

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 23 November 2021 7.30pm

Angela Hewitt piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Sonata in C K309 (1777)

*I. Allegro con spirito • II. Andante un poco adagio •
III. Rondeau. Allegretto grazioso*

Olivier Messiaen (1908-1992)

Préludes (1928-9)

*La colombe • Le nombre léger • Instants défunts •
Les sons impalpables du rêve • Plainte calme • Un reflet dans le vent*

Interval

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Piano Sonata in B flat K281 (1775)

I. Allegro • II. Andante amoroso • III. Rondeau. Allegro

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Nocturnes Op. 55 (1842-4)

Nocturne in F minor • Nocturne in E flat

Scherzo No. 4 in E Op. 54 (1842-3)

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In August 1777, the 21-year-old **Mozart's** general boldness led his Archbishop employer to sack both him and his father, Leopold. Strenuous repair work got Leopold his job back, but Wolfgang had to seek pastures new. Nothing daunted, he set off on tour with his mother. He was no stranger to roaming the Continent. His first tour had spanned three years, taking the whole family to Paris and London, and shortly after, he spent two years in Northern Italy, accompanied by his father; in between, he was forever back and forth to Vienna. This time, by October, they had reached Mannheim, with its magnificent and famous Court Orchestra, which had been built up by Johann Stamitz. Its director now was Christian Cannabich, whose daughter, Rosina, was just entering her teens. Wolfgang and his mother somehow got stuck in Mannheim until well into December, by which time Leopold, in his letters, was heavily underlining his advice to move on to another city. Mozart, meanwhile, had been writing Rosina this C major piano sonata. It became a popular favourite in the Cannabich household: 'It's hummed, drummed, fiddled and whistled three times a day', Wolfgang told his father. The middle movement is a portrait of the enchanting Rosina. It would seem she was perhaps a contrary Miss. The main theme sounds as if it begins on the upbeat to the three-beat bar – 3 ONE 2, 3 ONE 2, and so on, and only at the fifth bar does the harmony reveal, with a shortening of step rather like reaching the bottom of the stairs before you thought you were there, that actually it's been 1 TWO 3, 1 TWO 3, all along!

Rosina was, in fact, just a blind. Mozart had indeed fallen in love in Mannheim, with Aloysia Weber. With great reluctance, he moved on towards Paris at the end of March 1778. There his mother died, and Wolfgang found little success. On the way home, he spent Christmas with the Weber family. When he next met them, in 1781, Aloysia was married. Wolfgang married her younger sister, Constanze, the following year.

The eight preludes published by the 21-year-old **Messiaen** have titles, in the manner pioneered by Debussy 20 years before. They employ similar pianistic devices, though Messiaen is more inveterately contrapuntal than Debussy – as one might expect from a great organist. Their sounds, however, are completely different, thanks to Messiaen's employment of what he called Modes of Limited Transposition. To explain: the ordinary major scale – aka the Ionian Mode, according to ancient Greek theory – can start on any one of the 12 different notes, and the selection of notes is different each time. But the whole-tone scale, that quintessentially French mode that Messiaen, a stickler for order, numbered Mode One, has only two transpositions. Since all the notes are a whole-tone apart, if you transpose it by a whole-tone (that's to say, start on D instead of C), you just get all the same notes. If you transpose it a semitone (start on C sharp) every note

is different from the version that starts on C. But this transposition is subject to the same limitations, so Mode 1 has only two transpositions. Mode 2 is more complicated, being formed of four overlapping groups of three notes separated by a semitone and a tone. So, C Dflat Eflat E Fsharp G A Bflat C. This has three possible transpositions (start on C, Dflat or D), so hints a little more at a key than does the perfectly ambiguous whole-tone scale. Messiaen uses such modes (he numbered them up to seven) to create unexpected combinations of notes.

Mozart saw in the year 1775 rehearsing his new opera, *La finta giardiniera*, in Munich. This sonata, which he presumably wrote in between rehearsals, is more like Haydn than Mozart's sonatas usually are, throwing off for the first time the suave writing he had imbibed from Johann Christian Bach in London in 1764. (Later, Christian was on hand in Paris to help when Mrs Mozart died, earning Wolfgang's eternal gratitude.) The rondo theme is a good example of the new twinkle in Mozart's eye: it's in the key of B flat, but the very first harmony note we hear is a B natural. Later, its very unusual slurs across the barline give it a slight sailor's swagger. The opening of the first movement is Haydn at his most expansive, setting out his climbing equipment, the crampons of cadence and the ropes of figuration, as it were, before leading us up the early crags of the tonal system. The comparatively moderate speed of the demisemi-quavers is another Haydn fingerprint, later much used by Beethoven, though more in his Adagios. The amorous *Andante* strives for expression in a new way, with very detailed dynamic markings, and a bewilderingly interesting phrase structure, as what seemed to be a five-bar phrase avoids stopping after eight bars, and finally comes to a halt after 15 bars!

The French piano-maker Erard established a factory in London as early as 1792, in an attempt to escape the chaos of the Revolution. By the 1840s, London-built Erards were thought to be better than those made in Paris, possibly because the quality of the iron was better, the industrial revolution having started earlier in Britain. And so, when **Chopin** wanted to find a really good piano for his Scottish pupil Jane Stirling, he asked his friend Julius Benedict, the great opera composer who lived in Manchester Square, to pop along to Great Marlborough Street and choose an appropriate instrument. It was for this Erard piano that Chopin composed two of his greatest Nocturnes, the weary but valiant F minor and the gorgeous E flat, where Chopin indulges his taste for counterpoint to the full. Jane Stirling's instrument is now in the Cobbe Collection at Hatchlands in East Clandon, near Guildford.

One might be forgiven for thinking that the E major Scherzo was by Richard Strauss. What a harmonist Chopin was!

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