

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 25 March 2023
7.30pm

Supported by Sam and Alexandra Morgan

Imogen Cooper piano

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

From *Années de pèlerinage, deuxième année, Italie* S161
(1838-61)

Sonetto 47 del Petrarca • Sonetto 123 del Petrarca •
Sonetto 104 del Petrarca

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 30 in E Op. 109 (1820)

*I. Vivace ma non troppo – Adagio espressivo •
II. Prestissimo • III. Gesangvoll, mit innigster
Empfindung. Andante molto cantabile ed espressivo*

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in C D840 'Reliquie' (1825)

I. Moderato • II. Andante

Ludwig van Beethoven

Piano Sonata No. 32 in C minor Op. 111 (1821-2)

*I. Maestoso - Allegro con brio ed appassionato •
II. Arietta. Adagio molto semplice cantabile*

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Franz Liszt's first two keyboard collections titled *Années de pèlerinage* date from the years of 'Lisztomania', as Heinrich Heine dubbed them, when the keyboard lion roved Europe to feverish adulation. Whereas the pieces in Book One evoke his travels in Switzerland, those in Book Two were inspired by the art and literature of Italy, culminating in the sonata *Après une lecture de Dante*.

After discovering Petrarch (1304-74) in the late 1830s, Liszt returned again and again to his love poetry. The three Petrarch sonnets in the *Années de pèlerinage* started life in the late 1830s as songs, and were later transcribed as songs without words. Affirming his love of *bel canto* opera, Bellini especially, Liszt responds to Petrarch's troubled adoration of his muse Laura with music that often veers between recitative and aria. There are flashes of glittering, *echt*-Lisztian virtuosity. But the predominant tone is one of rapt, musing tenderness.

In the Romantic imagination **Beethoven** wrote his last piano sonatas and string quartets for himself and posterity, in ivory-tower isolation from the world. The more prosaic truth is that they were all composed at the behest of a friend, publisher or patron. Early in 1820 he was asked by his friend Friedrich Starke to contribute a 'little piece' to a piano tutor. By April Beethoven had responded with a short movement in E major. The same month he received a request from the Berlin publisher Adolf Martin Schlesinger for three new piano sonatas. On the suggestion of a friend, Beethoven reused the 'little piece' as the first movement of the Sonata Op 109, completed in the summer of 1820.

In his three final sonatas Beethoven draws back from the gigantism of the so-called 'Hammerklavier', Op 106. In the E major Sonata, especially, there is little room for strenuous rhetoric. Instead Beethoven cultivates what the American musicologist Maynard Solomon dubs an 'etherealized, improvisatory tone'. On the surface the opening movement (Starke's 'little piece') indeed sounds like an inspired improvisation. But its air of nonchalant playfulness coexists with a subtly compressed sonata-form structure. Following the nostalgic coda without a break is a furious E minor march-scherzo, again in a compressed sonata form. Textures are truculently polyphonic. The theme's descending bass is developed separately, while a subsequent 'running' theme, in double counterpoint, spectacularly exploits the extremes of the keyboard – a late-Beethoven speciality.

As in Op. 111, Beethoven crowns the sonata with a set of variations on a sublimely simple melody, somewhere between a sarabande and a hymn. The fourth variation weaves a shadowy outline of the theme in graceful arabesques. Then, in the fifth, Beethoven develops a fragment of the theme in a rugged fugue. The sixth and final variation opens with the theme in the alto voice before building in an astonishing series of sustained tremolandos and trills. After this visionary climax Beethoven brings back the theme in its original purity, with an effect of timeless peace.

Schubert abandoned as many piano sonatas as he finished. Outstanding among these fragments is the so-

called 'Reliquie' ('relic') Sonata of spring 1825. As with the 'Unfinished' Symphony, we can only speculate why Schubert downed tools after he had completed two movements and begun a minuet and finale. The two movements he did complete are broad in scale and rich in invention, with something of the 'heavenly length' that Robert Schumann admired in the 'Great' C major Symphony.

Opening with a quiet, 'pregnant' theme, initially in bare octaves, the first movement has an orchestral grandeur of sonority - a reminder that so much of Schubert's keyboard music evokes other sound worlds. His harmonic imagination, too, is at its most visionary, not least when the second theme - a more expansive variant of the first - arrives, via a sudden, disorienting twist, in the infinitely remote key of B minor. In the far-flung development Schubert combines fragments of the main theme with an insistent drumming figure in music by turns mysterious and volcanic.

After the *Moderato's* tranquil close - the only sustained stretch of C major in the whole movement - the *Andante* opens with a plaintive C minor theme. In a rondo-like structure, this haunting melody alternates with a barcarolle-like episode whose gently rocking motion can be shattered by the explosive outbursts that are always likely to occur in Schubert's late slow movements.

Dedicated to his pupil and benefactor Archduke Rudolph, Beethoven's last sonata is a work of extreme contrasts. Just two movements suffice, polar opposites on every level. As in the Fifth Symphony, the sonata presents a C minor to C major darkness-to-light narrative. Here, though, triumph is inward, spiritual.

The initial *Maestoso* combines the peremptory dotted rhythms of a French Baroque Overture with mysterious harmonic shifts. Vibrations deep in the bass, like a written-out trill, explode into the *Allegro con brio ed appassionato*, which begins like an angular, Bachian fugue subject and continues in a toccata-like swirl of semiquavers. Amid the music's gnarled contrapuntal textures, the lyrical second theme offers a tantalisingly brief vision of peace that will find fulfilment in the second movement.

Emerging from the strange glimmer of the first movement's coda, the theme of the *Arietta* mingles primal simplicity with a celestial delicacy and grace. Throughout the five variations that follow the pulse remains constant while the note values constantly increase – a Beethovenian recreation of an old Baroque technique. The syncopated third variation sounds like sublimated boogie-woogie. In the transcendent final variation, the melody is sounded in an unearthly texture beneath high trills, like distant, mystical trumpets.

When the publisher Schlesinger received the sonata he enquired whether the copyist had forgotten to send a third movement. Beethoven's response would doubtless have been unprintable.

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