

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 25 November 2022
1.00pm

Joseph Tong piano

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Arabeske in C Op. 18 (1838-9)

Jean Sibelius (1865-1957)

5 Pieces Op. 75 'The Trees' (1914)

*When the rowan blossoms • The lonely fir • The aspen •
The birch tree • The spruce*

David Matthews (b.1943)

Five Trees (2021-2) *London première*

*I. The Oak • II. The Willow • III. The Scots Pine •
IV. The Apple • V. The English Elm*

Co-commissioned with funding from the John S Cohen Foundation, Three Choirs Festival and Presteigne Festival

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Fantasy in C D760 'Wanderer' (1822)

*I. Allegro con fuoco, ma non troppo •
II. Adagio • III. Presto • IV. Allegro*



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Determined to shore up his finances before his anticipated marriage to Clara Wieck, **Robert Schumann** spent the autumn and winter of 1838-9 in Vienna, where he hoped to establish himself both as a composer and as the publisher of his journal, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. Hope quickly turned to disillusionment in a city he found too full of gossip and triviality. Yet his Viennese stay was fruitful in other ways. Early in 1839 he visited Schubert's brother Ferdinand and delightedly discovered a huge pile of unpublished manuscripts, including the 'Great' C major Symphony. In Vienna, too, Schumann completed the *Arabeske* Op. 18, and the first four movements of the *Faschingsschwank aus Wien*, adding the finale after his return to Leipzig in spring 1839.

Resorting to 19th-century gender stereotyping, Schumann described the *Arabeske* as 'delicate - suitable for ladies'. On one level it is a guileless rondo, with a gracefully rippling refrain and two minor-keyed episodes, the second of which alludes to the refrain. But Schumann being Schumann, this music is replete with poetic subtleties: in the way the first episode gradually fades into reverie, or in the musing coda, whose dissolving textures foreshadows the postlude of *Dichterliebe*.

An avid nature lover, **Sibelius** was never more at home than in the Finnish forest. His country house near Helsinki was sheltered by birches and firs, two species of tree hauntingly evoked in his 1914 piano vignettes, *The Trees*. After a hesitant, questioning opening, the rowan, or mountain ash, flowers in a warm cantabile melody. *The lonely fir* - a symbol of Finnish independence against Russian domination - is evoked in a slow, solemn march that grows increasingly passionate, while in *The aspen* the chorale-like opening contrasts with shimmering music suggestive of the fluttering leaves.

There is a similar contrast in *The birch*: between a lively melody in folk style and a softly murmuring section marked *dolcissimo, misterioso*. Two melancholy waltz melodies, one in the tenor and one in the soprano register, have made *The spruce* the favourite of the set. Amid the bittersweet charm, a torrential outburst (*risoluto*) recalls the impassioned flourishes near the close of the *The lonely fir*.

David Matthews composed *Five Trees* in 2021-2 as a companion work to Sibelius's *The Trees*. Where Sibelius portrayed five Finnish trees, Matthews describes five British equivalents. His sequence begins with the *maestoso* solemnity of *The Oak*, the wood from which all British ships were built until the 19th Century. *The Willow* is portrayed in a graceful allegretto, whose starting point was the Willow Song from Shakespeare's *Othello*, evoked rather than quoted.

The Scots Pine has a deliberately Scottish flavour - the tree is battered by gusts of wind, but does not

succumb - while *The Apple* is a joyful scherzo. Lastly *The English Elm* begins with a lament for the death of almost all British elms from Dutch Elm Disease. David Matthews notes: 'recently my brother Colin sent me a photograph of a fallen elm trunk on Clapham Common - it was a tree that I knew and which survived the disease for many years. Around the trunk many saplings were growing up. So I felt able to give my piece - and the whole work - a happy ending.'

Between 1820 and the autumn of 1822 **Schubert** began and then abandoned several large-scale instrumental works - most famously the 'Unfinished' Symphony - as he struggled to reconcile his expanded subjective vision with the four-movement sonata design. Only with the 'Wanderer' Fantasy of November 1822 did he triumph over his creative impasse, through a show of demonic energy (Schubert often treats the piano with a Beethovenian brutality) and through a radical - and prophetic - reinterpretation of the traditional sonata design, whereby four linked movements each grow from a single thematic cell.

More mundanely, Schubert had a strong financial incentive for completing the Fantasy, which had been commissioned by a wealthy nobleman, Emmanuel Liebenberg de Zsittin. Talented though he was (he had studied with Hummel), Liebenberg may have got more than he bargained for in the bravura pyrotechnics and volcanic, quasi-orchestral writing of the outer movements. The composer himself evidently found the finale beyond him. As his friend Leopold Kupelwieser recalled, 'Once when Schubert was playing the Fantasy ... and got stuck in the last movement, he jumped up from his seat with the words: "Let the devil play the stuff!"'

The whole Fantasy grows outwards from the slow movement, a series of free variations on a passage from Schubert's (by 1822) famous song of Romantic alienation, 'Der Wanderer'. The song theme's repeated notes and dactylic (long-short-short) rhythm underlie the hammering opening of the first movement. This initial idea then gives rise to a more lyrical variant, in the remote key of E major, which in turn spawns a leisurely *dolce* theme in E flat major.

The scherzo ingeniously metamorphoses the Fantasy's opening paragraph, while the lulling trio is a beautiful transformation of the E flat major theme from the first movement. The finale acts as a kind of recapitulation to the first movement. It begins as a strenuous fugue on the Fantasy's opening theme but becomes less fugal and more deliriously virtuosic as it proceeds, culminating in a titanic send-off that seems to force the contemporary fortepiano to its limits and beyond. No wonder it fazed Schubert when he played the Fantasy to his friends!

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