

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 24 May 2022 7.30pm

Danny Driver piano

CLASSIC *f*M Wigmore Hall £5 tickets for Under 35s supported by Media Partner Classic FM

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

Cloches à travers les feuilles from *Images, Series 2* (1907)

György Ligeti (1923-2006)

From *Etudes Book 2* (1988-94)

Galamb borong • Fém • Vertige • Der Zauberlehrling

Etudes Book 3 (1995-2001)

White on White • *Pour Irina* • *A bout de souffle* • *Canon*

Bill Evans (1929-1980)

Peace Piece (1958)

György Ligeti

From *Etudes Book 2* (1988-94)

En suspens • *Entrelacs* • *Coloana infinită*

Interval

György Ligeti

From *Etudes Book 1* (1985)

Désordre • Cordes à vide • Touches bloquées

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Etude in E Op. 10 No. 3 (1830-2)

György Ligeti

From *Etudes Book 1* (1985)

Fanfares • Arc-en-ciel • Automne à Varsovie

Claude Debussy

Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut from *Images, Series 2* (1907)

György Ligeti

L'escalier du diable from *Etudes Book 2* (1988-94)

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Contradictions, contingencies and paradoxes proved to be powerful shaping forces in the work of **György Ligeti**. The Hungarian composer was a witness to where the absolute certainties of hard-edged ideologies, those of Hitlerian fascism and Stalinism most brutal among them, could lead; consequently, he rejected any attempt to constrain art within the boundaries of a system or -ism. Ligeti's art was one of adventure and exploration. He found inspiration in music from diverse cultures, from the extraordinary polyphony and polyrhythms of the Banda Linda people of the Central African Republic to Balinese gamelan, the impressionistic jazz harmonies of Bill Evans and the infinitely subtle soundworld of Debussy. The diversity and complexity of these many influences found their place in Ligeti's three books of *Etudes* for piano, in all 18 pieces that reflect the extraordinary richness of the composer's mature music and his uncanny feeling for the timbres and textures of sound.

Ligeti's *Etudes* emulate the spirit of one of these aforementioned influences: Claude Debussy. Speaking to a Hungarian journalist in 1910, Debussy reflected on his openness to fresh ideas and their realisation in his first book of piano *Préludes*: 'what joy in finding within us something new, which surprises even ourselves...', he observed. Ligeti's first book of *Etudes*, completed in 1985, followed a long period of creative transition and silence during which he had immersed himself in studying non-European musical traditions, the superhuman polyrhythms of Conlon Nancarrow's *Studies for player piano*, fractal geometry, the imaginary worlds of Lewis Carroll and Jorge Luis Borges, and the mathematically inspired drawings and unsettling perspectives of MC Escher's graphic art. *Etudes Book 1* set Ligeti free to experiment with a multitude of styles: displaced reiteration and asynchrony between the right and left hand in *Désordre* ('Disorder'); the mechanical obstruction of an incessantly repeated rhythm in *Touchez bloquées* ('Blocked keys'); the jazz-like fluidity and tonal beauty of *Arc-en-ciel* ('Rainbow'); and the rhythmic dynamism of *Automne à Varsovie*, a tribute to the people of Poland and their non-violent struggle against Soviet rule.

Danny Driver describes Ligeti's three books of *Etudes* as 'quite a mountain to climb', a metaphor born of their striking musical depth and fiendish technical demands. While preparing to perform several of them for the first time in 2011, he worked late into the night as part of an inchworm process of progress followed by frustration, repeated until each piece had been absorbed and their many difficulties overcome. 'They are addictive to practise,' notes Driver. 'If you love the piano and are a perfectionist by nature, then there's something that sucks you deeper and deeper into the music. You feel that you must find out what each piece is really about, and you can't begin to do that until you've surmounted all the intransigent technical challenges that are on the page. And those demands, musical and technical, fuel the enthusiasm for more practice.'

Ligeti's complex invention, stylistic range and emotional variety, suggests Driver, are typical of a composer who determinedly set his own course. 'Perhaps the restrictive environment of post-war Hungary played its part here. Ligeti certainly distrusted hegemony, whether it was political hegemony or the stylistic hegemony imposed on new music by the Darmstadt School of composers. I think that caused him to ask, "what if...": What if we don't have these systems? What if we don't follow what others tell us? What can we do that's different? He was a maverick; each of his pieces has its own rules and inhabits its own world. You find that with all great pieces of music, where the material generates its own rules. But Ligeti had a remarkable breadth and depth of knowledge of art forms that ranged far beyond the western traditions.'

The composer's second and third books of *Etudes*, respectively written between 1988 and 1994 and 1995 and 2001, offer fresh imaginative takes on music for solo piano. *Book 2* includes evocations of gamelan harmony in *Galamb borong*, a faux-Balinese title rooted in the Hungarian for 'unhappy pigeon', and in the scintillating rhythmic layers of *Entrelacs* ('interlacing' or 'tracery'); Banda Linda polyphony in *Fém* (the Hungarian word for 'metal'); the rapid-fire repetitions of *Der Zauberlehrling* ('The sorcerer's apprentice'); the spiralling patterns of *Coloana infinită* ('Infinite column'), inspired by Constantin Brâncuși's eponymous sculpture; and the intricate polymetric patterns of *L'escalier du diable* ('The devil's staircase'), the longest and among the most difficult of the entire set.

Although chronic illness prevented Ligeti from realising his plans for *Book 3*, its four études elicit extraordinary emotional richness from their study of canonic structures and tonalities rising from the piano's white keys. Strict canon is common to *White on White*, the wild *A bout de souffle* ('Out of breath') and *Canon*, while *Pour Irina* plays with counterpoint and strikingly fluid phrase lengths to progress from a state of serenity to one of near-frenzy.

Danny Driver's choice of companion pieces, each exquisite and multi-faceted, opens gateways to the seemingly inexhaustible emotional and expressive range of Ligeti's *Etudes*. **Debussy's** 'Cloches à travers les feuilles' and 'Et la lune descend sur le temple qui fut' from his second series of *Images* (1907), for instance, resonate respectively with the bell-like sonorities of *Galamb borong* and the sublime stillness of the first half of *White on White*. **Chopin's** famous Etude in E Op. 10 No. 3 offers a bridge that connects Ligeti to an earlier world of intense musical expression, while *Peace Piece*, originally improvised by **Bill Evans** above two ostinato chords at the end of a recording session in 1958, serves here as a meditative preface to *En suspens*, a rare moment of repose in Ligeti's *Book 2*, marked to be performed 'with the elegance of swing'.

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