

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 28 May 2022 1.00pm

Jonathan Biss piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in C minor D958 (1828)

I. Allegro II. Adagio • III. Menuetto. Allegro • IV. Allegro

György Kurtág (b.1926)

From *Játékok* (1973-present)

*Un brin de bruyère a Witold • Fanfare to Judit Maros' wedding •
Hommage à Jeney (Phone Numbers of our Loved Ones I) •
(... and round and round it goes) • Hommage à Schubert •
La Fille aux cheveux de lin - enragée*

Márta ligaturája (2020)

Interval

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 27 in E minor Op. 90 (1814)

*I. Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck •
II. Nicht zu geschwind und sehr singbar vorgetragen*

Piano Sonata No. 31 in A flat Op. 110 (1821-2)

*I. Moderato cantabile molto espressivo • II. Allegro molto •
III. Adagio ma non troppo - Fuga. Allegro ma non troppo*

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By the summer of 1828 **Schubert's** often precarious health had deteriorated to the point where he was plagued by headaches and attacks of nausea. Yet he not only kept up an active social life but continued to work at a feverish rate. In September he completed four visionary masterpieces: the C major String Quintet, and three sonatas, in C minor D958, A major D959, and B flat D960. The B flat Sonata, especially, has acquired an aura of otherworldliness. Yet we should beware of hearing the sonata trilogy as a protracted farewell. Their moods embrace pathos, anguish and a sense of evanescence, but also exuberance, humour and a sheer zest for life.

The C minor and A major sonatas seem to confirm the notion that Schubert was determined to establish himself as Beethoven's successor. Behind the opening of the Sonata in C minor D958 lies Beethoven's 32 Variations in C minor. There are half-echoes of the 'Pathétique' Sonata in the *Adagio*, while the finale distantly recalls the 'galloping' finales of the 'Kreutzer' Sonata and the Piano Sonata Op. 31 No. 3. Yet the sonata is utterly Schubertian. Where Beethoven's variation theme is Classically rounded, Schubert extends its 'hammer blows' in a fevered sequence before a precipitate scale hurtles the music into the depths. This opening has been well described by Alfred Brendel: 'the leading character in this tragedy is being chased and cornered, and looks in vain for a way to escape'.

The solemn calm of the *Adagio* is ruffled by two widely modulating episodes whose restlessness can grow febrile. Although marked *Menuetto*, the third movement is closer in spirit to the Romantic intermezzo than the courtly minuet. As in the 'Death and the Maiden' and G major string quartets, Schubert's vast finale is a frantic nocturnal ride, using the tarantella rhythms beloved of Italian opera composers with grim, even nightmarish, obsessiveness.

Now 96, the Romanian-born Hungarian **György Kurtág** has been well described as a poet among novelists. His inclination is towards aphoristic miniatures of intense, compressed feeling. In this Kurtág is the heir of Webern, of whom Schoenberg once quipped, 'If you want to make a concert shorter, just add a work by Webern.' The other prime influence in Kurtág's music is Béla Bartók; and like his great compatriot, he has often drawn on Hungarian folksong and folk dance.

During the 1960s, spent largely teaching in Budapest, Kurtág composed only fitfully. A creative release came in the early 1970s with the first volume of *Játékok* ('Games'), children's piano pieces distantly inspired by Bartók's *Mikrokosmos*. Crucial throughout *Játékok* is a free play of the imagination. In his preface, Kurtág explained that 'the idea of composing *Játékok* was suggested by children playing spontaneously, children for whom the piano still means a toy'.

Kurtág has subsequently added ten more books exploring a whole gamut of styles, sonorities and techniques. Some of these epigrams are greetings to friends, as in the 'Fanfare to Judit Maros' wedding', with its evocation of bell chimes. Others pay tribute to fellow composers, then living (the zany 'Hommage à [Zoltán] Jeney') and dead. The musing 'Hommage à Schubert' invokes the Viennese

composer's favourite dactylic rhythm, while 'La Fille aux cheveux de lin' is a ferocious take on Debussy's famous *Prélude*.

Beethoven's popularity soared to new heights in 1814. The final version of *Fidelio* was triumphantly produced at Vienna's Kärntnertortheater in May, while his Seventh Symphony and patriotic potboiler *Wellingtons Sieg* had proved sensationally successful at two benefit concerts.

Amid these public triumphs Beethoven composed one of his most personal sonatas, in E minor Op. 90. He dedicated it to Count Moritz von Lichnowsky, brother of his first Viennese patron Carl. Beethoven's factotum Anton Schindler relates that the composer had jokingly chided the Count over his qualms about marrying a woman from a lower social class. According to Schindler, the first movement, with its extreme contrasts of vehemence, pathos and tense calm, represented 'a struggle between heart and head'. In the assuaging rondo finale all conflict is resolved in a 'happy conversation with the beloved'. The prevailing dynamics are soft, both in the theme and the equally lyrical episodes. Even the occasional *forte* is quickly quelled by a *subito piano*. This movement was a favourite of Mendelssohn's and, we might guess, of Schubert's too.

In the Romantic imagination Beethoven wrote his final three piano sonatas, Opp. 109, 110 and 111, and his late string quartets for himself and posterity, in isolation from the world. The prosaic truth is that they were all composed at the behest of a friend, publisher or patron. In the three sonatas, dating from 1820-1822, Beethoven draws back from the gigantism of the 'Hammerklavier' Sonata to return to the speaking intimacy of the sonatas Opp. 90 and 101. There is little room for strenuous rhetoric. Instead, Beethoven cultivates what the American musicologist Maynard Solomon calls an 'etherealized, improvisatory tone'.

Unfolding against the background of a minuet, the *Moderato cantabile molto espressivo* of the A flat Sonata Op. 110 is the most lyrically benign of Beethoven's first movements. A laconic, wilful F minor scherzo, full of blunt dynamic contrasts, jolts us out of reverie. The scherzo's tiny coda dissolves into a recitative and *Arioso dolente*: a grieving operatic *scena* translated into pianistic terms. Distress is then assuaged by the most serene, most Bachian of Beethoven's fugues, the antipode of the rebarbative fugue in the 'Hammerklavier'. In spirit and melodic shape (built on rising fourths) the vocally inspired fugue subject also echoes the sonata's opening.

Thwarting expectations of an exultant close, the music slips to the far-distant key of G minor for a reprise of the arioso, its phrases broken with stifled sobs. The fugue begins again in G major, with its theme inverted. Beethoven then treats the theme in augmentation (i.e. with doubled note values), diminution and double diminution (i.e. with the notes four times as fast) while modulating back to the home key of A flat for an ecstatic apotheosis. Multiple rewritings in the autograph reveal how hard-won was the glorious sense of inevitability engendered by the sonata's final pages.

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