critic. So, reading a romantic novel could lead to a piano suite, while a poem might not confine itself to becoming a song – it could start a symphony: the motto theme of the First Symphony, for instance, perfectly fits the poetic line that inspired it.

Of *Kreisleriana*, Schumann remarked that the title would mean nothing except to a German. Kreisler was the manic musical hero of the novels of ETA Hoffman, and this kaleidoscopic set of eight fantasies, composed in 1838, depicts some of the moods German readers knew so well. It also incorporates musical pictures of Clara, who became his wife two years later, but at this point was so frustratingly unattainable that Schumann even considered ending it all.

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