

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 28 December 2022
7.30pm

Piers Lane piano

Edvard Grieg (1843-1907)

Holberg Suite Op. 40 (1884)

*I. Praeludium • II. Sarabande • III. Gavotte •
IV. Air • V. Rigaudon*

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Piano Sonata in B minor S178 (1849-53)

*Lento assai - Allegro energico - Andante sostenuto -
Allegro energico - Lento assai*

Interval

Franz Liszt

Weihnachtsbaum S186 (1874-6)

Schlummerlied • Abendglocken • Ehemals

Edvard Grieg

Piano Sonata in E minor Op. 7 (1865)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Andante molto •
III. Alla menuetto, ma poco più lento •
IV. Finale. Molto allegro*

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Over the winter of 1869-70 the young **Grieg** met Liszt during a four-month stay in Rome. Liszt, then a grand European icon, was residing at a nearby monastery, the Santa Francesca Romana. This encounter had a profoundly encouraging effect on the Norwegian composer at a time when encouragement was sorely needed. Before the visit's arrangement, Grieg had felt despair about his artistic future in the relatively provincial Oslo, and was deep in grief following the death of his daughter Alexandra. A letter of recommendation arriving from Liszt seemed a welcome beam of good fortune, and had secured Grieg the stipend required to travel abroad.

Grieg and his wife Nina arrived in Rome just before Christmas, and Grieg's initial impressions of Liszt were mixed: although he was awed by his 'visionary' appearance in his 'abbot's garb', he also dryly observed Liszt's 'strutting about' for the benefit of the ladies. His reactions to Liszt's music were equally varied, with Grieg even describing one work as 'sad proof of the decline of the newer German music'. Up close to Liszt, though, Grieg was enthralled. The composers spent two days together, with both men playing Grieg's works on the piano - Liszt famously sightread Grieg's piano concerto. Grieg left Rome deeply impressed by the experience, and particularly motivated by Liszt's reactions to his explorations of a specifically Norwegian musical sound, writing in his report on the visit: 'it was of supreme interest for me to observe how the national element in my work at first made [Liszt] hesitant, but then enthusiastic. A triumph of this kind for my efforts and my views on the national is itself worth the journey [to Italy]'.

By 1884, a decade and a half later, Grieg was at the height of his fame in Norway and abroad, and heavily invested in Norwegian Romantic nationalism. In Bergen, that year saw the bicentenary celebrations of the birth of Ludvig Holberg, a playwright claimed by both Denmark and Norway as founder of their national literary traditions, and a former resident of the city. Known as the 'Molière of the North', Holberg was a keen satirist of human idiosyncrasies and an advocate of social reform who encapsulated the spirit of Scandinavia's humanist Enlightenment. Among the festivities planned by the city, two new musical commissions fell to Grieg: first, a male voice cantata, to be performed around a newly erected statue of the playwright, and second, the enduring *Holberg Suite*, or to give it its full title, *From Holberg's Time: Suite in Olden Style*, which attempted to reconstruct the sounds of Holberg's lifetime. This is the 19th-century neo-Baroque: following the *Praeludium*, a set of 18th-century dances - *Sarabande*, *Gavotte*, *Air* and *Rigaudon* - transport listeners back to the intellectual context in which Holberg's ideas fermented. Grieg subsequently arranged the work for string orchestra, and it remains one of the most celebrated works of Grieg's oeuvre.

Liszt's Piano Sonata in B minor is the earliest work on this evening's programme, and it has intrigued and

inspired scholars and pianists alike since its completion in 1853. Perhaps one of the greatest achievements of the period Liszt spent in Weimar, its musical mechanics are deeply integrated and complex, at once an exercise in compression and in expansion: 'a sonata across a sonata'. Looked at from one direction, it squeezes the usual four-movement structure into one continuous movement; but apply a different lens and it becomes a work that composes out the expectations of sonata form - exposition, development and recapitulation. In spite of its unyielding 'absolute' title, the Piano Sonata has attracted a number of programmatic interpretations.

Dedicated to Liszt's granddaughter (the daughter of Cosima and Hans von Bülow; Cosima was by this point, however, married to Wagner), Liszt's *Weihnachtsbaum* was chiefly composed between 1874 and 1876. The set of 12 pieces represents Christmas from three different viewpoints, with hymns (including *Adeste Fideles*), then a series of pieces portraying Christmas with an attitude of child-like purity (e.g. No. 7, *Schlummerlied*), and finally a Christmas tinted with experience (No. 9, *Abendglocken*, and No. 10, *Ehemals*). There is a further reading of *Ehemals*, in which it may also represent Liszt's first meeting with his lover Princess Sayn-Wittgenstein, a match prevented by family and religion.

Composed during a summer burst of creativity in Denmark in 1865 when Grieg was just 22, his Piano Sonata in E minor Op. 7 is a work with a youthful ambition towards large-scale forms at odds with Grieg's later output - he would go on to make his name as a musical miniaturist. The Piano Sonata hails from the period when Grieg first began to grapple with the question of Norwegian identity. As a middle-class urban Norwegian, Grieg had grown up immersed in the Danish culture and language that characterised cosmopolitan Bergen life. But after a decisive meeting with the bright young hope for Norwegian nationalist music Rikard Nordraak in Copenhagen in the winter of 1864-5, he began likewise to view Norwegian Romantic nationalism as his central artistic goal. Despite the immediate productivity Nordraak inspired, the works Grieg produced that summer in Denmark still showed strong allegiance to Danish music and culture: for instance, the Piano Sonata is dedicated to Danish composer Niels Gade. 'Whether the enchanting surroundings or the fortifying air inspired me stays open. In any case, I did write my Piano Sonata within eleven days', Grieg claimed in a later interview. This creative friendship between the two young men was tragically cut short: Nordraak died soon afterwards in 1886, giving rise to Grieg's *Funeral March in Memory of Rikard Nordraak*, which Grieg later also requested be performed at his own funeral.

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