

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 28 January 2023
1.00pm

Clare Hammond piano

Hélène de Montgeroult (1764-1836)

From *Cours complet pour l'enseignement du
Forte-Piano* (?1820)

Etude No. 62
Etude No. 66
Etude No. 67
Etude No. 103
Etude No. 82
Etude No. 104
Etude No. 101
Etude No. 107

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 8 in C minor Op. 13 'Pathétique' (1797-8)
I. Grave - Allegro di molto e con brio •
II. Adagio cantabile • *III. Rondo. Allegro*

Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909)

From *Iberia (Book 1)* (1905-6)

El puerto • Evocación

Triana from *Iberia (Book 2)* (1907)

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Hélène de Montgeroult, née de Nervo, was born in Lyon in 1764. She studied in Paris, where her teachers included the prominent Bohemian composer and pianist Jan Ladislav Dussek. When the revolutionary Reign of Terror began, around the summer of 1792, Montgeroult, who had married into the aristocracy some five years earlier, fled to London. However, she returned to Paris in December of the same year, owing to new laws confiscating the property of emigrants. The story that she saved her aristocratic neck from the guillotine through her brilliant improvisation of variations on *La Marseillaise* in front of the revolutionary tribunal was spread about many years later, though it may contain a grain of truth. At any rate, she was by all accounts one of the great pianists of her day, and when the Paris Conservatoire was established in 1795 she was appointed as a senior teacher – the only woman to achieve such a position.

Among Montgeroult's keyboard compositions were sonatas and nocturnes, the latter being among the earliest pieces of their kind. Her *magnum opus*, however, was her *Cours complet pour l'enseignement du Forte-Piano* - a thoroughgoing series of exercises of progressive difficulty, followed by 114 studies and various contrapuntal pieces.

Etude No. 62 has its melody in the left hand, constantly crossing over an accompaniment in rippling semiquavers in the right, and No. 66 is another left-hand study, with its bass line falling consistently off the beat.

Etude No. 67, in a luminous B major, is a study in rapid motion for both hands, while the impassioned No. 82 is again a left-hand study, this time designed to strengthen the independence of the fingers which play in rapid legato semiquavers throughout. In the nocturne-like 101, in C sharp major, the melody is confined to the right hand, while the left proceeds in constant flowing quavers. The more impulsive and improvisatory No. 103 contains several contrasting sections.

The agitated No. 104 is made up of breathlessly short phrases that seem to contain an in-built element of acceleration, while the equally dramatic No. 107, marked *Grandioso ed energico*, is a study in constant rapid semiquavers for the left hand. Like several of its companions, this is a piece in which Montgeroult seems to anticipate the Etudes of Chopin.

Beethoven's famous sonata appeared as the 18th Century was drawing to a close, with a title page proclaiming a 'Grande sonate Pathétique'. Beethoven's autograph score is no longer extant, and it is not unlikely that the title originated with the publisher. The sonata bore a dedication to Beethoven's early patron Prince Karl Lichnowsky. In 1800, the year after the 'Pathétique' appeared in print, the Prince granted Beethoven an annuity of 600 florins, and in gratitude Beethoven inscribed his Second Symphony as well as the Piano Sonata Op. 26 to him.

The 'Pathétique' is the first of Beethoven's piano sonatas to begin with a slow introduction, and the sombre opening page is almost entirely built around the

rise and fall of its opening phrase. (Is it coincidental that the phrase was echoed nearly a hundred years later by Tchaikovsky, in the first movement of his 'Pathétique' Symphony?) Beethoven begins his *Allegro* with a staccato theme spiralling upwards above the sound of a pervasive drum roll. The contrasting second subject is given out with the music still in the minor, and the eventual turn to the major coincides with the arrival of restless figuration which, far from alleviating the music's atmosphere of agitation, serves only to heighten it. The notion of bringing back the introduction's material both at its original slow tempo and in an accelerated form at crucial points during the course of the *Allegro* was something new to Beethoven's style, and it heralds the similarly integrated use of a slow introduction in some of his late string quartets.

The sonority of the slow movement's opening bars, with their broad melody unfolding over a gently rocking inner voice, is one that was much admired by later composers, and the slow movement of Schubert's C minor Sonata D958, whose reprise has a similar keyboard layout, was surely modelled on Beethoven's. Like Beethoven's, Schubert's piece is in A flat major, and it absorbs the rhythm of the middle section's inner voice into the accompaniment when the main theme returns.

The slow movement's key exerts an influence on the *Rondo* finale, whose extended central episode, itself almost in the nature of a miniature set of variations, is in A flat. Sketches for the finale appear among Beethoven's ideas for his string trios Op. 9, and since those sketches are clearly conceived with the violin in mind, it is possible that the sonata's rondo theme was originally destined for the last of the trios, also in C minor.

Iberia was **Albéniz's** masterpiece, as well as his *opus magnum* for the piano. He began work on it in 1905, and completed it some three years later. The 12 numbers are arranged in four books of three pieces each, though Albéniz seems never to have envisaged that they would be played complete, or that selected numbers would be performed in any specific order.

The *Evocación* which begins Book I has the plain title of 'Prelude' in Albéniz's manuscript, and it is the only piece in the series that is not linked to a specific Spanish region. Instead, it seems to look back at Spain from a distance, and through a haze of nostalgia. Not for nothing is the music's predominant dynamic marking *ppp*, or even *pppp*. The dance rhythm it conjures up is that of the fandango or malagueña, while the incisive and catchy rhythm of the zapateado pervades *El puerto*, invoking the town of El Puerto de Santa Maria, near Cádiz.

Triana, the last number in Book II, recalls the Romani quarter of Seville, a location that is indelibly stamped with the sound of flamenco. In this irresistibly energetic piece, Albéniz conjures up the clicking of castanets, the stamping of feet and the strumming of guitars, ending the whole thing as though with a shout of 'olé!', played *ffff*.

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