

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 24 November 2024
7.30pm

Arthur Jussen piano
Lucas Jussen piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Sonata in C for piano 4 hands K521 (1787)
I. Allegro • II. Andante • III. Allegretto

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Andante and variations Op. 46 (1843)

Jörg Widmann (b.1973)

Bunte Blätter (2022)
Fanfare • Fangspiel • Walzer • Danse macabre • Rätsel • Zirkusparade

Interval

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

6 épigraphes antiques (1914)
Pour invoquer Pan • Pour un tombeau sans nom • Pour que la nuit soit propice • Pour la danseuse aux crotales • Pour l'égyptienne • Pour remercier la pluie au matin

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Suite No. 2 Op. 17 (1900-1)
I. Introduction. Alla marcia • II. Valse. Presto • III. Romance. Andantino • IV. Tarantelle. Presto

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In the winter of 1780-1, Johann Nepomuk della Croce painted a portrait of the Mozart family. Under the watchful gaze of Leopold Mozart – and under a portrait of his wife, Anna Maria, who had died two years previously – **Mozart** and his sister, Nannerl, sit side-by-side at a keyboard. The painting certainly shows Nannerl to be her brother's equal and the siblings often appeared together on the European tours they made in the 1760s. They may even be playing one of the two early sonatas for piano duet that Mozart had composed in Salzburg in the early 1770s. The Sonata in C, K521, is much more ambitious than those youthful works. Mozart wrote it in 1787, originally planning to dedicate it to one of his gifted pupils, Franziska von Jacquin. Eventually, however, it was dedicated to Nanette and Barbette Natrop, whose father was a wealthy Viennese entrepreneur. The Natrop sisters were clearly talented musicians, able to cope with a sonata that Mozart described to a friend as 'rather difficult'. It is also urbane and witty, and its three movements would surely have delighted music lovers in the salons that were such a feature of social life in the Austrian capital.

In 1842, **Schumann** made a careful study of the quartets of Haydn and Mozart, finding in the latter an abundance of 'serenity, repose, and grace'. Almost immediately, Schumann embarked on a series of chamber works of his own, including three string quartets, a piano quartet and a piano quintet. He also composed the *Andante and variations* Op. 46, for the decidedly quirky combination of two pianos, two cellos and a single horn. Mendelssohn – who took part in a private run-through of the work in Leipzig – wisely suggested that it might be more viable if rewritten for two pianos. It was in this form that the variations were premièred in Leipzig by Mendelssohn and Clara Schumann in the summer of 1843; a quarter of a century later, Clara Schumann performed them in Vienna with Brahms. Although they contain moments of genial ebullience, Schumann thought them 'very elegiac. As I confessed to a friend: "I think I felt rather melancholic when I wrote them".'

In 1850, Schumann assembled a volume of 14 piano miniatures that he had written over the last decade and a half, giving them the title of *Bunte Blätter* ('Colourful leaves', although *Blätter* can also be translated as 'pages' or 'sheets'). This was the very title that **Jörg Widmann** also chose for the sequence of six pieces for two pianos that Arthur and Lucas Jussen first performed at the Ruhr Piano Festival in Bochum on 3 July 2022. Like Schumann, Widmann uses evocative names to characterise what he refers to 'a collection of highly diverse and multifaceted pieces and forms'. There are nods to seemingly familiar genres such as the waltz and the fanfare, and the 'Dance macabre' may allude to Saint-Saëns, or indeed to any of the many 'Dances of Death' familiar from European music, poetry or painting. The second

number is a playful 'game of tag' that celebrates the virtuosity of the brothers who premièred it, and 'Riddle' honours the German philosopher Peter Sloterdijk, with whom Widmann collaborated on the opera *Babylon*.

In 1894, the Belgian poet Pierre Louÿs published a volume of prose poems under the title *Chansons de Bilitis*. Purporting to be translations of a forgotten contemporary of Sappho, the book was soon revealed to be an elaborate forgery, although that did little to dampen their popularity with *fin-de-siècle* audiences, who delighted in Louÿs's evocation of lesbian eroticism and the pagan hedonism of Ancient Greece. **Debussy** set three of the poems for voice and piano in 1897, and in 1901, he provided music to accompany a dramatic recitation of 12 more. The music for these *tableaux vivants* was scored for two flutes, two harps and celesta – an unusual combination that was hardly likely to be popular with performers and promoters. Seemingly in need of money, Debussy returned to the score in 1914, revising six of its numbers for two pianos as his *6 épigraphes antiques*, although he never made the orchestral version he also considered. Even in the version for two pianos, however, one can hear Debussy's attempt to evoke the sound of the flute or the jingling of crotales, and his stylisation of the modes of Ancient Greece lends the music a kind of austerity, even abstraction. Even as he looked back to the distant past, Debussy proved himself to be entirely modern.

The bravura march that opens the Suite No. 2, Op. 17, gives little indication of the years of depression that **Rachmaninov** had endured after the disastrous premiere of his First Symphony in March 1897 (Glazunov – the conductor – was said to have been drunk on the occasion). A period of therapy in the first months of 1900 successfully alleviated Rachmaninov's emotional turmoil, and the successful premiere of two movements of the Second Piano Concerto that December further confirmed his sense of creative renewal. The conductor on that occasion was his cousin, Alexander Siloti, and it was Rachmaninov and Siloti who gave the first performance of the new suite in Moscow in November 1901. After the opening march comes a waltz that is full of the playfulness and filigree delicacy a Mendelssohn scherzo. The third movement is a soulful romance that seems to emerge from the emotional world of the Russian gentry estate. Like so many artists from the European North, Rachmaninov was drawn to the light and warmth of the Mediterranean, and the finale is a sprightly tarantella that captures the sights and sounds of a sojourn in Italy that he made in 1901.

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