

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 24 June 2023  
1.00pm

Grace Francis piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)	Variations on a Theme by Paganini (Book II) Op. 35 (1862-3)
Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)	Andante spianato et grande polonaise brillante Op. 22 (1830-4)
Pyotr Ilyich Tchaikovsky (1840-1893)	October from <i>The Seasons</i> Op. 37b (1875-6)
Fryderyk Chopin	Scherzo No. 2 in B flat minor Op. 31 (1837)
Franz Liszt (1811-1886)	Un sospiro S144 No. 3 (1845-9)
	Mephisto Waltz No. 1 S514 (1856-61)



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**Brahms** completed the *Variations on a Theme by Paganini* Op. 35 in 1863. That name is in fact the work's subtitle: the formal title is *Studies for Pianoforte*. Clara Schumann, herself a famed pianist, famously dubbed it the 'Hexenvariationen', or 'Witch's Variations', on account of the work's technical difficulty. Paganini's Caprice No. 24 in A minor is employed as the theme for both books of variations. The structure of each book is identical: the theme, 14 variations and a coda. It is probable that Brahms penned the work as a riposte to Liszt's *Grandes études de Paganini* written in 1851, based upon the same theme. Whilst Book I showcases technical difficulty and bravura writing, Book II is equally challenging for the pianist but the writing is more varied and nuanced. The first variation features varied repeats, thereby becoming almost two variations in one. Variation four is a waltz played with the hands widely spaced, whilst the seventh presents its rhythms played across the beat. Several of the other variations invoke violinistic flair as harmonics, grace notes and blind octaves are all present.

**Chopin** composed the *Andante spianato et grande polonaise brillante* Op. 22 between 1830 and 1834, with the *Grande Polonaise* being written first in 1830-1831. The *Andante spianato* was written in 1834 and joined to the polonaise with a fanfare-like motif. Chopin used the indication of *spianato*, meaning smooth, solely for this work amongst his entire oeuvre, the desired effect being reinforced by a further marking of *tranquillo*. The Argentinian pianist Nelson Goerner sees the work as two separate yet conjoined pieces, which he calls 'a strange couple, but a very beautiful one'. In his view, the *Andante* is 'comparable to ... the most beautiful nocturnes and incorporates mazurka elements in its middle section.' Of the longer grande polonaise, Goerner opines that it is 'distinctively aristocratic and noble, brilliant and colourful; the piano figuration is never mere passagework but generating music of fantastic invention.'

**Tchaikovsky** was not the first composer to write a sequence of '12 characteristic scenes' for piano based on the months of the year; that honour went to Fanny Mendelssohn, sister of the composer Felix Mendelssohn. Her cycle, *Das Jahr*, was written in 1841 following a year travelling in Italy. Tchaikovsky's *The Seasons* Op. 37b was written at the request of St Petersburg publisher Nikolay Bernard, with the music for each month being printed between January and December 1876 in the periodical *Nouvelliste*. *October* carries the subtitle 'Autumn Song': it is a rich yet delicately scored vignette that aptly conveys the shortening of daylight hours whilst capturing a mood of introspective reflection.

Chopin's Scherzo No. 2 in B flat minor Op. 31 dates from 1837. Robert Schumann wrote in his diary that it had 'all the passion of Byron's poetry' after hearing a performance of it. Essentially, the work is in three sections, wherein faster paragraphs given to dramatic outburst surround a more lyrical central section. Thus,

the work begins with a highly agitated passage of questioning and answering phrases, which then cede to a melody of some beauty, before a trio section that begins with the most economical of compositional means to then grow in virtuosic demands. The work's development section presents augmented versions of the main thematic material to date, all of which are then gathered together again in a rapid coda that surely requires a superior technique and musical understanding on the part of any pianist.

**Liszt's** *Un sospiro* S144 No. 3 is the last of three *Etudes de concert* completed in 1849. In common with its partners, the title – which translates as 'A sigh' – conveys the work's main poetic aspect, although it is possible the titles were not Liszt's own. That said, he did not fight their inclusion when the études were published. Although ostensibly a study in crossing hands and achieving a flowing and seamless effect using arpeggios, Liszt also notates a melody on a third, treble clef stave in the score. As the work progresses, the degree of hand crossing and integration of the melody against the background texture becomes ever more involved as ever larger and more distant intervals need to be negotiated.

Liszt composed no fewer than four *Mephisto Waltzes* at various intervals between 1859 and 1885. The *Mephisto Waltz No. 1* S514 was originally conceived as the second of *2 Episodes from Lenau's Faust* and was scored for orchestra. The work's intended title in that version was *Der Tanz in der Dorfschenke*, or 'The dance in the village inn'. Liszt printed this summary of Nikolaus Lenau's verse in the score:

There is a wedding feast in progress in the village inn, with music, dancing, carousing. Mephistopheles and Faust pass by, and Mephistopheles induces Faust to enter and take part in the festivities. Mephistopheles snatches the fiddle from the hands of a lethargic fiddler and draws from it indescribably seductive and intoxicating strains. The amorous Faust whirls about with a full-blooded village beauty in a wild dance; they waltz in mad abandon out of the room, into the open, away into the woods. The sounds of the fiddle grow softer and softer, and the nightingale warbles his love-laden song.

The dance-like spirit is apparent in one of Liszt's most extrovert compositions. Indeed, for those contemporaries who held that Liszt's virtuosity and ability to entrance audiences with his keyboard prowess was an indication that he had entered into a pact with the devil, then his revisiting of the Faust legend in some of his popular compositions provided all the evidence they needed.

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