WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 23 March 2025
7.30pm

This concert is supported by Pauline and Ian Howat

Cédric Pescia piano
Philippe Cassard piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828) — Fantasie in F minor D940 (1828)

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) — Symphony No. 9 in D minor Op. 125 'Choral' (1823)
arranged by Franz Liszt
I. Allegro ma non troppo, un poco maestoso
II. Molto vivace
III. Adagio molto e cantabile
IV. Presto – Allegro assai 'Ode to Joy'

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This evening's programme brings together two works written within just four years, each of which takes a unique approach to the problem of how to write an original four-movement instrumental work. To hear them side by side – and from two people playing side by side! – provides a remarkable insight into the Viennese musical avant-garde of the 1820s.

In the summer of 1824, **Franz Schubert** made his second trip to Zselíz (now in Slovakia), the residence of Count Johann Karl Esterházy, to act as music teacher to his family. Schubert's health had been poor and he was reluctant to live behind his Viennese friends for such rural isolation. But there were perks: the company of a fine singer, Baron Karl von Schönstein; a light enough schedule to be able to compose whilst there; and the opportunity to spend time with Karoline von Esterházy, the younger of the Count's daughters. We are told by one of Schubert's intimates that he had fallen for the young noblewoman – and when she teased him for not having dedicated any of his pieces to her, he replied, 'What is the point? Everything is dedicated to you anyway.'

Whether or not this is mere fanciful biographical embroidery, it says something of Schubert's fondness for the Countess – not to mention his view of her pianistic prowess – that he did indeed dedicate a work to her several years later. In the first few months of 1828, he composed his Fantaisie in F minor, a monumental composition for piano duet which is effectively a four-movement sonata written as a continuous piece. Its earnest, haunting first theme provides the source material for all that follows: at times grand and pointed, elsewhere soulful or vividly energetic. And Schubert pulls off a remarkable harmonic conjuring trick, shunting the music up by a semitone to F sharp minor for his two middle movements, only to return us to F minor for the gripping fugal finale and the devastatingly controlled return to the melody with which we began.

On 7 May 1824, about a fortnight before Schubert travelled to Zselíz, he sat in the Kärntnertor theatre to hear the première of **Beethoven**'s Ninth Symphony. A work two years in the making (not including earlier attempts to set Schiller's *An die Freude*, which date back to the 1790s), its first performance featured a choir of around 90 people and four distinguished solo singers in addition to the orchestra. Beethoven stood beside the conductor, Michael Umlauf, for the duration of the performance, unable to hear a note of it.

For all that this first hearing was greeted with tumultuous applause, the Ninth Symphony did not pass smoothly into standard concert repertoire. It was very big – Beethoven added to the woodwind, brass and percussion of his usual ensemble – and extremely long, not to mention ferociously difficult to play. (One of the copyists working for the Philharmonic Society in 1825, preparing for the London première, apologized to his boss for working so slowly but pointed out that the trumpets had as many notes as he usually expected to find in a first violin part!). The difficulties of marshalling singers as well proved insurmountable for many, and several performances were given in which the finale was simply omitted all together. But by the 1850s, the work had found an energetic advocate in the person of **Franz Liszt**, who conducted the Ninth himself at Weimar and promoted it elsewhere as enthusiastically as he could. He also made virtuosic solo piano transcriptions of all of Beethoven's symphonies. And in 1851, he arranged the Ninth for two pianos.

To conjure Beethoven's mighty orchestral textures from four hands is no mean feat: not just because of the density of some passages, but because of the delicacy of others. The opening is a hushed, *tremolo* rocking of one pianist's hands whilst the other strikes out the falling fifths and fourths that punctuates the texture. The power of both players is reserved only for the mightiest climaxes, the rest lovingly shaped as a series of duos, dialogues and stereo effects. In many ways this clarifies the action for listeners, the composer's intricate textures newly cleaned, every dissonance and ringing harmony polished. The Scherzo is crisp and pointed, a coiled spring that demands lightness from its players even as Liszt assigns his pianists fistfuls of notes and leaping octaves from beat to beat. The Adagio is of course lacking the swell and build of strings and winds – but rather than seek to hear what the keyboards cannot provide, it's as well to consider how directly this translation turns Beethoven's music back into a sonata. The ringing right-hand melodies, gently pulsing chords, and even the registral play in Liszt's transcription echo the slow movements of so many of Beethoven's piano works.

It's the finale, of course, that poses the greatest challenge. Indeed, in Liszt's astonishing transcription of the work for solo piano he was forced to omit much of the vocal writing on the basis that it was physically impossible to render in addition to the orchestral parts. But here he has double the finger-power and puts it to thrilling effect. After the break-neck recap of previous movements and the thundering double bass recitative, Liszt unfurls An die Freude across four staves, complete with the words printed in the score so that the players know who they are 'singing' when. The chorus rings out over pounding octaves, the fugue brilliantly decorated with looping passagework as the music thunders to its rousing conclusion. Two humble pianists, clearly, can raise the roof just as mightily as a chorus and orchestra of hundreds, given the right arranger.

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