

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 27 December 2023
7.30pm

Ariel Lanyi piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Sonata No. 2 in A Op. 2 No. 2 (1794-5)
*I. Allegro vivace • II. Largo appassionato •
III. Scherzo. Allegretto • IV. Rondo. Grazioso*

César Franck (1822-1890) Prélude, aria et final (1887)
I. Prélude • II. Aria • III. Final

Interval

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) Etudes symphoniques Op. 13 (with the posthumous etudes)
(1834-7)
*Thema. Andante – • Etude I. Un poco più vivo •
Etude II. Andante • Etude III. Vivace •
Etude IV. Allegro marcato • Etude V. Scherzando •
Variation I Op. posth. • Variation II Op. posth. •
Variation III Op. posth. • Variation IV Op. posth. •
Etude VI. Agitato • Etude VII. Allegro molto •
Etude VIII. Sempre marcatissimo •
Etude IX. Presto possibile •
Etude X. Allegro con energia •
Etude XI. Andante espressivo • Variation V Op. posth. •
Etude XII. Finale – Allegro brillante*

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Beethoven's first pieces published with opus numbers both owe a great deal to Haydn, his teacher. The Piano Trios, Op. 1, take a genre that Haydn had made his own and was still actively contributing to, while the three piano sonatas Op. 2 are dedicated to Haydn. All six works run to a symphonically ambitious four movements. The A major sonata shows Beethoven at his most Haydnesque, the humour still a twinkle rather than the snarl it sometimes became later.

Beethoven marked some fingering for a tricky moment in the first movement. We can deduce from it that a) he preferred not to put his thumb on a black note (an interesting carry-over from 18th-century clavichord technique, where the very abrupt leverage of the raised notes makes playing them with the thumb both clumsy and risky) and b) he could stretch an octave between his index finger and his little finger. Even though the octave span on early pianos is very slightly less than on today's instruments, that's quite a big hand. The slow movement reminds us that Beethoven's way with the sustaining pedal was the despair of all his rivals. Sustained repeated chords definitely need the pedal. The simultaneous staccato bass line definitely doesn't. You can imagine Beethoven grinning as he set his trap.

Franck's over-ambitious father named his first-born son Caesar-Augustus – a pair of names which greatly amused the music critics – and did his best to turn him into a child-prodigy pianist and composer, on the model of Liszt. César-Auguste did well as a pianist at the Conservatoire. At his final exam in 1838, after playing a Hummel concerto flawlessly, he gratuitously transposed the difficult sight-reading test down a minor third, which so confused the examiners that they decided to award *two* first prizes, because Franck was so much better than anyone else ever had been, and it seemed a pity to leave the others out all together.

During the late 1860s, Franck began to attract private composition pupils of the calibre of Henri Duparc and Vincent d'Indy. They became the nucleus of an admiring group – the Franckists – who called him Père Franck. From the late 1870s, Franck produced a series of mature, considered works. Amazingly, the now much-loved *Prélude, aria et final* (1887) earned its composer a nomination for a satirical list of Boring Composers current in the music press at the time, with one critic writing: 'a composition, new if in no way a novelty, by this master whom I prefer to worship at a distance than to listen to'. Times change!

Words and music were very closely linked in **Schumann's** mind – he, of all composers of the Romantic period, is the one most likely to give a piece a title, beyond a genre description like Mazurka or Song without Words. His father was a publisher and a novelist, and young Robert was inspired to write

stories, poems and plays. He always remained a literary man, an editor and a critic. So, reading a romantic novel could lead to a piano suite, while a poem might not confine itself to becoming a song – it could start a symphony: the motto theme of the First Symphony, for instance, perfectly fits the poetic line that inspired it.

Schumann's original title for Op. 13, which he began in 1834, was 'Studies of an orchestral character for pianoforte, by Florestan and Eusebius', the latter being two of the alter egos which Schumann allowed to inhabit his persona. Florestan was the extrovert and Eusebius was the clever, shy one. Later, Schumann could also become David, always fighting the Philistines (a personification of artistic ignorance that seems to have originated with Schumann). If you notice that Clara (eventually his wife), David, Eusebius and Florestan, form an alphabetical sequence, you'll get some idea of how Schumann's mind worked.

Schumann's alternative title for the *Etudes symphoniques* was 'Studies in the form of Variations'. They are inextricably linked with Schumann's complicated love-life. He became engaged to a fellow pupil of Friedrich Wieck, Ernestine, not knowing that her protecting 'relative', a Baron von Fricken, was in fact her father. Besotted with Ernestine, Schumann wrote a set of variations on the notes A-S-C-H (the name of the town where she and the Baron lived – all those letters are note-names in German). The present *Etudes* are based on a theme actually composed by the Baron, though the first edition merely remarks that 'the notes of the melody are the composition of an amateur'. In 1835, Robert found himself spending a great deal of time with Wieck's daughter, Clara – their first kiss occurred on 25 November – and he also discovered the truth about Ernestine's parentage. Ernestine was given her marching orders on New Year's Day, but Schumann carried on with the variation-studies on her father's theme. The two versions published by Clara contain essentially the same music, though with a bar less here and there, or a *ritardando* omitted. The first version numbers the variations from 1 to 12, and calls them all 'Etudes'. The later version calls most of the sections 'Variations' (numbered from 1 to 9, but with no Variation 2). Three sections are called 'Etudes' (numbered 2, 3 and 9), while the last section is now called 'Finale'. Bewildering enough, but long after Schumann's death, his disciple Brahms published five more variations, numbered from 1 to 5, with no indication as to where he had found them or they might slot in. However, since the first known performance of any of the piece was when Clara played just three variations to mark her secret engagement to Robert, perhaps the order and even the selection of variations matter less than the underlying message.

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