

WIGMORE HALL 125

Saturday 25 October 2025
7.30pm

Inon Barnatan piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

6 Klavierstücke Op. 118 (by 1893)

*Intermezzo in A minor • Intermezzo in A •
Ballade in G minor • Intermezzo in F minor •
Romance in F • Intermezzo in E flat minor*

Jörg Widmann (b.1973)

From *Intermezzi* (2010)

I. [Viertel = 66] • II. Zart singend

Johannes Brahms

From 4 Klavierstücke Op. 119 (by 1893)

Intermezzo in B minor • Intermezzo in E minor

Jörg Widmann

IV. Wiegenlied from *Intermezzi*

Johannes Brahms

From 4 Klavierstücke Op. 119

Intermezzo in C • Rhapsody in E flat

Interval

Johannes Brahms

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor Op. 5 (1853)

*I. Allegro maestoso • II. Andante espressivo •
III. Scherzo. Allegro energico – Trio • IV. Intermezzo.
Andante molto • V. Finale. Allegro moderato ma rubato*



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Brahms's late works are often described as autumnal, but this has become a cliché, giving a restricted impression of a composer of wide expressive range who could still project the assertive, heroic manner, as in the Rhapsodie Op. 119 No. 4. Some of the late piano pieces exude wistful melancholy, while others are more direct. The Op. 118 set begins with an intermezzo ('molto appassionato') which seems to evoke deep sighs full of longing. The second piece, marked 'teneramente' (tenderly), is among the most haunting of Brahms's late works, with a specially touching coda. The muscular Ballade, No. 3, has a lyrical middle section in a remote key. No. 4, another intermezzo, is more elusive, its undercurrent of agitation eventually rising to the surface. The following Romanze expresses gentle regret with simplicity, turning to innocent charm in the central section. Finally, the tragic Intermezzo in E flat minor, with the rare 'mesto' (sad) in the tempo direction, has a left-hand part of swirling mist and a middle section of gentle defiance.

Born in Munich, the composer and clarinetist **Jörg Widmann** began his clarinet studies in 1980 and the following year he became a composition student of Kay Westermann. He has subsequently studied composition with Hans Werner Henze, Wolfgang Rihm, Wilfried Hiller and Heiner Goebbels. He furthered his clarinet studies at Munich, New York's Juilliard School and at Karlsruhe. In addition to winning many awards, he has been composer-in-residence of the Cleveland Orchestra, the Salzburg Festival and the Lucerne Festival, among other organisations.

In composing his Intermezzi (for Sir András Schiff), Jörg Widmann was influenced by the late pieces of Brahms, Opp. 116-119. He has written: 'In their disconcerting concision and terse brevity ... these late Intermezzi occupy a unique place in the piano literature. It was this inflection ... that I sought to capture in my own ...' The first intermezzo, of a mere eight bars' duration, is characterised by upward leaps – a perfect fifth, then minor sixths, then sevenths in the left hand. Intermezzo No. 2 is marked 'Zart singend' (tenderly singing). With its descending phrases it feels closer to the wistful quality which characterises many of the late Brahms pieces.

Brahms's group of four pieces Op. 119 date from 1893. The first of the set (*Adagio*, in B minor) is the epitome of melancholy, though in the middle section Brahms does introduce some warmth. Op. 119 No. 2 has a rather breathless quality, a restless undercurrent, as indicated by the 'un poco agitato' in the tempo heading, but Brahms relaxes into the tonic major (E major) by transforming his opening into a graceful waltz.

The fourth of **Widmann's** Intermezzi, 'Wiegenlied' (Cradle Song, Lullaby), begins with a downward scale which is very reminiscent of two Brahms pieces – the first of 3 Intermezzi, Op. 117 and the Romanze, Op. 119, No. 5. This is one of the intermezzi in which Widmann

most obviously includes direct quotation. The melodic line is constantly undermined by syncopation. Thereafter the piece becomes more unstable, accommodating much dissonance and many fluctuations of tempo. A waltz-like passage ('wienerisch' – Viennese, 'lontano' – distant) quickly reaches a passionate climax. The final bars are surprisingly violent ('feroce' – fierce, 'con tutta la forza' – with full force), in contradiction of the cradle-song title.

The third piece from Brahms's Op. 119 – marked *Grazioso e giocoso* – is playful rather than reflective and stands in contrast to the inwardness of Op. 119 No. 1. Unusually the melody is embedded in the middle of the texture. The fourth and last of the group (*Allegro risoluto*) is not in the least inward. In this heroic piece Brahms adopts the grand manner – decidedly public, not private. There is a tremendous build-up to the last statement of the opening theme.

Brahms's three piano sonatas are early works – Opp. 1, 2 and 5. Completed in 1853, the Third Sonata has an unusual five-movement structure. After the 20-year-old Brahms had played some of his own piano works to him, Schumann hailed him as a genius – 'like Minerva, fully armed from the head of Jove'. The Third Sonata begins with a heroic *Allegro maestoso* seemingly constructed from granite. The opening, overpowering in its grandeur, is answered by a contrasting *pianissimo* passage (*tranquilamente*). Soon the initial mood is restored and a new theme in chords is accompanied by a staccato version of the opening in the bass. The second subject is lyrical, the development is touched by the other-worldly and mysterious, and the very ending is magnificent. The second movement is a 'song without words', inspired by a Sternau poem quoted at the head of the page:

'Twilight falls, the moonlight shines,
Two hearts are united in love,
and keep themselves in bliss enclosed'

Here Brahms is at his most romantic, equally tender and passionate. The following scherzo is effectively a fiery, demonic waltz, whereas the trio section brings a broad melody in contrast, though the muscular element is renewed before the scherzo reprise. In the following 'Rückblick' (backward glance) Brahms transforms the melody from the second movement, the relative minor key creating a spectral atmosphere, with drum-like rhythm in the bass. This develops into a massive climax before receding into a chilling *pianissimo*. The 6/8 finale, approximating to a rondo, has a syncopated main theme, a first episode of lyrical character, and subsequently some quietly obsessive development of the first subject. A broad new theme is introduced *pianissimo* but soon builds to *fortissimo*. The brilliant coda is marked *Presto* but it is the broader theme which belatedly prevails to create a triumphant conclusion.

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