

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 24 May 2025  
7.30pm

Benjamin Grosvenor piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

3 Intermezzi Op. 117 (1892)

*No. 1 in E flat*

*No. 2 in B flat minor*

*No. 3 in C sharp minor*

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Fantasie in C Op. 17 (1836-8)

*I. Durchaus phantastisch und leidenschaftlich vorzutragen - Im Legendenton • II. Mässig. Durchaus energisch • III. Langsam getragen. Durchweg leise zu halten*

Interval

Modest Musorgsky (1839-1881)

Pictures from an Exhibition (1874)

*Promenade 1 • The Gnome • Promenade 2 •*

*The Old Castle • Promenade 3 • Tuileries •*

*Bydlo • Promenade 4 • Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks •*

*"Samuel" Goldenberg und "Schmuyle" • Promenade 5 •*

*The Market Place at Limoges • Catacombs (Sepulchrum*

*Romanum) • Cum mortuis in lingua mortua • The Hut on*

*Fowl's Legs (Baba-Yaga) • The Great Gate of Kiev*



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**Johannes Brahms**, the handsome young eagle whose life was transformed when he knocked on the door of the Schumanns' house in Düsseldorf on 30 September 1853, had become an introverted, self-contained figure by the time he wrote his 3 *Intermezzi* Op. 117 in 1892. Two years earlier he had stated that with his String Quintet Op. 111 he was done with composing, but when he heard the clarinetist Richard Mühlfeld play he was coaxed out of his brief retirement to write not only the late clarinet chamber works but also 20 short piano pieces that were published as Opp. 116, 117, 118 and 119. He referred to the Op. 117 set as 'the lullabies of my grief', at a time when he was powerfully aware of mortality with the recent deaths of people he was closest to, in particular his beloved sister Elise.

Clara, Robert Schumann's widow and the most important relationship in Brahms's life, was in raptures over their elusive, quiet poetry and supremely subtle writing for the piano. The first is headed by a quote from a Scottish lullaby, reflected in the comforting key of E flat and the calm rocking motion. The middle section is a muted, minor-key brief nocturne. The second *Intermezzo*, in remote B flat minor, is carried by a fragment of melody that merges into a middle section based on sighing thirds. The third *Intermezzo*, in C sharp minor, opens with a simple, bleak unison melody that gathers harmony like a shroud. The extended middle section offers some major-key warmth and more generous textures. All three are gently *andante*, each has only one forte marking, they are all reflective, resigned small masterpieces, a long way from the tempestuous heroics of his younger years.

Brahms met the Schumanns the year before **Robert's** suicide attempt. 15 years earlier, in 1838, Robert was passionately in love with Clara, the daughter of his piano teacher Friedrich Wieck, who was implacably opposed to their marriage, which eventually took place in 1840. Following the deaths of Beethoven and Schubert in 1827 and 1828, Schumann was greatly exercised by the decline of the sonata principle that had been the driving aesthetic force in music for almost a century. He himself had written many character pieces and groups of miniatures – works such as the *Dauidsbündlertänze*, *Carnaval* and *Kreisleriana* – while trying to keep the form's flame alight in his own piano sonatas and in his *Fantasie* Op. 17, like Schubert's 'Wanderer' Fantasy and Liszt's Sonata in B minor, a work strengthened by its realignment of the form to suit a more overt romanticism.

Ironically, the *Fantasie* was originally intended as a public act of reverence to Beethoven before becoming an intensely private declaration of love for Clara. Liszt, to whom Schumann dedicated Op. 17 (with Liszt repaying the compliment in 1854 by dedicating his Sonata in B minor to Schumann), was organising the funding of a Beethoven monument to be erected in Bonn (unveiled in 1845), and Schumann proposed

donating the proceeds of a Grand Sonata, pressing into service a passionate lament over an enforced separation from Clara as the first section, to be called *Ruins*, followed by two more movements, *Triumphal arch* and *Crown of stars*. However, Schumann's enthusiasm for the Beethoven monument project was not shared by various publishers, and it was eventually published in 1839 as the *Fantasy*.

The programmatic titles were dropped, and the piece was headed by a verse by the poet Friedrich Schlegel (a contemporary of Beethoven) that translates as 'In all the sounds of the world's shining dream, it is the soft one that the secret listener hears', the secret listener assumed to be Clara. The first movement is marked to be played 'passionately throughout', with a long minor-key passage marked 'Im legendem-Ton' (In the style of a fable). At the close there is a quote from Beethoven's *An die ferne Geliebte*, the point of which was lost on no one. The middle movement is a triumphant march, its excitement heightened by its extreme difficulty. The third is a sublime nocturne that reaches for the stars in its radiant climax. The second movement in particular made Clara feel faint with rapture, although she waited ten years after her husband's death to play it in public.

**Modest Musorgsky** was by all accounts a fine pianist but much criticised for the way he wrote for the instrument. His output is littered with unfinished business, and his masterpiece *Boris Godunov* was much revised and editorially improved. Yet despite these perceived failings, Musorgsky expressed Russian 'soul' with unaffected depth and immediacy, while drinking deep of the Russian spirits that hastened his death from alcohol poisoning when he was only 42.

He composed *Pictures from an Exhibition* in 1874 as a tribute to his friend, the artist, architect and fellow Russian revivalist Viktor Hartmann, who had died the year before, to coincide with a memorial exhibition of Hartmann's work. Ravel's famous orchestration may have given the suite of ten pictures interspersed with promenades a wider audience and sonic extravagance, but the piano original has irresistible force and personality. The music makes the pictures move and describes character and situation with astonishing directness. The Promenades themselves are a masterstroke. You might think that a walk round a gallery would call for a simple, common-time pace, but Musorgsky alternates bars of unusual and irregular time signatures that suggest both movement and aesthetic and emotional appreciation in freefall. The listener becomes one with the composer as he reflects with sadness, affection and nostalgia on the company and achievements of a much-loved friend, sending him off in a blaze of bell-ringing glory as the Promenade music is subsumed into 'The Great Gate of Kiev'.

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