

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 27 June 2023
7.30pm

François-Frédéric Guy piano
Emmanuel Strosser piano

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Introduction and Rondo alla burlesca Op. 23 No. 1 (1940)

2 Lullabies for 2 pianos (1936)

Lullaby • Lullaby for a Retired Colonel

Richard Strauss (1864-1949)

Tod und Verklärung Op. 24 (1888-9) *arranged by Otto Singer*

Largo - Allegro molto agitato - Meno mosso - Moderato

Interval

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Sonata in F minor for 2 pianos Op. 34b (1864)

I. Allegro non troppo • II. Andante, un poco Adagio •

III. Scherzo. Allegro • IV. Finale. Poco sostenuto -

Allegro non troppo

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Tonight's composers all experienced success young. Strauss and Britten were more than rising stars by their mid-20s when they wrote the music we will hear, and they took it in their stride. Poor 20-year old **Brahms** had the misfortune to find that Robert Schumann had presented him to the world as some kind of musical messiah '...destined to give ideal presentation to the highest expression of the times...he is come... He is called Johannes Brahms...' Schumann's article brought down a torrent of mockery and hostility on his protégé, a terrible thing to do to a young, unknown composer. It haunted him all his days, and perhaps caused the paralysing crises of confidence that plagued his compositional career. Tonight's closing work is a case in point.

It first saw light as a string quintet in 1862. Brahms's violinist friend Joseph Joachim saw it and wrote, '...what deprives me of pure pleasure, is, in short, the lack of charm.' More practically, he added, 'I am afraid that without vigorous playing it will not sound clear.' Brahms found he agreed and recast the piece for the altogether more 'vigorous' combination of two pianos as you hear it tonight. Now, the pianist friend (Clara Schumann) disliked the piano version. Having played it often with Brahms and others, she acknowledged its quality but thought it not a sonata. 'Please, remodel it once more!' She urged a full orchestration, but he combined his two previous ideas to create the quintet for piano and string quartet that has enjoyed such deserved popularity ever since. Brahms destroyed the original version, but published the duo version, suggesting that he valued it more than Madame Schumann. Certainly it makes a fascinating complement to the later version: one piano adds an incisive percussion to the quintet – two pianos can be startlingly brilliant, and there are passages (notably in the last two movements) of intense rhythmic drive and volume which present questions of balance for true duo partners to relish resolving.

We meet the two composers appearing before the interval tonight at similar stages in their careers, which throws their differences into stark relief. **Britten** in 1930s London was a playful modernist, kindred spirit to Evelyn Waugh and WH Auden. Critics found it difficult to be sure when he was being genuine, when satirical, and when just 'clever'. Take the two lullabies: the first is mostly restful in a gorgeously exotic way, though hardly soporific; the second is an insomniac nightmare. This retired colonel is plagued with memories of military bands.

As war loomed, Britten forsook Britain for North America, a hoped-for land of opportunity which he actually found increasingly alien and onerous. He sought solace among like minds, including fellow ex-pats Ethel Bartlett and Rae Robertson. They, after their marriage, had formed the first professional piano duo in England (making their recital debut in Wigmore Hall almost exactly 99 years ago, in June 1924) and enjoyed a starry international career bolstered by the new technologies of fast travel (they toured constantly), radio and

recordings. In the year Britten wrote tonight's opening piece for them, 1940, their engagements included the Hollywood Bowl, and the *Boston Evening Transcript* named them 'The best-loved piano duettists in the world.' In commissioning Britten and others they showed a daring to match their popularity. 'Burlesque' or 'burlesca' appears several times in his oeuvre, including in his last quartet: to him it translates as sardonic, upbeat with menacing leer. Here he pairs 'burlesca' with an introduction that is very much pomp in a grand Baroque manner, all dotted rhythms and emphatic gestures. The combined effect is like daubing red paint all over a grand portico.

Strauss's precocity in his mid-20s had a very different, lofty and spiritual flavour. Under the influence of composer and violinist Alexander Ritter he read Schopenhauer, whose ideas about death struck a profound chord: 'I believe that when death closes our eyes we shall awaken to a light, of which our sunlight is but the shadow.' There, in a nutshell, is the idea behind *Tod und Verklärung*, fleshed out by the 26-year-old composer into an intimate death-bed scene, starting with an enfeebled heart-beat. He had Ritter write a poetic programme for the piece which is worth quoting in full:

I. (Largo) In a dark, shabby room, a man lies dying. The silence is disturbed only by the ticking of a clock – or is it the beating of the man's heart? A melancholy smile appears on the invalid's face. Is he dreaming of his happy childhood?

II. (Allegro molto agitato) A furious struggle between life and death, at whose climax we hear, briefly, the theme of Transfiguration that will dominate the final portion of the work. The struggle is unresolved, and silence returns.

III. (Meno mosso) He sees his life again, the happy times, the ideals striven for as a young man. But the hammer-blow of death rings out. His eyes are covered with eternal night.

IV. (Moderato) The heavens open to show him what the world denied him, Redemption, Transfiguration – the Transfiguration theme first played pianissimo by the full orchestra, its flowering enriched by the celestial arpeggios of two harps. The theme climbs ever higher, dazzlingly, into the empyrean.

The finest musical magician could not capture Strauss's orchestral world on two pianos, but Otto Singer Jr – who made this duo version – was one of the best arrangers in the business, someone who dauntlessly rendered even the grandest scores accessible as piano solos or duos. Strauss was composing – *just* – in the age of recording (Edison had invented the phonograph in the 1870s), but to anyone unable to hear a live orchestra, a live piano would still be a far preferable alternative to a primitive sound recording.

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