

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 29 June 2025
7.30pm

Daniel Lebhardt piano

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

St François d'Assise: la prédication aux oiseaux S175 No. 1 (1862-3)

Sunt lacrymae rerum from *Années de pèlerinage, troisième année*
S163 (1877-82)

Robert Schumann (1810-1856) Kreisleriana Op. 16 (1838)

*I. Äusserst bewegt • II. Sehr innig und nicht zu rasch •
III. Sehr aufgeregt • IV. Sehr langsam • V. Sehr lebhaft •
VI. Sehr langsam • VII. Sehr rasch • VIII. Schnell und spielend*

Interval

Robert Schumann

Gesänge der Frühe Op. 133 (1853)

*I. Im ruhigen Tempo • II. Belebt, nicht zu rasch • III. Lebhaft •
IV. Bewegt • V. Im Anfange ruhiges, im Verlauf bewegtes
Tempo*

Clara Schumann (1819-1896)

Variations on a Theme by Robert Schumann in F sharp minor Op. 20
(1853)

Robert Schumann

Geistervariationen WoO. 24 (1854)

Franz Liszt

La cloche sonne S238 (c.1850)

St François de Paule marchant sur les flots S175 No. 2 (1862-3)



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‘Suddenly there appeared the most extraordinary person I had ever seen. Tall, extremely thin, pale, with large, sea-green eyes flashing with sudden brilliance like waves glinting in the sun, strong features shot through with suffering, hesitant in his movements and seeming to glide rather than walk, seemingly preoccupied yet at the same time restless, like a ghost waiting for the clock to strike and summon him back to the shades.’ Thus the Countess Marie d’Agoult, who bore **Liszt’s** three children. George Eliot was just as impressed, later on, in a different way. She wrote: ‘Liszt is the first really inspired man I ever saw. His face might serve as a model for a St. John in its sweetness when he is in repose, but seated at the piano he is as grand as one of Michelangelo’s prophets. He is a glorious creature in every way – a bright genius, with a tender, loving nature, and a face in which this combination is perfectly expressed.’

Liszt had long retired as a solo pianist when, in 1856, he published his ‘Complete Symphonic Poems’, the fruit of his time as conductor of the Court Orchestra at Weimar. Liszt had been grappling with the problem of how to exert the same level of control over an orchestra that he had exerted over the inanimate piano, and in this astounding publication he announced his new solutions, which included the sectional rehearsal and the invention of the virtuoso conductor (‘kapellmeister up-and-down beating must cease’). One of his first acts at Weimar was to put on (and transcribe for piano) *Tannhäuser* – Wagner, fleeing Dresden in 1848 after his short-lived career as a revolutionary, managed to catch a rehearsal. Leaving Weimar because of musical censorship, Liszt must have sighed for new worlds to conquer (he had already invented the masterclass, so we owe the biggest draws of our musical world – virtuoso pianists, star conductors, slick orchestras and master-classes – to Liszt, not to mention charity concerts and pianists sitting sideways to show off their profile.)

In 1860 he went to Rome to arrange the necessary permits to enable him to marry his current mistress. But that all fell through, and Liszt, beset by family tragedies, entered a monastery in Rome, and, in 1865, took minor Holy Orders. Around 1863, he composed two legends of two different Saints Francis, which open and close our recital: preaching to the birds, and walking on the water.

The three books of ‘Years of Pilgrimage’ – musical travel diaries – were published in 1855, 1858 and 1883. The first two books often comprise revision of pieces written long before, during Liszt’s years as a touring virtuoso. *Sunt lacrymae rerum* (a quotation from Virgil), in the Hungarian style, was composed in 1877–82. *La cloche sonne* is an arrangement of an old French song dating from about 1850.

Words and music were very closely linked in **Robert Schumann’s** mind – he, of all composers of the Romantic period, is the one most likely to give a piece

a title, beyond a genre description like Mazurka or Song without Words. Schumann’s father was a publisher, and young Robert was inspired to write stories, poems and plays. He always remained a literary man, an editor and a critic. So, reading a romantic novel could lead to a piano suite, while a poem might not confine itself to becoming a song – it could start a symphony: the motto theme of the First Symphony, for instance, perfectly fits the poetic line that inspired it.

Schumann’s literary imagination led him to people his music with characters, many of them simply Schumann in disguise. He could be Eusebius or Florestan or David, always fighting the Philistines (a personification of artistic ignorance that seems to have originated with Schumann). And if you notice that Clara (his wife), David, Eusebius and Florestan, form an alphabetical sequence, you’ll start to get some idea of how Schumann’s mind worked.

Of *Kreisleriana*, Schumann remarked that the title would mean nothing except to a German. Kreisler was the manic musical hero of the novels of ETA Hoffman, and this kaleidoscopic set of eight fantasies, composed in 1838, depicts some of the moods German readers knew so well. It also incorporates musical pictures of Clara, who became his wife two years later, but at this point was so frustratingly unattainable that Schumann even considered ending it all.

Soon after composing the five *Gesänge der Frühe* (Dawn Songs) in 1853, after an interval of happy marriage and fatherhood, Schumann started to think about ending it all once more. ‘Very original as always,’ Clara told her diary, ‘but hard to understand.’ Schumann thought that the ‘Spirit Variations’ were being dictated to him by Angels. He was working on the piece in February 1854, until he threw himself into the Rhine, whereupon he was admitted to an asylum for the rest of his life.

Clara had left the family home by this point, on doctor’s advice, and was never permitted to visit Robert’s asylum. Her *Variations* were written for Robert’s last birthday at home, in 1853. Brahms later wrote variations on the same theme, and dedicated them to Clara: it was Brahms who visited Robert in the asylum in Clara’s place. Clara’s compositions for Robert’s birthdays often seem to bear a presentiment of the future. This is a wistfully melancholy tune enough (from Robert’s *Pretty Pictures* Op. 99), but nothing compare to the Heine settings she had made for earlier, happier, birthdays. ‘They both loved each other, but neither knew it’, begins one; while another ends ‘Tears pour down my face – I can’t believe I’ve lost you.’ Happy birthday, darling.

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