

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 26 October 2022
7.30pm

Alina Ibragimova violin
Cédric Tiberghien piano

John Cage (1912-1992)

6 Melodies (1950)

*Melody 1 • Melody 2 • Melody 3 •
Melody 4 • Melody 5 • Melody 6*

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Fantasy in C D934 (1827)

*Andante molto - Allegretto - Andantino -
Tempo I - Allegro vivace - Allegretto - Presto*

Interval

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Violin Sonata in E flat Op. 18 (1887)

*I. Allegro, ma non troppo • II. Improvisation: Andante cantabile •
III. Finale: Andante - Allegro*



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John Cage will likely forever be remembered as one of the original American maverick composers – along with Henry Cowell, Harry Partch and Lou Harrison – who redefined what music could be. But Cage’s impact on the fabric and organisation of music – and his musings on its nature and purpose – were more far-reaching than those of his contemporaries. Two years before his controversial *4'33"*, in which the listener is invited to explore the music contained within silence (an act as audacious as Marcel Duchamp submitting a urinal for an art exhibition over 30 years earlier) Cage wrote his *6 Melodies*, one of only four works he produced for violin and piano.

Just as Arnold Schoenberg had earlier created serial music, in which the 12 pitches of the Western chromatic scale are arranged in a predetermined order (the idea being to explode the pitch relationships on which traditional melody and harmony were founded), in his *6 Melodies* – and similarly in his preceding String Quartet (also 1950) – Cage assembled a collection (what he called a ‘gamut’) of sounds that function as musical building blocks. As for structure, Cage adopted a numerical pattern that governed the relative proportions both of phrase-lengths and bar-numbers within each piece. The results are abstract, spare, static, even austere. But, by definition, there’s a family resemblance across the pieces and also a folk-like, ancient-sounding beauty in the ‘open’ intervals. There’s fragility, too, stemming not least from the instruction for the violinist to play without vibrato, and ‘with minimum weight of the bow’.

Cage would soon move on to other media (e.g. magnetic tape) and techniques (e.g. adopting chance principles, influenced by his studies of Asian philosophies), making the *6 Melodies* a fascinating snapshot of this iconoclast’s thinking at the midway point of the 20th Century.

Like Cage, **Schubert** wrote precious few pieces for violin and piano (though there the resemblance ends!). In 1816-7, aged 19, Schubert composed three violin sonatas (published posthumously as Sonatinas). In the following year came the Sonata in A, published (also after his death) as a ‘Duo’. Over a decade later, after becoming acquainted with the virtuoso Czech violinist Josef Slavík – whom Chopin had declared ‘the second Paganini’ – Schubert produced two pieces for violin and piano: the Rondo in B minor D895; and the Fantasy in C, which Slavík premièred at a private concert on 20 January 1828.

The Fantasy opens with a slow introduction (*Andante molto*), as if in the mists, with a searching (and fiendish to play) tremolo in the piano. There’s a typically Schubertian longing in the violin’s melody, lifted by the twirling figures in the pianist’s left hand and by a more decorative accompaniment as the melody is repeated an octave lower. A magical mini cadenza for violin, then for piano, leads to the *Allegretto*, with a rustic, folk-like flavour. The violin and piano take it in turns to present this melody, the ‘lead’ instrument imitated at close quarters by its partner. After a freer-ranging, showy

section with a march-like feel (recalling the *long short-short long long* rhythm of Schubert’s first *Marche militaire* for piano duet), the rustic theme returns, followed again by its showier counterpart, now expanded. The energy dissipates and now the scene changes. In the *Andantino*, the public stage is suddenly swapped for the intimate salon as the violin plays a rapt song, based on Schubert’s Rückert setting ‘Sei mir gegrüsst’ (‘I greet you’). This becomes the peg on which to hang a set of variations, the first three exploring a testing variety of challenges for both violin and piano, the fourth and last returning to the rapture of the song melody.

Out of this emerges the gentle quivering of the opening (*Tempo l*), building to a jubilant hymn-like tune (*Allegro vivace*). The pace is briefly arrested for a return to the ‘Sei mir gegrüsst’ tune (*Allegretto*) before the spirited *Presto* coda.

Not surprisingly for a composer who once boasted he could describe even a knife and fork in music, **Richard Strauss** was at his best when there was a story to tell. At the time of writing his Violin Sonata, the 23-year-old had composed only the first of his 10 colourful orchestral tone-poems, showpieces buoyed by vivid narratives from folklore, literature and nature. None of this subject matter relates to the Violin Sonata, and yet there’s an approach to texture and expression that is unmistakably orchestral in conception.

The piano launches the first movement with a heroic theme in thick chords, and the violin instantly joins in the action. The two are tightly entwined as they navigate a fund of thematic ideas, the last of which picks up on the distinctive triplet figure to link back to the opening idea. Though there are moments of reflection, the abiding impression is of bounding energy. It can have been no accident that this sonata shares its E flat major key both with Beethoven’s ‘Eroica’ Symphony and with Strauss’s soon-to-emerge musical portrait of the inexhaustible lothario Don Juan.

The second-movement *Improvisation* is unashamedly Romantic in tone, perhaps since Strauss had recently met the young Pauline de Ahna, later to become his wife. The stormy *appassionato* central section – with the piano’s rising bass figure and repeated right-hand chords recalling Schubert’s alarming ‘Erkönig’ – casts a dark shadow, against which the following gossamer-light music forms a delicious contrast. This lightly whipped decoration lingers to the end, as the song concludes in hushed intimacy.

The *Finale* opens with a foreboding slow piano introduction, out of which erupts a theme even bolder and more virile than at the start of the sonata. An upwards-quivering stream of semiquavers features in both instruments. There are allusions to material in the first movement, but the most remarkable aspect is the requirement of the players – at the end of a substantial work – to deliver lyrical beauty, scherzo-like brilliance and uncompromisingly muscular grandeur.

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