WIGMORE HALL

Monday 24 February 2025
1.00pm

Steven Osborne piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)	Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring from *Herz und Mund und Tat und Leben* BWV147 (1723) *arranged by Myra Hess*
James MacMillan (b.1959)	Lumen Christi
Judith Weir (b.1954)	Chorale, for Steve
Franz Schubert (1797-1828)	Piano Sonata in B flat D960 (1828) *I. Molto moderato* *II. Andante sostenuto* *III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace con delicatezza* *IV. Allegro ma non troppo*

BBC RADIO 3 **This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3**

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J.S. Bach's 'Jesu, Joy of Man's Desiring' was Dame Myra Hess's signature tune. The BBC Four programme *Perfect Pianists*, which is re-broadcast regularly, includes a magisterial filmed performance from Dame Myra herself – keep an eye open for it!

Sir James MacMillan's note on *Lumen Christi* states: 'This little piano piece began as a playful sketch for Symphony 'Vigil'.' ('in fact, the music appears towards the end of the second movement, unexpectedly on the celeste'). The four notes of the Easter chant *Lumen Christi* are repeated over and over again, in two different octaves, with an ever-evolving harmonic background which leads to an unsettling polytonal opposition in the middle of the piece. The overall effect is of a child's music box - simple, mostly serene but with some ominous shadings'. (James MacMillan, August 1997).

Judith Weir's *Chorale* in memory of the American composer Steven Stucky (1949-2016) was written for the pianist Gloria Chen. A chorale-like theme in the left hand is decorated with quintuplets. At the end, a version of the theme is played in solemn four-part harmony. Only the white notes are used, and the piece ends with a C major chord.

Schubert was the only great composer of the Viennese School actually to be Viennese – a reminder of the cosmopolitan nature of that swirling centre of empire. His natural form of self-expression was the piano – often in combination with a voice, of course, but on all sorts of other occasions too. A painting of a charade being acted by a group of his friends – 'Adam & Eve', with the morally dubious Schober as the Serpent, and the unusually tall Kupelwieser, the painter of the picture, as the Tree of Life – shows Schubert sitting at the piano in a corner, attended only by a patient dog, as he strums a doubtless dramatic chord with his left hand alone.

1828 was the year Schubert gave his public concert – just the one, in his whole lifetime. It dropped like a very small pebble into the Viennese musical pool, completely eclipsed by the enormous splash made by Paganini that same week. The receipts were soon spent, and Schubert, in declining health, found himself unable to take an essential holiday from the early industrial fug of Vienna. He spent August composing his last great songs, to poems by Rellstab and Heine that he had come across at his Book Club (as we would now call his 'reading circle').

In an attempt to find cleaner air, he went to stay with his brother Ferdinand in his new apartment in a developing suburb. He was expecting to die from syphilis: but because the well in Ferdinand's courtyard was not dug deep enough, syphilis found itself in a race with typhoid.

While he was staying with Ferdinand, he worked on his greatest masterpieces. The last three piano sonatas were composed in September, and the great C major String Quintet soon after. His final occupation, on his deathbed, was the correction of the proofs of *Winterreise*, that supreme song cycle that has become one of those iconic works that everyone must hear, regardless of their taste, its reputation taking on a life of its own. A precious autumn indeed.

On 4 November, in that fit of self-improvement that often strikes about the age of 30, Schubert decided his counterpoint wasn't good enough, and embarked upon a course with the noted theorist Simon Sechter. Schubert wrote a few exercises for him (which, amazingly, turned up suddenly in 1969), but on 19 November, at the age of 31, he died. Sad though this is, an even sadder fact is that getting even to 31 was doing pretty well for Viennese men in those early throes of the Industrial Revolution.

Schubert's contrapuntal ambition is more likely to have been spurred by his sense of his possibilities, rather than dissatisfaction with what he was actually producing. The great B flat Sonata, at one point the most recorded work in the repertoire – I built a library on it for Radio 3 a few years ago, and it was quite a handful – shows Schubert at the top of his game, refining all he had learnt in a life mostly spent sitting at a piano. To take just one example: which child has not revelled in banging the piano's bottom note? – 'the note the cat died on', according to my grandmother. About 20 seconds into his sonata, Schubert sublimates this universal urge into an incredibly disturbing trill on his piano's bottom note.

Then there are the astonishing lyrical inventions of the first two movements (and their odd key relationship – B flat major to C sharp minor); the fleeting twinkle of the Scherzo; and the Finale's oblique approach to the tonic via a sort of gathering-note, like the one in the Finale of the 'Trout' Quintet. My favourite moment in the sonata is shortly before the return of the opening theme in the first movement, when we hear the melody in D minor twice, but in between we hear it actually in B flat major, which is where Schubert's mighty structure has been heading all the time. It's an incredibly bold anticipation which somehow works as a distant glimpse of home as you trudge along the weary road.

How good a pianist was Schubert? He played this sonata himself, but left his piano trios to the virtuoso, Bocklet, perhaps out of consideration for the string players. The detailed expression marks in the last two movements make me suspect that he played them quite slowly. Perhaps we're in that world where composers play as if they were just improvising, with heart and soul, sometimes humming to themselves, forgetting everything around them.