

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 23 July 2025
7.30pm

Piers Lane piano
Luosha Fang viola

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in D D850 (1825)

*I. Allegro • II. Andante con moto •
III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace •
IV. Rondo. Allegro moderato*

Interval

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Harold en Italie S472 (c.1836-50) *based on Hector Berlioz*

*I. Harold aux montagnes – Scènes de mélancolie,
de bonheur et de joie: Adagio – Allegro • II. Marche
de pèlerins – Chantant la prière du soir: Allegretto •
III. Sérénade – d'un montagnard des Abruzzes à sa
maîtresse: Allegro assai – Allegretto • IV. Orgie de
brigands – Souvenirs des scènes précédentes:
Allegro frenetico*



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In May 1825 **Schubert**, in good health after his illness of 1823-4, left Vienna with the baritone Johann Michael Vogl for the holiday of his lifetime in the spectacular mountain region of the Salzkammergut. In mid-August they arrived in the spa resort of Bad Gastein, where Schubert got down to some serious work. He continued drafting the symphony destined to become the 'Great' C major, and quickly wrote a large-scale Piano Sonata in D major, published in 1826 and dedicated to the Bohemian pianist Karl Maria von Bocklet.

It is always dangerous to interpret Schubert's music as emotional autobiography. Yet it is surely not over-fanciful to hear the exhilaration of that glorious *Sommerreise* in both the 'Great' C major Symphony and the D major Sonata, of which Robert Schumann wrote: 'Life ... bubbles forth ... one thing after another, exciting and irresistible'.

With its unflagging rhythmic *élan* and picturesque shifts of key, the first movement breathes an *alfresco* holiday spirit. At one point in the exposition Schubert even gives us a snatch of Alpine yodelling, marked 'con capriccio' ('with caprice'). Yet behind the music's apparently free-wheeling exuberance lies a close organic unity. So much derives from the two elements of the impulsive main theme: pounding repeated notes, and a cascade of triplets.

For Schumann, the luxuriant second movement, a rondo with two episodes, was 'so bursting with rapture that it seems unable to sing itself out'. Again, though, the music is tightly structured, with everything growing from the opening song melody. At the end of the second episode Schubert uses the syncopated rhythms to build a towering climax. The syncopations continue in the accompaniment when the song theme returns, before the music dies away to silence.

Like the first movement, the *Scherzo* contrasts an assertive opening, low in the keyboard, with airy, dancing triplets. Pervasive cross-rhythms (triple versus duple time) give the music added piquancy. In the second half the main theme is transformed, delightfully, into a lilting *Ländler* – a quintessentially Viennese moment. The G major Trio recalls the Andante in its rich chordal textures. At its centre a grand sequence of modulations slips, via E flat, to the exotic remoteness of G flat major.

'Anyone who tried to take [the finale] seriously would only look ridiculous' was Schumann's verdict on the *Rondo*: understandable in the face of the naïvely jaunty main theme and its ticking accompaniment (a parody here of Haydn's 'Clock' Symphony?) But Schumann seems to have underestimated the second of the two episodes. With an easing of the tempo, this begins with a ravishing new *cantabile* melody before developing an unsuspected muscularity. The final bars drift into a Schubertian dream. And a sonata that began with a bravura flourish ends with a whisper.

For Goethe Italy was an idyllic 'land where the lemon trees bloom'. Berlioz, who spent over a year there in 1831-2 after winning the Prix de Rome, was drawn to the country's wilder, Byronic aspects. Walking in the Abruzzi region, he wrote that he craved 'volcanos, rocks, rich piles of plunder in mountain caves, a concert of shrieks

accompanied by an orchestra of pistols, and carbines, blood and Lachryma-Christi...' The first seeds were sown of his 'symphony in four parts, with a principal viola', as he dubbed *Harold en Italie*.

The crucial stimulus, though, came from Niccolò Paganini, a warm admirer of Berlioz's music. The Italian virtuoso asked him to write something for his newly acquired Stradivarius viola, doubtless expecting a display piece. Instead Berlioz decided to create 'a series of orchestral scenes in which the solo viola would be involved ... like an actual person, retaining the same character throughout. As its setting I decided on the poetic impressions recollected from my wanderings in the Abruzzi, making [the viola] a kind of melancholy dreamer in the style of Byron's Childe Harold.' (The pilgrims' march and brigands' orgy were Berlioz's own invention.)

Paganini's enthusiasm dimmed when he received a draft of the first movement in 1834. According to Berlioz, he complained that the viola part was 'too full of rests' (some understatement!), and never played *Harold en Italie*. To Paganini's credit, after hearing a performance in 1838 he praised the work and promptly sent Berlioz a cheque for the huge sum of 20,000 francs.

The other superstar virtuoso of the Romantic age, **Franz Liszt**, had become a friend and confidant of Berlioz in Paris (he was one of a select few whom Berlioz addressed as 'tu'), and with characteristic generosity did much to promote his work, both through transcriptions and the performances he conducted in Weimar. He made his piano-violita transcription of *Harold en Italie* in 1837, revising it twice before it reached its final form in 1879. The upshot is a work full of Lisztian bravura – the finale, especially, is fiendish – that also remains true to Berlioz's original.

Each of the four movements sets Harold-Berlioz, represented by the viola, amid an Italian landscape. After a tortuously chromatic fugal introduction that hints at the work's motto theme, the viola enters with a radiant version of the motto. The tempo then speeds up to a bounding Allegro portraying Harold's 'scenes of happiness and joy'. In the following *Pilgrims' March* the viola's motto sounds in counterpoint with a chant melody. With a nod to the 'marching' Allegretto in Beethoven's Seventh Symphony, this beautiful movement became a favourite in Berlioz's lifetime.

Beethoven's Seventh is again evoked in the galloping dotted rhythms that frame the third movement. In between, the Abruzzi mountain dweller serenades his mistress to a melody of nursery-rhyme simplicity and sweetness, later in counterpoint with the motto. For his finale Berlioz follows Beethoven's Ninth – for him the ultimate symphony – by introducing reminiscences of each of the previous movements. When the brigands' orgy erupts in full anarchic violence, the viola becomes a helpless bystander, making but one brief, melancholy appearance just before the end.

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