

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 22 December 2024
7.30pm

Kit Armstrong piano

Thomas Tallis (c.1505-1585)

Felix namque I

Giles Farnaby (c.1563-1640)

A Maske

John Bull (c.1562-1628)

Lord Lumley's Pavan and Galliard
Telluris ingens conditor

François Couperin (1668-1733)

Le réveil-matin (pub. 1713)
Les petits moulins à vent (pub. 1722)
Le dodo, ou L'amour au berçeau

George Frideric Handel (1685-1759)

Suite in G minor HWV432
*I. Overture • II. Andante • III. Allegro •
IV. Sarabande • V. Gigue •
VI. Passacaglia*

Interval

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Rondo in A minor K511 (1787)

Camille Saint-Saëns (1835-1921)

Africa Op. 89 (1891)

Leopold Godowsky (1870-1938)

In the Kraton from *Java Suite*

Kaikhosru Shapurji Sorabji (1892-1988)

Transcendental Etude No. 36

Arvo Pärt (b.1935)

Für Alina (1976)

Kit Armstrong (b.1992)

Etudes de dessin



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When I ask myself what I do as a practitioner of classical music, I might come up with a description like: deciphering old music sheets, performing them in a current-day environment, and thereby making music for modern ears. This leads to the question: what is so attractive about that? Let me start out on a path of speculation – first of all, I suppose we are drawn towards the idea of immortality of past achievements, and thus are to some extent naturally antiquarians at heart. Even notwithstanding that, we believe that we recognise timeless beauty and meaning in the old music sheets. When this happens, it is not an unfamiliar feeling to be tempted to suspect our modern society of not being conducive to the creation of equally exciting artefacts. Can we exploit this feeling to create something artistically valuable in the present?

It seems to me that we live in an era of the happy confluence of two aesthetic achievements: on the one hand an expertise, perfected over centuries, to make something apparently sensible out of almost any musical utterance, and on the other hand, our having trained ourselves to appreciate the ostensibly authentic aesthetics of a wide range of cultures. Regarding the first, I like to remind myself that classical music, despite its name, is also a product of the present day, and that authenticity is an illusion, albeit an essential one. We of course cannot know exactly how the distant past sounded – and one glance at the mainstream in this field should suffice to show that we mostly cannot even claim to be making a best effort. Depending on the era of the original work, intentions have been transmitted to us in many ways: from movies, sound recordings, mechanical reproductions, all the way to treatises and eyewitness reports. The tradition of Western classical music and its interpretation has decided for the most part to ignore all of these, and focus on sheet music as if it were the definitive form of the artworks. A blessing in disguise – for it is exactly this form which preserves a great deal of recognisable material while allowing its interpreter to deform it enough to fulfil different urges. Looking back on more than a century of earnest endeavour, we can consider ourselves highly skilled in solving this puzzle that defines the art: formulating new aesthetic experiences all while following the letter of the beloved classics. To paraphrase a notable pronouncement, this keeps them alive, for an artwork admitting all manner of well-meaning misunderstandings is one with a good chance of long-term survival.

We meet now the other river: that which has carried the nature of our expectations inexorably in the direction of

openness and tolerance. The days in which one labeled as 'monstrous' and 'primitive' all that did not satisfy the stylistic particularities of one's own era and milieu are long gone. The discovery and habilitation of ancient music and world music, I imagine, has extended our natural horizons in this matter. We can be thankful to the reception history leading up to the present day for the fact that so many things have indeed become palatable to modern ears. We should also acknowledge the great benefit brought by the idea of erudition and cultivation being based upon coming to terms with an ever-expanding canon, for it trains curiosity and appreciation of the unfamiliar. (That defending an accepted canon becomes an end in itself, and a pretext for chauvinism, is probably an unfortunate consequence of human nature.)

The circumstances thus perceived have motivated me to present this recital programme, centred around the theme of chronology itself. In essence, I feel that we are naturally curious about the subject, stimulated by the promise of historical significance; that we have the breadth of experience to be able to approach it profitably on something resembling its own terms; and that we have an environment in which the remaining gap can be bridged by communicative artistry.

Tonight's journey begins in the 16th Century, where my instrument, the keyboard, first became the medium and enabler of an all-encompassing form of artistic creation and self-expression. It brings us to the near past, where we may observe how musical thought around the written note has become an universal language throughout the world.

Some might think that the point of a programme like this is to compare eras with one another, or to follow a line of development. I would personally prefer to consider it a reflection of what fundamentally I think classical music is about. By definition written music involves temporally dissociating the act of creation and the act of performance, so is in its basic premise necessarily music of the past, whether remote or recent. What interests me herein is creating a link between the the past and the present. Put simply, I want to make music in a way that I believe sides with classical music's essential justification – taking the old music sheets and inventing something based on them which evokes an amazing vision of a timeless world. So here is a collection of works which inspire me to attempt exactly that.

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