

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 25 October 2024
7.30pm

Cédric Tiberghien piano

Lisa Illean (b.1983)

Sonata in ten parts (2024)
Co-commissioned by Wigmore Hall

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

33 Variations in C on a waltz by Diabelli Op. 120 (1819-23)

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Lisa Illean (born 1983) is an Australian composer. Now living in the United Kingdom, she has written for a variety of ensembles, from duos to orchestral works, often with an electronic component. The titles of her works suggest our fragile, liminal relationship with natural, elemental and transient worlds, and her skill at creating sounds on the edge of perception is greatly admired. This *Sonata in ten parts* is her first work for solo piano. The loudest dynamic is *mezzo-forte*, and the score is meticulously crafted, with many specific performance directions.

The composer writes: 'Each of the ten parts making up this sonata began as an improvisation on a pattern derived from a moment (often no more than a bar) of Beethoven's *33 Variations on a waltz by Diabelli*, Op. 120. In the spirit of the variation form, I was interested in transforming the patterns under my fingers, while also drawing disparate starting points into a common nocturnal atmosphere.

'Each part belongs to and illuminates the others; there are explicit recollections (for example, of part III in parts VII and X), but also recurring sound images continually refreshed, such as patterns often reaching or grasping, cascades like sudden vistas of light, and sonorities grounded in major/minor seconds. Direct allusions to the Beethoven surface like an iceberg, but mostly they are partially dissolved, coiling and uncoiling, altering, aqueous, lightening. This music is for Cédric Tiberghien'.

Apart from increasing deafness and the bitter legal dispute over the guardianship of his 12-year old nephew, **Beethoven** had reasons to be cheerful in 1818, one of them being the gift from London of a new Broadwood piano. This cutting-edge instrument, with a longer keyboard than he was used to on Viennese models producing a louder, fuller tone that he could more or less hear, had a marked effect on the sonata he had been working on since 1817, the massive *Hammerklavier* Op. 106. This turned out to be one of a mighty handful of ambitious works – the *Missa Solemnis*, the *Symphony No. 9* and the set of *33 Variations on a waltz by Diabelli* – that with the last three piano sonatas dominated his working life until 1824.

However, the 'Diabelli' Variations had a rather low-key launch, when at the start of 1819 Anton Diabelli, a recent new face on the Viennese music publishing scene, approached 50 composers to write one variation each on an amusing little Austrian waltz he himself had penned, the results to be published as a 'patriotic anthology'. Possibly as a courtesy to the new arrival in his inner circle of friends and almost certainly from a pragmatic instinct to cultivate (and make life hell for) yet another publisher, Beethoven eventually responded to this modest commission that same year, not with just the one but with 23 variations, expanded by a further 10 in 1823, fitting them around work on the new Mass, the symphony, and his three last piano sonatas.

Pictures of Diabelli suggest a shrewd operator, and his publishing business, through various mergers and buy-outs, saw out much of the 19th Century. He did very well out of Schubert, who was on his list of variation invitees, along with Beethoven's patron Archduke Rudolph, Mozart's son Franz Xaver, piano pedagogues Czerny and

Moscheles, Hummel – even the eight-year-old Liszt, plus many names now long forgotten. Diabelli published the complete set in 1823 as the first volume of the patriotic anthology, and Beethoven dedicated it to Antonie Brentano, a strong contender for the mysterious 'Immortal beloved'.

Beethoven had a robust sense of humour. He referred to Diabelli's waltz as a 'Schusterfleck' ('cobbler's patch'), a derogatory term denoting poverty of invention. As Diabelli must have known, this certainly applies to his spindly offering. But however predictable and trite, it has become one of music's greatest philosopher's stones, turning base metal into gold.

Beethoven knew how to make the smallest detail have enormous impact. One wonders how Diabelli reacted to his theme being swatted away by Variation 1, of the ten later insertions (Variations 1, 2, 15, 23-26, 28, 29 and 31). It is certainly quite a put-down, amounting almost to a second start, and the change of metre from waltz-time to march-time decisively sets the bar high for the ensuing range of the whole work.

Beethoven is more interested in the theme's harmonic possibilities, taken to extremes in the otherworldly, tonality-blurring Variation 20, and he takes aim as much as at what's there as at what isn't. Variation 13 just gives the harmonic basics, leaving us to fill in the gaps, then in the next, over a similar rhythm, fills them in. Deconstruction is as vital to his plan as elaboration. It is in Variation 14 that he also modulates to a remote mid-point key, one of several gestures to subvert Diabelli's harmonic tyranny. In the first minor-key Variation (9), instead of something soulful, Beethoven picks on the theme's opening appoggiatura in a merciless send-up, and there is more parody in the pair of severe Czerny-like exercises (Variations 16 and 17). In Variation 22, he uses Mozart's famous first aria for Leporello in *Don Giovanni*, suggesting parallels between wise servants and their less-than-ideal masters.

Then in Variation 29, for only the second time, Beethoven moves to C minor, for a short, sad prelude, and stays there for the next, the pair of them anticipating his Variation 31, an extended, melancholy aria, evoking Bach's 'Black Pearl' *Goldberg* variation as much as the slow-movement style of the late sonatas. Beethoven got better and better at endings, but here he surpassed himself with an end so completely justifying the means, leading us for a while into more tunnel than light, its seriousness earthing the preceding comedy of aesthetics. The mood changes with one of Beethoven's signature strenuous, self-conscious fugues in a new key (E flat), piling into a melodramatic cadenza, followed back in the home key by one of the composer's greater miracles: Diabelli's waltz transformed into a poised, antique minuet that opens out to starry revelation and dissolution, not unlike the end of Op. 111. Throughout, like Nuremberg's benign cobbler-poet Hans Sachs, Beethoven has doffed his cap to the masters who helped form him – Bach, Handel, Haydn and Mozart – in a work that never ceases to amaze.

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