

# WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 25 September 2022  
7.30pm

Igor Levit piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) 11 Chorale Preludes Op. 122 (1896) *transcribed by Ferruccio Busoni*  
*Herzlich tut mich erfreuen • Schmücke dich, o liebe Seele •*  
*Es ist ein Ros entsprungen • Herzlich tut mich verlangen •*  
*Herzlich tut mich verlangen (second setting) •*  
*O Welt, ich muss dich lassen*

Fred Hersch (b.1955) Variations on a Folk Song (2021)  
*Interval*

Richard Wagner (1813-1883) Prelude from *Tristan und Isolde* (1857-9) *transcribed by Zoltán Kocsis*

Franz Liszt (1811-1886) Piano Sonata in B minor S178 (1849-53)  
*Lento assai - Allegro energico - Andante sostenuto -*  
*Allegro energico - Lento assai*

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A set of 11 chorale preludes for organ was the work with which **Brahms**, in the early summer of 1896, set the double bar to his composing life. The experience of almost half a century is enclosed here, but also of a longer span, going back of course to Bach. As with Bach, venerable melodies, those of Lutheran chorales, are accompanied by harmonies or running figures that support them and, in how they provide harmonic stability, confirm them, even console them.

The melodies themselves were already old by Bach's time. Brahms, who had his antiquarian side, surely knew this – knew that the tune of 'O Welt, ich muss dich lassen' was composed by Heinrich Isaac in the late 15th Century, while that of 'Es ist ein Ros entsprungen' might possibly go back still further. Long spans are evoked in these miniatures, of which **Busoni** adapted six for piano in 1902, the year the set was published. Besides adding a good many markings for pedalling and expression, Busoni commonly presents the melody in octaves, for organ-like strength. He also gives 'Es ist ein Ros entsprungen' a one-bar introduction and the following piece a similarly modest coda.

The next work also has a deep memory within it, for, as its composer **Fred Hersch** has observed, it is based on a folksong that, originating among fur trappers in the upper Missouri in the early 19th Century, travelled downstream as a boatmen's song and was further conveyed around the world: 'Oh Shenandoah'. (Shenandoah, also written Skenandoa, was an Oneida tribe chief who died at a great age in 1816, which provides some indication of when the song must have come about.)

Hersch, admired by Igor Levit as one of the great pianists of our time, included a version of the song on a solo album released in 1999. He came back to it last year to create this work specifically for Levit, using all his skills as a jazz artist to weave a sequence of variations with a coda. 'There are 20 variations', he notes, 'in a wide variety of approaches that play off both the melody and the harmony.'

Another formidable pianist, **Zoltán Kocsis**, made a bunch of **Wagner** transcriptions as a young man, his choices including the prelude to *Tristan und Isolde*, the close of which on octave Gs in the bass enables Levit to go straight from here to the Sonata in B minor by **Liszt**.

Brahms, at the other end of his adult life, was with Clara Schumann in May 1854 when a parcel arrived from Liszt containing a copy of this newly published composition, dedicated to her husband. This could be seen as a friendly return gesture, for Robert Schumann had dedicated his C major Fantasy to Liszt

in 1839. However, much had changed since then, in the Schumanns' lives and in their appreciation of their Hungarian contemporary. Robert had recently been admitted to the sanatorium from which he was never to be released, and so we have only Clara's reaction to the music as played by Brahms: 'Merely a blind noise – no healthy ideas any more, everything confused, one cannot find a single clear harmonic progression – and yet I must thank him for it. It really is too awful.'

Resistance to the sonata – by no means only from Clara Schumann – was a measure of its daring. Liszt, much taken with the welding of movements in Schubert's 'Wanderer' Fantasy, did the same here, creating a sequence of allegro, slow movement, scherzo, and finale, all based on the same small group of motifs and merged in one bounding whole. The achievement took him, indeed, close to the edges of the possible within traditional harmony.

First come a few muffled bars uncertain in tonality, sounding less like an absolute beginning than a recommencement, a stirring of life again after some catastrophe (which here we might imagine the *Tristan* prelude to have represented, though Wagner's work came later in the 1850s). The ensuing *Allegro energico* introduces a surging theme that will become the sonata's first principle, followed in the bass by a more ominous idea. All the motifs are now in place; what follows is their working-out. The introduction leads into a big opening movement with a splendid middle section, marked *grandioso*, whose melody rises over pulsing chords. By the time this movement is breaking down, through twinkling solo passages, we are more than a third of the way through the piece. Then comes the *Andante sostenuto*, with more gorgeous melody worked out of the material, suggesting the love music of an operatic paraphrase. Through a return to the very opening, the piece moves into a short fugal section serving as scherzo, whereupon it bursts back to recapitulate the 'first movement' and add a coda that serves as finale.

With its irresistible drive, the sonata has inevitably been interpreted as telling some kind of narrative: perhaps the Faust legend, which Liszt treated in a symphony he composed right after the sonata, or some other tale of warring good and evil, or even the composer's own life history of heroic progress achieved despite the naysayers. But the story it tells best is its own, of musical ideas that seem to come alive in their tempestuous movement, transformation and combat, that glow with the all the power of the instrument they are played on and that burn themselves up in fire of their own making.

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