

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 27 January 2022 7.30pm

Mozart's Birthday

Christian Blackshaw piano

This concert and its live stream are generously supported by the Lillian Berman and Gerald Goldfarb Fund

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Sonata in F K280 (1775)

I. Allegro assai • II. Adagio • III. Presto

Piano Sonata in B flat K281 (1775)

I. Allegro • II. Andante amoroso • III. Rondeau. Allegro

Piano Sonata in E flat K282 (1775)

I. Adagio • II. Menuetto I-II • III. Allegro

Interval

Piano Sonata in C K330 (1781-3)

I. Allegro moderato • II. Andante cantabile • III. Allegretto

Piano Sonata in B flat K333 (1783-4)

I. Allegro • II. Andante cantabile • III. Allegretto grazioso

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Following up on early success can be a difficult trick to manage. Prodigies of sport or musical performance can turn out to be a flash in the pan. The young organist William Crotch was even more dazzling than **Mozart**, but failed to follow through; for every cunning survivor lurking at the back of the tennis court there's an over-eager net-haunter who inexplicably vanished. How to move on from early brilliance to lasting success: it was a problem for Mozart too. At the age of 15, he was still collecting honorary diplomas on tour in Italy. But two years later, a trip to pay court to the Empress in Vienna gained no reward. Mozart's new Archbishop, though happy enough to confirm Mozart's appointment at his Salzburg court, only required simple service music which gave little scope for the exercise of growing compositional skill and daring. So a commission for an opera was a welcome escape, and on 6 December 1774, Mozart and his father set off to Munich for the rehearsals of *La finta giardiniera*. It was premièred on 13 January, with great success. Leopold conducted some of his son's masses, and they went down well, too.

During this time when heady possibilities seemed to be opening up once more, round about his 19th birthday on 27 January 1775, Mozart composed six piano sonatas, officially his first surviving attempts in this genre. (In fact, his London sketchbook of 1764 contains a couple of three-movement sequences that work pretty well as sonatas, though they're not titled as such.)

What is a sonata? The word itself is simply the Italian for 'sounded' ('played', that is to say), as opposed to a 'cantata' which is 'sung'; and it was used simply in this way throughout the 17th Century to denote purely instrumental music. Gradually it acquired implications: a sonata would have three or four movements, alternately fast and slow, one perhaps in a related key. By 1775 it had acquired a big implication: at least one movement would be in what, by association, we have come to call 'sonata form', even when it occurs in symphonies. (Mozart's Piano Sonata in A K331, which consists of a set of variations, a *Minuet*, and a simple *Rondo*, is the exception that proves the rule!)

The earliest, unwitting, definition of sonata form comes from Dr Burney, who, writing in 1782 of his friend JC Bach (who had died on New Year's Day that year) said: 'Bach seems to have been the first composer who observed the law of *contrast*, as a *principle*.' Burney was mainly referring to the character of the themes, but he must also have noticed the various contrasts of key. In the opening *Allegros* of JC Bach's piano sonatas, the contrasting material (what we now often call 'the second subject') is introduced in a new key: usually the dominant, five notes higher than the tonic, where we started. But when the

same material returns later in the movement, it is always firmly back in the tonic. Mozart certainly noticed this when, at the age of about sixteen, he arranged three of Bach's Op. 5 sonatas as Piano Concertos (K107). One of the ways he wanted the solo piano to shine was to give it the honour of changing key. (In nitty-gritty detail, this simply involves 'sharpening' the fourth note of the scale. Starting in the key of C, if all the Fs become F sharps, we modulate to the dominant. Starting in the key of F, it means all the B flats would have to become B naturals. It's like a painter slightly changing the selection of colours on his palette.) So in these concerto arrangements, the orchestra plays through *all* Bach's tunes in the tonic (including the second subject), before the soloist enters and twists the music to a new key, where he plays the second subject all over again. An object lesson in understanding Mozart's mature concerto form.

Most of Mozart's Munich sonatas follow the procedures of JC Bach, with their simple textures and striking themes. The B flat Sonata, however, in its more discursive material, shows the influence of Joseph Haydn (whose brother, Michael, the Mozarts knew well in Salzburg). The E flat Sonata breathes Haydn's wit in the finale. But it also attempts a rarity, obviously intended to impress possible Munich patrons: it opens with an *Adagio*. (Haydn tried this once, in the 1760s, but after a quarter of a century, his nerve broke, and he added an *Allegro* to open the piece!) The texture of Mozart's *Adagio* theme seems designed to show off the *rubato* speciality he was so proud of: playing the left hand accompaniment in strict time, but bending the melody in the right hand, like some bewigged Fitzgerald or Sinatra, swinging their line around, rather than on, the beats. All to no avail, alas. No princely appointment was forthcoming in Munich, so back to Salzburg they went. Mozart stuck it for another two years, and then was spectacularly fired.

Fast-forward to 1783. Married, and living in lodgings in Vienna, Mozart takes his wife and their little son, Raimund Leopold, to Salzburg to meet Grandfather Leopold; unfortunately, Raimund dies there. Mozart prepares three new sonatas, perhaps as teaching material against his return to Vienna. K330 once again shows the symmetrical, clearly-etched themes he had learned from Johann Christian. On the way back to Vienna, the Mozarts stop off at Linz, where he writes a symphony and the Sonata in B flat K333. The former is performed in the Theatre on 4 November. Doubtless the sonata, with its teasing cadenza in the perfectly poised Rondo finale (something that Mozart made very much his own), graced some delightful public occasion too.

Happy Birthday, Wolfgang!

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