

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 24 January 2022 1.00pm

Elisabeth Brauss piano

BBC
RADIO



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3

Domenico Scarlatti (1685-1757)

Sonata in C minor Kk56

Sonata in C Kk159 'La caccia'

Sonata in B minor Kk27

Sonata in B minor Kk87

Sonata in G Kk427

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Sonata in A minor K310 (1778)

I. Allegro maestoso • II. Andante cantabile con espressione • III. Presto

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Sonatine (1903-5)

I. Modéré • II. Mouvement de menuet • III. Animé

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Piano Sonata No. 3 in A minor Op. 28 (1917)

Allegro tempestoso

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Today's lunchtime recital by German pianist Elisabeth Brauss offers a chronological survey of the piano sonata spanning around 170 years, revealing not only its structural evolution but also the development in its expressive and imaginative scope. This period saw the rise of the virtuoso pianist and the transfer of keyboard music from private court or domestic spaces to the public arena of the concert hall.

Domenico Scarlatti's contribution to the keyboard sonata is unrivalled in quantity – he wrote at least 555 examples. Born in Naples in 1685 (the same year as JS Bach and Handel), it at first seemed he would follow his father, Alessandro, as a composer of operas and church music. But in 1719 he was appointed to the royal court in Portugal, also becoming tutor to the then seven-year-old infanta Maria Barbara, daughter of King João V. With the marriage of Maria Barbara to Prince Fernando of Spain in 1729, Scarlatti moved with his patroness first to Seville then to Madrid, where he composed most of the sonatas. As well as pushing the boundaries of keyboard technique, the sonatas make frequent reference to the folk and popular music of Spain, evoking the sound of guitars, castanets and drums. Mostly spanning a few minutes in length, they tend to fall into a simple binary (two-part) single-movement form. They are among the earliest pieces considered as part of the standard piano repertoire.

Marked *Con spirito*, the Sonata in C minor Kk56 almost has the feel of a tarantella (a fast, 6/8 dance from Scarlatti's birthplace, Naples). The simple but robust harmonic structure is based on the alternation of tonic and dominant, and the second part features some characteristic hand-crossing. One of the most popular sonatas, the equally spirited C major sonata Kk159 (nicknamed 'La caccia', 'The hunt'), opens with bold hunting horns. The second section begins in the minor key but returns to the major for the return of the opening music. By contrast Kk27 in B minor moves from the minor to major in the first part, and features elegant counterpoint (part-writing) that recalls Bach; whereas Palestrina may be more the model in the beautiful and introspective Kk87. Marked 'As fast as possible', Kk427 calls for the left hand to be as nimble as the right and is spiked with sudden chordal outbursts.

Mozart wrote his Piano Sonata in A minor K310 in Paris, where he had travelled with his mother, Anna Maria, in 1778 in a bid to find a job. (He had recently been dismissed from his Salzburg post working for Prince-Archbishop Colloredo.) Tragically, Anna Maria died on 3 July and the shock of her death is thought by some to have coloured this sonata – one of only two of Mozart's 18 keyboard sonatas composed in a minor key. Adding to Mozart's torment at the time was his disdain for the French, his unwillingness to return to Salzburg and his infatuation with the young singer Aloysia Weber whom he had met the previous year in Mannheim. (He would later marry Aloysia's sister, Constanze.)

The *Allegro maestoso* launches in with insistent chords in the left hand and an orchestral texture, but the real drama comes in the stormy, driven development section. The *Andante cantabile con espressione* second movement combines poise with poignancy to breathtaking effect. The final movement is a *Presto* rondo, which ordinarily might be carefree and lively, but here carries unsettled undertones.

Elegant yet compact, teeming with detail yet crystalline in transparency, **Ravel's** *Sonatine* seems fashioned entirely in the image of its meticulously dressed, mechanical-toy-loving creator. A critic at the work's Paris première in 1906 complained, 'It is finely made, it is appealing, it is even often entertaining – but it remains cold.' In fact, this is absolutely in keeping with Ravel's unique combination of flair and modesty. The first movement was apparently written as an entry to a competition promoted by the *Weekly Critical Review*. According to Ravel's friend the critic Michel-Dimitri Calvocoressi, the competition was abandoned since Ravel was the only entrant, and anyway he had exceeded the stipulated limit of 75 bars. Like his later suite *Le tombeau de Couperin*, it pays homage to 18th-century Classicism. The three movements – a central minuet flanked by two quicker movements – are unified by featuring themes based on the interval of the fourth or its inversion, the perfect fifth.

When he graduated from the St Petersburg Conservatory in 1909, aged 18, **Prokofiev** already had seven piano sonatas under his belt. He soon rejected these and followed his instinct to take a more progressive path, but he returned to some of them in his 'mature' early piano sonatas: the Sonatas Nos. 3 and 4, for example, both bear the subtitle 'From Old Notebooks', acknowledging these borrowings.

By the time of his Third Sonata Prokofiev had found a radical, percussive keyboard style, bearing out Glazunov's observations on his playing: 'He is trying to produce effects which are often beyond the piano's abilities, often at the expense of beauty of the sound.' The sonata opens with a driving, continuously motoric section – a hallmark of Prokofiev's piano-writing. This eventually yields, via a long, mysterious rising chromatic scale, to a delicate lyrical theme, marked '*semplice e dolce*' ('simply and sweetly'), that combines childlike naivety with poignant nostalgia. Once this comes to rest it's a return to the opening, brutalist music in a development section that climaxes in thunderous rising left-hand chords and fast-repeated notes in the right-hand thumb. The coda builds up from hushed insect-like chromatic buzzing, spreading over the entire range of the keyboard and gathering in pace during a technical tour de force that drives to the end.