

# WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 26 July 2022 7.30pm

Eric Lu piano



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<b>Robert Schumann</b> (1810-1856)	Arabeske in C Op. 18 (1838-9) Waldszenen Op. 82 (1848-9) <i>Eintritt • Jäger auf der Lauer • Einsame Blumen • Verrufene Stelle • Freundliche Landschaft • Herberge • Vogel als Prophet • Jagdlied • Abschied</i>
<b>Johannes Brahms</b> (1833-1897)	Theme and Variations in D minor Op. 18b (1860) Interval
<b>Johann Sebastian Bach</b> (1685-1750)	Toccatà in C minor BWV911 (before 1714)
<b>Fryderyk Chopin</b> (1810-1849)	Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor Op. 35 'Funeral March' (1837-9) <i>I. Grave - Doppio movimento • II. Scherzo • III. Marche funèbre • IV. Finale. Presto</i>

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In 1838 the 29-year-old **Robert Schumann** headed for Vienna. He was leaving Leipzig and the home of his former piano teacher Friedrich Wieck, having fallen in love with Wieck's teenage daughter, Clara, nine years his junior. Banished from the Wieck household, Robert communicated with Clara by letter. The *Arabeske*, written in 1838-9, uses rondo form (meaning a returning refrain) to ensure unity, but displays considerable contrast between tenderness, passionate yearning and determination. Thus it has often been interpreted as a picture of the composer's mental state during this period of separation from his beloved Clara.

In the 19th Century relatively little of the countryside had been tamed, and nature was the abode of much that was unknown and threatening, both real and imaginary. 'The woods' were the darkest and most unsettling place of all, as many a fairy tale attested. And Robert Schumann read the works of the Brothers Grimm and Hans Christian Andersen to his children almost every night.

The 'Woodland Scenes' were written eight years into the Schumanns' marriage, spanning the close of 1848 and the beginning of 1849. Although the nine movements include a convivial tavern scene and a depiction of a welcoming landscape, much else is disquieting. The fourth piece, 'Verrufene Stelle', takes its cue from a poem describing a human-blood-sucking flower. Clara (by now a celebrated touring pianist) omitted this movement from her performances and considered the whole cycle too sinister to be programmed frequently.

The only movement whose title merits further explanation is 'The prophet bird' – the most common English translation, but one that risks implying a particular ornithological variety. A more literal translation is 'Bird as prophet'. The delicate outer sections suggest both birdsong and iridescent plumage glimpsed as the bird flits between shady branches. The central section, in which the prophecy is delivered, has a religious tone and is perhaps the most consoling music in the cycle.

**Brahms** composed two string sextets in the early years of his career. The first of them, Op. 18, was completed in 1860. Brahms, who turned 27 that year, had recently been at the centre of a romantic catastrophe. He and the newly widowed Clara Schumann shared the most tender feelings, yet he did not feel he should step into the shoes or lie in the bed of his late mentor, Robert Schumann. Friends persuaded him to propose instead to a soprano named Agathe von Siebold, which he did, only to break off the engagement abruptly, leaving both Clara and Agathe feeling angry and betrayed.

The relationship with Clara survived, however, once both sides accepted it could not be a life partnership. After attending a play-through of the First Sextet she requested a piano arrangement of its second movement, a dark-hued set of variations. The composer obliged and presented it to her on her birthday. There is a Bach-like

dignity to the variations, which evolve emotionally and dramatically while retaining roots in the original harmony. One might also detect an echo of the variations that comprise the second movement of Robert Schumann's Third String Quartet.

**Bach's** seven free-standing toccatas date from the beginning of his career, circa 1705–1713. They alternate passages of strict formality with episodes that sound improvisatory in nature. The main business of the C minor Toccata BWV911 is an extended fugue, preceded by a series of grand flourishes that develop into a highly decorated adagio passage. The fugue gets well underway before it is interrupted by a fantasia-like episode recalling the introduction. Yet it begins again, patiently rebuilding to an open cadence that is resolved by further stately flourishes and a brief, emphatic presto conclusion.

**Chopin** composed many of his mature works during summer sojourns at the country estate of his lover, the novelist Aurore Dupin, better known by her nom-de-plume of George Sand. These precious interludes in Nohant, central France, offered respite from the stifling pressures of Parisian society and from the endless round of teaching and performing. It was in these rural surroundings that Chopin completed his Second Piano Sonata in 1839.

The most famous movement, the *Marche funèbre*, had already been completed, perhaps as early as 1837. Chopin mentions the new sonata in a letter to his friend the musician and writer Julian Fontana, dated August 1839. There he suggests a possible spur to his constructing a sonata around the funeral march: a publisher was circulating an earlier sonata in C minor, written when Chopin was a teenager. Disowning the apprentice work, the 29-year-old composer wanted to show his true capabilities.

Opus 35 was published in 1840 and appears to have gained early popularity with performers and the public. Some critics and fellow composers found it perplexing, however. Mendelssohn said he 'hated' the *Finale*, and Robert Schumann complained that the movements did not hang together as a sonata but were 'four badly behaved children' forced to share a single space. Yet the work is clearly modelled on Chopin's favourite Beethoven sonata, Op. 26, with its own funeral march movement. There are possible allusions to Bach, too, in Chopin's work, so he was by no means disrespecting tradition.

On the other hand, like Beethoven, he was an innovator, and his two mature piano sonatas (Op. 35 and Op. 58) seek to incorporate the formal fluidity he was exploring in his shorter, free-standing pieces. The Sonata is also anything but rambling: one of its finest interpreters, Sergey Rachmaninov, remarked admiringly, 'Chopin's Sonata lasts nineteen minutes, and all has been said.'

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