

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 29 June 2022 7.30pm

Leon McCawley piano

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Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Variations in F minor HXVII/6 (1793)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Sonata in F K533/494 (1788)

I. Allegro • II. Andante • III. Rondo. Allegretto

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in B flat D960 (1828)

I. Molto moderato • II. Andante sostenuto • III. Scherzo: Allegro vivace con delicatezza – Trio • IV. Allegro ma non troppo

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Musical lives rarely fall into neat chronological divisions. It's still easy to forget that **Haydn's** late music postdates Mozart's – and that when he died, Schubert had already begun his musical training. These F minor keyboard variations date from the summer of 1793, and Haydn's first return to Vienna from London. Two beloved friends were newly absent from his social circle; Mozart, dead since late 1791, and Maria Anna von Genzinger, Haydn's platonic confidante, who'd died in January 1793 aged just 38. Add the fact that the Variations were written for Mozart's former keyboard pupil Barbara ('Babette') Ployer, and it begins to make sense that these searching double-variations should be cast in Haydn's tragic key of F minor. And that after the variations have run their course, this concise work (which Haydn – perhaps with irony – headed *un piccolo divertimento*) should break into a *coda* of sudden, unexpected and overwhelmingly tragic emotion.

Mozart's description of Vienna as a 'true Clavier-land' didn't only cover performing opportunities. He was in continual demand as a piano teacher, and piano music was also readily saleable. After February 1788, when Austria's war with Turkey had pushed Vienna into inflation and recession, concertgoing was badly hit. That might explain the circumstances behind the composition (or at any rate, the final assembly) of this sonata, of which Mozart completed the first two movements in January 1788.

Why, exactly, remains unclear but the lucid, almost toccata-like contrapuntal writing of the opening *Allegro* suggests that he'd been mulling over the Bach keyboard works that he'd discovered (and indeed played) at the soirées of the connoisseur Baron Gottfried van Swieten. The second movement, on the other hand, unfurls with a *fantasia*-like freedom and depth of emotion. It's almost improvisatory in tone, and makes full use of a large and up-to-date keyboard.

Which makes it curious that, at some point later that year, rather than continuing to explore the same vein, he pulled out a *Rondo* (K494) that he'd written in June 1786 and – by some discreet amendments and the addition of a *cadenza* (to add virtuoso weight) – retrofitted it to serve as the finale of what now became a three-movement sonata. Its publication, shortly afterwards, by Franz Anton Hoffmeister of Vienna – who regularly made bridging loans to the cash-strapped Mozart – gives some hint at Mozart's motivation. But it doesn't offer any explanation of the artistic alchemy by which these separate and highly individual works come together to create a sonata whose imagination, economy and utterly distinctive sense of colour add up to much more than the sum of its parts.

I cannot learn whether he wrote these sonatas on his sick-bed or not; from the music I rather surmise that he did... However it may be, these sonatas seem to me to differ from his others in their greater simplicity of invention... It flows on from page to page, ever more musical and melodious, as if it could

never come to an end or lose its continuity, broken, here and there, by more abrupt impulses, which quickly subside [...] In any case, he closes so lightly, cheerfully, courageously, as though he would be ready to begin again the next day. It was not to be. But he could, at least, face the end with a serene countenance.

Robert Schumann encountered **Schubert's** final three piano sonatas for the first time in 1838. The publisher Diabelli had inscribed them to Schumann: Schubert, had he lived, had intended to dedicate them to Johann Nepomuk Hummel, though Alfred Einstein believes that his inspiration (though emphatically not his model) was Beethoven. But by the time Schubert completed the final draft of this B flat Sonata in September 1828, Beethoven had been dead for 18 months. We know, as Schumann knew, that Schubert himself had only weeks to live. But there's little evidence to suggest that Schubert knew that he was sick; he'd enjoyed a successful year, with a lucrative and widely-discussed concert in March, and had recently completed (in addition to the three piano sonatas) his E flat Mass and C major String Quintet.

But as so often, Schumann – while vague on biographical details, and ever-inclined towards the Romantic interpretation – pinpoints some essential musical truths. His judgement on the sonata's 'flow' is a natural response to the vast scale and structure of the astonishing *Molto moderato* first movement. If the first theme echoes that of Beethoven's 'Archduke' trio, the way the movement proceeds is entirely Schubertian: presenting ideas in three distinct groups (the low trill at the end of the first melodic phrase plays an important unifying role), and letting them reflect, respond to and play off one another over the spacious course of what Brian Newbould calls 'one of the greatest sonata movements of all time'.

Schumann's comment about the music's seemingly unending continuity precisely captures the first movement's unearthly scope and sense of space – as well as the meditative *Andante sostenuto*, in the profoundly distant key of C sharp minor. With its melody moving as if suspended amid its bare accompaniment; and an agitated central section, this slow movement outwardly mirrors the *Adagio* of the near-contemporary String Quintet – but to an enormously different expressive end. '*Con delicatezza*' writes Schubert on his *Scherzo*, as if (ironically) to avoid any suggestion of the brilliant salon idiom of Hummel. The *Trio*, amid such fleet-fingered lightness, throws its shadows all the more darkly. And after the subtle interplay of sunlight and darkness, the ingenious rhythmic and harmonic sleight-of-hand and the lightly-worn virtuosity of the rondo finale, the joyous final presto is the gesture of a composer who – however vast his vision – still has his feet planted in this world, not the next.

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