

# WIGMORE HALL

Friday 29 September 2023  
7.30pm

Isata Kanneh-Mason piano

Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Piano Sonata in C HXVI/50 (c.1794-5)

*I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegro molto*

Fanny Mendelssohn (1805-1847)

Easter Sonata (1828)

*I. Allegro assai moderato • II. Largo e molto espressivo •  
III. Scherzo. Allegretto • IV. Allegro con strepito*

Interval

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Kinderszenen Op. 15 (1838)

*Von fremden Ländern und Menschen •  
Curiose Geschichte • Hasche-Mann • Bittendes Kind •  
Glückes genug • Wichtige Begebenheit • Träumerei •  
Am Camin • Ritter vom Steckenpferd • Fast zu ernst •  
Fürchtenmachen • Kind im Einschlummern •  
Der Dichter spricht*

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Piano Sonata No. 3 in B minor Op. 58 (1844)

*I. Allegro maestoso • II. Scherzo. Molto vivace •  
III. Largo • IV. Finale. Presto non tanto*

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**Haydn** had the good luck to change his life completely in his 60s. His last aristocratic employer was less interested in music than his forefathers had been, and so Haydn was free to make two long visits to London in the 1790s. He mixed with scientists and poets, he gave concerts and made a fortune, he heard Handel's oratorios, and was moved to emulate them – the telescope of the Royal Astronomer William Herschel disclosed the inspiration for 'The Heavens are telling' in Haydn's *Creation* – and he came across the last word in piano technology. Haydn was so impressed by London-built pianos that he took a Longman & Broderip back to Vienna with him – you can see it in the Cobbe Collection at Hatchlands near Guildford.

The fine London pianos stimulated Haydn to three final piano sonatas, all dedicated to Therese Jansen, a student of Clementi, whose dancing-master father made £2000 a year from London's social whirl. In 1795, Haydn was a witness at her wedding to the son of a famous artist. Therese's daughter was the wildly celebrated Regency actress and singer, Madame Vestris. Quite a family! Haydn's last three piano trios are also dedicated to Therese. Her six Haydn works certainly suggest she was an excellent pianist: scales of all sorts abound, as do octaves and trills. She seems to have been especially good at scales in thirds and rhetorical surprises (not to say, jokes, which abound in the finales), and yet also to have a contemplative power, to judge by the slow movements of the first and third sonatas.

The C major sonata, the first of the three, has one of the earliest pedal markings: some wiggly lines and the words *open Pedal*. Pedals were first applied to pianos in 1771 by Americus Backers, a Swiss or German maker living in London. A piano of his dating from 1772 belonged to the Duke of Wellington (perhaps originally to his father, the composer Earl of Mornington) and can be seen in Apsley House at Hyde Park Corner. It took a while for pedal marks to settle down; Viennese pianos of about 1800 used knee-levers, and so a number of Beethoven's sonata manuscripts have the word *knie* scattered about them – confusing until you know why.

**Fanny Mendelssohn** must have sympathized with her father, Abraham. He, the successful banker who made everything possible, was the son of the great philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, and famously complained: 'Formerly I was the son of my father. Now I am the father of my son.' The unpublished manuscript of the *Easter Sonata* is signed F. Mendelssohn, and when the piece was discovered in 1970, the F was assumed to be short for Felix. This was a recurring problem for the pair. When Felix visited Queen Victoria for the first time, she sang him her favourite song of his, 'Italien'. Felix was much

embarrassed to have to explain that, although published in a set with his name on it, in the manner of the time – Clara and Robert Schumann did similar – it was in fact by his sister. The *Easter Sonata* is mentioned in Fanny's letters and diaries from 1829, so we can be confident that the piece is indeed hers. It provides an interesting example of the family's conversion to Lutheran Christianity – a step not taken by all Moses Mendelssohn's children, but apparently latent in his own theology. It was traditional for converting Jews to add a Christian surname, which is why we should really write Mendelssohn-Bartholdy – Abraham was very strict about this. (The Bartholdys were simply the former owners of one of their properties.) The sonata depicts the Passion of Christ, and doesn't actually get as far as Easter. The veil of the Temple is rent in twain in the finale, but perhaps the Resurrection is subsumed into the concluding fantasia on the Lutheran chorale 'Christ, the Lamb of God'.

**Schumann** was a prolific father – eight children between 1841 and 1854. How his wife, Clara, was able to maintain her position as a leading piano virtuoso is not the least of the mysteries surrounding the Schumanns. All this, however, was in the future when he composed his *Childhood Scenes* in February 1838. Clara, whom he was unsuccessfully courting, had been taken away on a seven-month concert tour by her disapproving father. Perhaps the *Scenes* are dreams of happiness to come.

Of **Chopin's** three piano sonatas, the last (in B minor) is the real one. The first was a student-ish attempt in the significant Beethoven key of C minor; the second, in B flat minor, was written around rather a good 'Funeral March' that Chopin had prepared earlier. But in the summer of 1844, he was a mature and successful artist deliberately writing a sonata from scratch. Now, what is it that differentiates a sonata from a 'string of pieces'? An over-riding unity, surely, a meaning. What this sonata's about, at the simplest level, is falling and then climbing back up again. And it uses other means of unification. For instance, the first movement ends on a B major chord with a D sharp at the top. The *Scherzo* takes that D sharp, calls it an E flat, and sets off in the key of E flat major. The slow movement turns it back into a D sharp, and the *Finale* somehow reaches an E flat chord (from B minor!), allowing player and listeners to muse on their musical journey. Both second and third movements have huge middle sections which can easily overbalance the form – careful tempo selection is more than usually crucial to this delicate formal tightrope.

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