WIGMORE HALL

Monday 29 May 2023
1.00pm

Mariam Batsashvili piano

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)	Ballade No. 1 in G minor Op. 23 (c.1831-5)
Franz Liszt (1811-1886)	Après une lecture du Dante from *Années de pèlerinage, deuxième année, Italie* S161 (1838-49)
Franz Schubert (1797-1828)	Impromptu in F minor D935 No. 1 (1827)
Franz Liszt	Hungarian Rhapsody No. 14 in F minor S244 (1846-53)

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Chopin did not so much play the piano – rather, he *was* the piano. A degree of self-identification with the instrument is indicated by his remark about the relative merits of Pleyels and Erards. Liszt preferred the latter, with their foolproof double-escapement action. Chopin explained that an Erard came with its sound all ready-made, but at a Pleyel, he had to make his own sound, which he preferred, if his health was good enough to allow the effort. As his mistress, George Sand, remarked, 'he made a single instrument speak a language of infinity'. 'Chopin is the greatest of them all', said Debussy, 'for through the piano alone he discovered everything'.

Not for Chopin the wistful story-titles beloved of Schumann and a host of lesser imitators. Dances, studies, sonatas, even the *Ballades* – Chopin gave no hint of any extra-musical inspiration. It was Liszt who said, after hearing the trio of the A flat Polonaise, 'I hear the hooves of the Polish cavalry'. Chopin did not even sanction the epithet 'Heroic', which was forced upon the piece six years after its composition, by George Sand, pursuing her own revolutionary agenda in 1848.

Chopin's *Ballades* explore a new way of composing; no longer the sonata forms arrived at by Haydn and Mozart, which, however wonderfully disguised by the composer's fancy, exemplify a rigorous harmonic logic; but rather an allusive logic of melody and tempo, hard to capture in notation, and therefore rare in performance: what we might call a narrative approach to form.

The first *Ballade* seems to sum up the composer's feelings about Russia's conquest of his native Poland, mirroring the entry he made in his diary in 1831 in Stuttgart, on hearing of the fall of Warsaw: 'Oh God, Thou art! Thou art and avengest Thyself not! Thou hast still not enough of the Muscovite crimes, or, or Thou art Thyself a Muscovite!' Yet the *Ballade* remains a piece of music, not an accompaniment for some unrealised political agenda, or even a poem, despite the title.

'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 wrote 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.'

That this remarkable man's music is not constantly in our ears is partly explained by a comment from his grandson, Siegfried Wagner (the Siegfried of the Idyll rather than the Ring): 'A man who is a musician and nothing but a musician can establish no relationship to Liszt's works. One has to bring to them a certain poetic empathy.'

Schubert composed eight Impromptus in 1827. Only two were published in his lifetime. Today's F minor Impromptu was published in 1839 (the publisher helpfully adding a dedication to Franz Liszt, recently arrived in Vienna, as we shall see) as the first of a set of four, Op. 142. The second is a much-loved lilting melody, the third a set of variations on the theme from the *Rosamunde* ballet, and the last, also in F minor, a quirky blend of duple and triple time.

In March 1838, sipping a coffee in the Piazza San Marco, Liszt glanced over someone's shoulder to read the headlines of their German newspaper, to discover that Budapest had suffered a catastrophic flood. Liszt returned to his Hungarian homeland for the first time since he left it in 1823, pausing in Vienna on the way to raise money. It was in Vienna in 1839 that he performed the first version of *Aprés une lecture du Dante*, inspired not by reading Dante, but by a poem of the same name by Victor Hugo. The final version published in 1856 deploys thematic ideas with familiar meanings – wailing chromatics, diabolical tritones – with a richly harmonised melody that leaves no doubt as to Liszt's stylistic influence on the music of his son-in-law, Wagner.

Back in Hungary at last in 1840, Liszt became captivated by the music of Romani Hungarians, and left graphic descriptions of how he found it. (Later Hungarian folklorists, like Bartók, drew more careful distinctions between Hungarian Romani music and other sorts of Hungarian music.) Liszt makes Vaughan Williams look like a dilettante. He longed to incorporate everything he heard into a single massive work: 'a National Epic', he wrote, 'and the strange tongue in which its strains would be delivered would be no stranger than everything else done by the people from whom it emanated.' The F minor *Rhapsody* began life as a work in E minor for piano and orchestra. The piano version is dedicated to Hans von Bülow, his daughter-in-law's first husband.