

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 22 March 2024
7.30pm

Paul Lewis piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in C minor D958 (1828)

I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Menuetto. Allegro • IV. Allegro

Piano Sonata in A D959 (1828)

I. Allegro • II. Andantino • III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace • IV. Rondo. Allegretto

Interval

Franz Schubert

Piano Sonata in B flat D960 (1828)

I. Molto moderato • II. Andante sostenuto • III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace con delicatezza – Trio • IV. Allegro ma non troppo



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



Schubert completed his last three piano sonatas in the autumn of 1828, just a few weeks before his death at the age of 31. In the previous year he had been one of the torch-bearers accompanying Beethoven's funeral procession as it passed through the streets of Vienna, and all three of his sonatas pay direct tribute to the great composer. The first of them goes so far as to be cast in the key Beethoven had made so much his own – the key of the Fifth Symphony and the 'Pathétique' Sonata, among many other works. Its assertive opening subject recalls the theme of Beethoven's *32 Variations in C minor*, though the differences between the two are more significant than their superficial similarities: Schubert's theme, being part of a less sectional design, evolves continually, before it eventually prepares the ground for a serene second subject in the major. Perhaps more obviously Beethovenian in its atmosphere of subdued tension is the approach to the recapitulation, where shadowy sweeping chromatic scales are underpinned by the main theme's rhythm tapped out, drum-like, deep in the bass of the piano.

Beethoven's shadow falls across the slow movement, too. Here, we may detect echoes of the 'Pathétique' Sonata's middle movement – particularly in the reprise of the main theme, which unfolds, as in the Beethoven, over a 'rocking' accompaniment in semiquaver triplets. The final return of Schubert's theme offers another texture favoured by Beethoven: a smooth melodic line above a staccato accompaniment. The music's atmosphere, however, is thoroughly Schubertian, as are the luminous harmonic shifts of its coda.

Following the minuet, with its sudden silences punctuating the melody as though the music were gasping for breath, Schubert writes a tarantella-like finale of almost manic energy. Its model is likely to have been the rhythmically similar final rondo of Beethoven's Sonata Op. 31 No. 3. Again, Schubert's tonal palette, and particularly his use of chromatically adjacent keys, is wholly individual: the sudden plunge into C sharp minor, a semitone above the home key, shortly after the start; and, in the movement's central section, the broad melody that unfolds in a luminous B major, a semitone below.

Schubert's working draft of the opening movement of the A major Sonata D959 presents its initial subject in the style of a chorale, without the octave leaps in the left hand that give the familiar version its rhythmic impetus. In both the draft and the definitive version the subject appears in the coda as a distant echo of its former self, with the pianist's left hand in imitation of pizzicato strings, before the music vanishes into thin air with a series of arpeggios sweeping gently over the keyboard. Not until the concluding bars of the finale is the subject to return in full-blooded guise, in a gesture towards the notion of a cyclic form.

The slow movement is a barcarolle of infinite melancholy. As in many of Schubert's late slow movements, there is a more agitated middle section, but

never did he conceive a more astonishing outburst than occurs here. It offers a vision of wild despair, if not actual madness, and its impassioned style anticipates the keyboard writing of a much later generation of composers.

The Scherzo's playful skipping chords are followed by a gentle *Rondo*. Schubert took its theme from the middle movement of his Sonata in A minor D537, composed a full decade earlier. But if the melody itself was an improved self-borrowing, the new finale's course of events shows Schubert turning for his model once again to Beethoven's Sonata triptych Op. 31 – this time, to the concluding rondo from the G major first work in the series. The influence of Beethoven's piece extends to the texture and keyboard layout of Schubert's, as well as the halting approach to its coda. In both the beauty of his material, and the magical effects of elliptical key-change, it has to be said that Schubert actually surpassed his model.

The Sonata in B flat D960 marked Schubert's farewell to the piano. Its opening movement is an unusually expansive *Molto moderato*, unfolding for much of its length in *pianissimo*, and its calm main theme is so broad as to be almost hymn-like. The music's unusually relaxed style and the manner in which the theme proceeds in smooth chords seem to recall one of Beethoven's great B flat works, the 'Archduke' Trio Op. 97.

The slow movement is built out of an infinitely expressive, long-spun melody which we might imagine being played by two violins. Its sonority is enriched by the resonance of an accompaniment ranging over four octaves, and constantly crossing over the theme. For his middle section, Schubert moves into the major, and transfers the melodic line to the more sonorous cellos. With the return of the opening theme comes a new rhythmic figure in the accompaniment; and the piece draws to a close with a coda of wonderfully heightened poignancy.

The Scherzo is a piece of utmost delicacy, and the *pianissimo* marking of its main subject coupled with its melodic shape suggests that it can be heard as an accelerated offshoot of the first movement's main theme. The *Trio*, although darker in mood and sonority, has all the hallmarks of a *Ländler*.

The finale begins with a dramatic gesture: a held octave G which heralds a rondo theme that appears to begin in the key of C minor, before it eventually alights on the home key. The harmonic side-step may have been intended as a homage to the similar opening of Beethoven's last completed composition - the finale he provided for the String Quartet in B flat Op. 130, as a substitute for the original *Grosse Fuge* conclusion. At the end, a headlong presto brings the sonata to a forceful close.

© Misha Donat 2024

Reproduction and distribution is strictly prohibited.