

WIGMORE HALL

Friday 27 January 2023
7.30pm

Mozart Birthday Concert

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

Christian Blackshaw piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Sonata in D K284 (1775)

*I. Allegro • II. Rondeau en polonaise. Andante •
III. Tema con variazione*

Piano Sonata in B flat K570 (1789)

I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegretto

Interval

Piano Sonata in C K545 (1788)

I. Allegro • II. Andante • III. Rondo. Allegretto

Fantasia in C minor K475 (1785)

Piano Sonata in C minor K457 (1784)

I. Molto allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegro assai

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As a *Wunderkind*, **Mozart** dazzled the courts of Europe with his precocious keyboard skills. Shortly after his move to Vienna in 1781 he impressed Emperor Joseph II in a famous gladiatorial contest with Muzio Clementi. Establishing himself as a star pianist in what he dubbed 'Klavierland', he delighted Viennese audiences with his improvisations and the series of concertos he premièred between 1783 and 1786. A reviewer in Cramer's *Magazin der Musik* spoke for many when he pronounced Mozart 'the best and most skilful keyboard player I have ever heard'.

Mozart's models in his earliest surviving keyboard sonatas, K279-284, composed during the winter of 1774-5, were the euphonious *galant* sonatas of Johann Christian Bach and of Georg Christoph Wagenseil. He seems to have intended them both for his own performance and as a set for publication, though only the most brilliant, the Sonata in D K284, was eventually published. After playing all six sonatas on a new fortepiano by Johann Andreas Stein in Augsburg in 1777, he wrote to his father: 'The last one, in D [K284] sounds absolutely marvellous on Stein's fortepiano. The device with which you control the action by pressing with your knee is so much more perfect in his pianos than in anyone else's...'

More than in any of his other early sonatas, Mozart seems to be thinking orchestrally in K284's opening *Allegro*, with its sudden contrasts of *forte* and *piano*, its 'drum' basses and its simulation of trumpet-fuelled tutti. The central movement is a gentle *Rondeau en polonaise*, closer to the original stately Polish dance than the snap of the Chopin polonaise, while the finale is a set of 12 variations on a gavotte-like theme, calculated (especially in the later variations) to showcase his own virtuosity.

By 1788 Mozart's glory days as a keyboard virtuoso were over. Viennese cultural life was now badly disrupted by Austria's war with Turkey; and Mozart could no longer count on his aristocratic patrons to support his subscription concerts. Teaching still remained one fairly reliable source of income; and it was for his pupils that he composed the C major Sonata K545 and, we can guess, the Sonata in B flat K570, dated February 1789.

Dominated by its gracefully rocking main theme, the first movement of K570 often suggests a string duo or trio in its lean contrapuntal textures. Next comes a *Romanze*-style *Adagio* whose solemn theme, evocative of horns, and two episodes recall the *Larghetto* of the C minor Piano Concerto K491. The melody of the second episode seems to cry out for the sensuous warmth of clarinets. Mozart also evokes other sound worlds in the rondo finale, especially in the jaunty first episode where the piano does a fair imitation of a wind band.

Mozart composed what he dubbed 'a little sonata for beginners', the Sonata in C K545, for pupils in June 1788, the period of the last three symphonies. Its

immaculately bred opening movement is famous for beginning its recapitulation not in the home key, but in the subdominant, F major. But rather than merely copying the exposition a fourth higher (as the young Schubert often did), Mozart composed new music to make the final reappearance of C major that much more emphatic. The *Andante* is an innocent serenade with a plaintive minor-keyed episode, while the finale, in gavotte rhythm like that of K284, is a delightful miniature rondo whose middle section varies and develops the main theme.

Four years earlier, in October 1784, Mozart composed his Sonata in C minor K457 for his pupil Therese von Trattner, wife of an affluent printer and publisher. When it was published, with a dedication to Therese, Mozart prefaced it with the elaborate, technically demanding C minor Fantasia, K475, dated 20 May 1785.

Therese must have been an uncommonly gifted musician, to judge by the expressive range of the Fantasia and Sonata. The Fantasia, which welds extreme contrasts into a cohesive whole, brings us as close as we shall ever get to Mozart the inspired improviser. After the ominous opening, moving from C minor to an audaciously remote B minor, the music slips surprisingly (though everything in the Fantasia is surprising) to D major for a calmer section that unfolds like an opera aria. The tranquil mood is then disrupted by a tumultuous allegro, followed by an andantino whose textures suggest a wind serenade. Then comes the most torrential outburst in the whole Fantasia - a vivid sense here of Mozart improvising like a man possessed - before a return of the stark opening.

It is typical of Mozart in C minor vein (compare, say, the Wind Serenade K388) that the Sonata K457 opens with a striding unison arpeggio, followed by a beseeching *piano* phrase - a pianistic recreation of an impassioned operatic duet. Operatically inspired, too, are the treble-bass dialogues of the second group of themes. These acquire a darker cast when they return, now in the minor key, in the recapitulation. But it is the opening arpeggio figure which dominates the drama, tossed between right and left hands in the development and worked in gruff canonic imitation in the coda.

The *Adagio*, a rondo in E flat with two episodes, brings necessary balm. Each time the theme recurs Mozart intensifies the expression with increasingly elaborate ornamentation. The triple-time finale combines turbulence with pathos, and makes a feature of startling silences. As in the first movement, the music's scale and emotional reach demand a momentous coda. Mozart duly writes one of his most dramatic perorations, involving hand-crossing, huge leaps and, by 18th-century standards, exceptional use of the keyboard's low register.

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