

Jonathan Plowright piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Chorale Prelude 'Nun komm der Heiden Heiland'
BWV659 *arranged by Ferruccio Busoni*

Chorale Prelude 'Ich ruf zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ'
BWV639 (1708-17) *arranged by Ferruccio Busoni*

Ignacy Jan Paderewski (1860-1941)

Miscellanea Op. 16
Nocturne in B flat No. 4
Légende No. 1 in A flat No. 1
Mélodie in G flat No. 2
Thème varié in A No. 3
Légende No. 2 in A No. 5
Un moment musical No. 6
Minuet in A No. 7

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Scherzo in E flat minor Op. 4

Interval

Johannes Brahms

Variations on an Original Theme Op. 21 No. 1

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Piano Sonata No. 2 in B flat minor Op. 36 (1913, rev. 1931)
I. Allegro agitato • II. Non allegro - Lento •
III. Allegro molto



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Although we tend to talk about classical music as if it's a 'universal' phenomenon, we generally use this catch-all term to mean music by composers born or working within Austro-German territories. That 'German-ness' has come to shape our sense of what instrumental music is likely to sound like, as well as setting expectations for much-used forms such as sonatas and symphonies. Tonight's programme unites several German musicians with an Italian, a Pole and a Russian, each with a different and fascinatingly complex relationship to the Austro-German 'norm'.

Ferruccio Busoni's parents were both musicians: his mother Anna played the piano, and his father Ferdinando was a touring clarinetist. 'I have my father to thank for my good fortune,' Busoni wrote, 'because during my childhood he insisted on my studying Bach... by this means he trained me to be a "German" musician and showed me a path that I have never entirely abandoned.' Busoni's dedication to **Bach's** music as a performer, arranger and editor was all-consuming and life-long. Among his many transcriptions and arrangements of Bach's works are a set of ten chorale preludes, from which we hear two. 'Nun komm der Heiden Heiland' has a sombre tread, the melody emerging in imitation from the tenor, alto and finally soprano ranges of the keyboard as the pedal line, deep in the bass, processes slowly onwards. 'Ich ruf' zu dir, Herr Jesu Christ' is also a minor-key piece – though the ringing melody high in the right hand adds a sense of light and hope to the music as it reaches its climax and sinks back into a low, major-key resolution.

Busoni was a close contemporary of the Polish pianist, composer and statesman **Ignacy Jan Paderewski**. Six years older than his Italian colleague, Paderewski enjoyed a considerable international reputation as a virtuoso in the later decades of the 19th Century, later becoming the third Prime Minister of an independent Poland in 1919. He studied in Warsaw and Vienna, where he took lessons from his countryman Theodor Leschetizky. He began his *Miscellanea* in 1885 but didn't complete the opus until 1896, by which time he had scored major successes in Paris, America and across Europe. Although the titles of many of the *Miscellanea* suggest that they are innocuous salon pieces and likely to be easily playable miniatures, most are anything but. Paderewski writes Chopinesque elaborations in some works (as in the substantial 'Variations'), and finger-bending or harmonically unexpected passages in others, particularly the two 'Légendes'. These pieces are both charming and designed to wrongfoot the listener: easy-going but only to a virtuoso.

Johannes Brahms's big break came in 1853, the year of his 20th birthday, when he met Robert and Clara Schumann and found himself newly supported, published for the first time thanks to the Schumanns' help, and announced in print as the saviour of German music. But even before he had made the trip to Düsseldorf, in the summer of 1851 Brahms composed a fiery *Scherzo* for solo

piano, clearly influenced by the music of both Chopin and Liszt (who sightread the shy young man's composition from the manuscript when they met in the summer of 1853). It is a virtuoso showpiece, full of skittering high writing and strident octaves. Brahms gave the public première of the *Scherzo* in June 1853 in Hanover, where he met a young violinist named Joseph Joachim who would become his friend and performing partner for many years. The piece was among the first published thanks to the Schumanns' help later that autumn.

Brahms's *Variations on an Original Theme* were composed – theme and all – in early 1857; but as a result of critical comments from Joachim, he let the set lie until 1861, when he eventually revised it and sent it off for publication. The composer's distinctive 'voice' is much more obviously in evidence here than it was in the *Scherzo* the warmly lyrical theme gives way to widely-spaced chords and figuration, gently-moving, almost Bachian inner voices, and the kind of rhythmic play that Brahms enjoyed exploring for decades.

We conclude with a work in a traditionally Austro-German genre composed by a young Russian, which later reached its 'final' version in America – and which is not necessarily all by the composer in question. In November 1913, **Sergey Rachmaninov** performed his recently-completed Second Piano Sonata in St Petersburg. Although he had enjoyed major international success since the earliest years of the 20th Century, by 1913 Rachmaninov's idiom was seen by many as being hopelessly outdated, and the Sonata was panned as having 'no interesting or profound ideas... It was interesting to note that this sonata, with musical aims far higher than all of this composer's elegies, barcaroles, and preludes, was received by his public with considerable reservation'. Rachmaninov himself was evidently unhappy with the Sonata: he felt that it was 'too long' and that much of the material was 'superfluous'. He issued new edition in 1931 – by which time the Rachmaninov family had fled revolutionary Russia for the USA – featured ferocious cuts and much textural simplification. The piece was championed by the composer's friend Vladimir Horowitz, who considered this revision to be too drastically abridged and, with Rachmaninov's approval, made his own version. Tonight, we hear the composer's 1931 abridged version of the Sonata.

The Sonata is in three sections, although movements are written as a continuous structure to be played without pause. A beautifully melancholy Lento melody is presented as a series of variations, surrounded by two substantial and bravura outer movements which share thematic material. Above all, the Sonata is noteworthy for its richly orchestral piano writing (particularly in the finale) and Rachmaninov's striking ability to preserve a sense of space and rhythmical freedom as he unfolds new, and often fearsomely virtuosic, musical ideas.

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