

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 27 January 2024
7.30pm

Mozart Birthday Concert

Christian Blackshaw piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Sonata in C K309 (1777)

I. Allegro con spirito

II. Andante un poco adagio

III. Rondeau. Allegretto grazioso

Piano Sonata in A K331 (c.1783)

I. Andante grazioso - Adagio - Allegro

II. Menuetto

III. Alla Turca. Allegretto

Interval

Piano Sonata in F K533/494 (1786-8)

I. Allegro

II. Andante

III. Rondo. Allegretto

Piano Sonata in D K576 (1789)

I. Allegro

II. Adagio

III. Allegretto



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By the summer of 1777 the 21-year-old Mozart was longing to escape what he saw as a life of servitude in Salzburg. He petitioned Prince-Archbishop Colloredo to release him from his service. Back came a frostily worded assent; and within weeks Mozart, accompanied by his mother, embarked on the most momentous tour of his life, to Paris via Mannheim, in search of a position that would enable him to leave Salzburg for good.

After stopping in Munich, mother and son spent two weeks in Augsburg in October 1777, where Wolfgang played his sonatas K279-284 on a state-of-the-art Stein fortepiano and had a flirtatious relationship with his cousin Maria Anna Thekla. In a letter to his father Leopold, Wolfgang reported that ‘...suddenly a splendid sonata in C major popped right out of my head with a Rondeau at the end. There was a huge uproar and tremendous applause...’ The improvised sonata duly became the **Sonata in C K309**, written out in Mannheim a few weeks later, with a new *Andante*.

Mozart seems to be thinking orchestrally at the opening of the *Allegro con spirito*, with its contrast between a unison *tutti* fanfare and a *galant* response that suggests strings alone. While the mood of the exposition is essentially amiable, the development works the main theme dramatically through a sequence of minor keys.

Mozart suggested that the delicately ornamented *Andante* was a ‘portrait’ of Rose Cannabich, the daughter of the Mannheim Kapellmeister Christian Cannabich. He recorded his ‘indescribable pleasure’ when she played it ‘with the utmost expression’. The demure opening of the rondo finale contrasts with a flamboyant series of fanfares beneath orchestral-style tremolos that veer between major and minor. Mozart further dramatises this arresting idea later in the movement.

With the Ottomans now at a safe distance, music evoking Turkish Janissary bands was all the rage in late-18th-century Vienna. After moving from Salzburg to Vienna in 1781, Mozart capitalised on the vogue in the opera *Die Entführung aus dem Serail* and the rondo *Alla Turca* finale of the **Sonata in A K331**, composed, probably for a pupil, some time between 1781 and 1783. Alternating A minor mystery and A major flamboyance, the rondo quickly became a popular hit. Its Janissary imitations - cymbals, drums and triangle - would have been even more vivid with the percussion stop available on some early fortepianos.

Mozart prefaces his ‘Turkish rondo’ with variations on a lulling nursery tune and a minuet and trio. The six variations of the *Andante grazioso* explore an inventive range of textures: say, in the hand-crossings and sensuous parallel thirds of variation four, or the swashbuckling figuration of the final variation, with its foretaste of the *Alla Turca*. Opening with a suggestion of horn fanfares, the central minuet alternates the ceremonial and the lyrical, while the expansive trio recreates the dulcet textures, complete with hand-crossings, of variation four in the *Andante grazioso*.

By 1788 Mozart’s glory days as an impresario and keyboard virtuoso were over. Vienna’s cultural life was now disrupted by Austria’s debilitating war with Turkey;

and Mozart could no longer count on his aristocratic patrons to support his subscription concerts. Until the commission for *Così fan tutte* in autumn 1789, his main sources of income were teaching and publications, plus his modest court salary.

On 3 January 1788 Mozart entered into his thematic catalogue ‘Ein Allegro und Andante für das Klavier allein’. For publication later that year he appended a ‘little rondo’ (K494) composed in 1786, upping its tempo from *andante* to *Allegretto* and adding an intricate contrapuntal cadenza. Wiry counterpoint is, in fact, a unifying feature of the whole **Sonata in F K533/494**, whose two- and three-part textures often hint at string chamber music.

The unaccompanied opening initially suggests a fugue. But while Mozart quickly foils expectations by changing to a *galant* theme-plus-accompaniment texture, he uses both the opening and a second theme based on cascading triplets with nonchalant contrapuntal ingenuity. The *Andante* shares the first movement’s contrapuntal leanings while heightening its tendency to harsh, angular linear writing. In the central development Mozart works a fragment from the main theme in a sequence of invertible counterpoint whose tortuous intensity is without parallel in his sonatas.

After two searching movements, the graceful theme of the *Rondo* comes as necessary relief. But this is no lightweight sendoff. The sonata’s preoccupation with linear counterpoint is confirmed firstly in a beautiful F minor episode, and then in the climactic final cadenza. This begins like a fugal stretto (with entries piling in on each other) and ascends majestically through the whole compass of Mozart’s five-octave keyboard before ending with the theme mysteriously in the bass.

Dated July 1789, Mozart’s last sonata, the **Sonata in D K576**, originated in his trip to Berlin and Potsdam that spring. The Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm II apparently commissioned Mozart to write a set of six ‘easy’ sonatas for his daughter, Princess Friederike. But for whatever reason, he completed only this one sonata.

The outer movements of K576 ingeniously marry a light, convivial tone with ‘learned’ contrapuntal craft. The opening theme, in rollicking ‘hunting’ style, lends itself naturally to canonic elaboration, a hint Mozart takes up almost immediately and pursues further when the same theme initiates the second group of themes. In the *Adagio* Mozart contrasts an expressive, richly ornamented melody in A major with a forlorn central episode in F sharp minor. One inspired touch is the way the coda alludes to the episode’s rhythm and texture, but not its precise melodic outline.

Like the first movement, the rondo finale develops its breezy, popular style tunes in athletic polyphonic textures, now with an added virtuosity. Belying Mozart’s original intention to write an ‘easy’ sonata for Princess Friederike, this is perhaps the most technically challenging keyboard movement he ever wrote. Did the princess ever play it, one wonders?

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