

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 2 December 2024
7.30pm

Farewell

Elisabeth Brauss piano

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Capriccio in B flat (Capriccio on the Departure of his Most Beloved Brother) BWV992 (?1704)

Arioso. Adagio. A flattery by the friends to dissuade him from making his journey. • A representation of the various mishaps that might befall him in foreign parts. • Adagissimo. A general lament of the friends. • Here, the friends come (for they see that it cannot be otherwise) and take their leave. • Aria di Postiglione. Allegro poco • Fuga all' imitazione della cornetta di postiglione

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 26 in E flat Op. 81a 'Les Adieux'

I. Das Lebewohl. Adagio • II. Abwesenheit. Andante espressivo • III. Das Wiedersehen. Vivacissimamente

Interval

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Geistervariationen WoO. 24

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Piano Sonata No. 7 in B flat Op. 83 (1939-42)

I. Allegro inquieto • II. Andante caloroso • III. Precipitato

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On the surface, Elisabeth Brauss's recital programme presents a classic, 'old school' sequence, opening with **Bach** and **Beethoven** (creators respectively of the Old and New Testaments of the piano literature, according to conductor Hans von Bülow), continuing with a great Romantic and culminating in the 20th century. But tonight's four pieces are also linked by the theme of farewell and loss.

Bach wrote his Capriccio 'on the departure of a beloved brother' as a teenager. It was long believed that the title referred to Bach's older brother Johann Jakob, an oboist who left for Poland to join the military band of Sweden's King Charles XII, but it has more recently been suggested that the inspiration was Bach's schoolfriend Georg Erdmann. Uniquely in Bach's works, the Capriccio's individual movements (six of them) were given descriptive titles.

In the songful, highly decorated first movement, the departer's friends try to keep him from leaving. After the following Andante (a fugue in which the dangers of being abroad are outlined), the third movement is a heartfelt lament that plays out over a sorrowful repeating bass pattern. In the brief fourth movement the friends say their 'farewells'. The downward-leaping octave figure in the fifth movement imitates the posthorn of the departing coach; this figure then continues into the finale, where it is incorporated into the countersubject of a fugue on a trumpet-like theme – a feat of ingenuity and technique far beyond the grasp of most teenaged composers. Archduke Rudolph Johann Joseph Rainier was a pupil and loyal patron of Beethoven, having established a consortium that guaranteed the composer an annuity, thereby keeping him in Vienna after a job offer had come from Napoleon's youngest brother Jérôme Bonaparte in Kassel. In return, Rudolph was the most frequent dedicatee of Beethoven's works – including the 'Archduke' Trio (Op. 97), the Fourth and Fifth piano concertos (Opp. 58 and 73) and the mighty 'Hammerklavier' Sonata for piano (Op. 106).

In May 1809 the Imperial family fled Vienna to escape the siege by Napoleon's French forces. Beethoven wrote a piece for Rudolph's departure – 'Das Lebewohl' (The Farewell) – which became the first movement of this sonata. Beethoven later added the movements 'Abwesenheit' (Absence) and 'Das Wiedersehen' (The Return). This was the only one of Beethoven's 35 piano sonatas to have an extra-musical inspiration, and it was no empty formal gesture: Beethoven's sketches reveal the piece was 'written from the heart'. The first movement's slow introduction begins with a horn call (Beethoven wrote the three syllables 'Le-be-wohl' above the opening three chords). This also permeates the main Allegro. In the development, the call comes more clearly into focus, and near the end of the movement it appears in close canon, before fading into the distance. The second movement is one of sighing lament, painful loss and dragging time. It drifts heavenwards, leading without a break into the excitement – and reckless abandon – of the final movement, which celebrates 'The Return'.

In the case of **Schumann's** *Geistervariationen* ('Ghost Variations') the leave-taking was the composer's own: it was the last work he completed before, beset by mental illness, he threw himself into the River Rhine in an unsuccessful bid to end his life. At the time Schumann believed himself to be surrounded by ghosts who would dictate songs to him, some angelic, others terrifying. According to the diary of his wife Clara, on the night of 17 February 1854 he heard a theme sung to him by angels, which he wrote down immediately. 'Once it was written down,' Clara reveals, 'he lay down again and fantasised all night, with his eyes open and looking up at the sky.' The theme is followed by five variations, the first weaving a thread of triplets between the hands. The second variation is a canon, whose second voice joins the first at only one note's remove.

The theme is transferred into the tenor register for the third variation, animated by an accompaniment of running sextuplets. Only in the fourth variation is the theme obscured in any way, here in a re-harmonisation that lends an austere mood. Likewise, in the fifth and final variation the theme is blended into the fabric of chromatic passing notes. Overall, the serene atmosphere of these variations belies Schumann's deeply disturbed state at the time. On 20 June 1939, **Prokofiev's** longtime friend and collaborator the theatre director Vsevolod Meyerhold was arrested, accused of anti-governmental activities (eight months later he was shot dead). Later that year, Prokofiev was invited to write a cantata to mark Stalin's 60th birthday. Naturally, he complied, producing *Zdravitsa* (often translated as 'Hail to Stalin'). Also in 1939 he began his three so-called 'War' Sonatas (Nos. 6–8), perhaps in these 'unofficial' works expressing the depth of feeling of losing his friend and realising the precariousness of his own position.

Like the Sixth Sonata, the Seventh was given its première by Sviatoslav Richter, in Moscow on 18 January 1943. Astonishingly, he claimed to have learnt it in only four days. His own view of the piece, if overwrought, gives an impression of the depth and violence of its expression: 'Disorder and uncertainty reign. Man observes the raging of death-dealing forces, but what he lived for doesn't cease to exist. ... He is together with the rest of mankind, protesting and suffering ... He will become strong through struggle, expanding into a gigantic and life-affirming force'. The first movement begins ominously, rhythmically driven and laced with menace. We move into a distant, otherworldly realm for the more lyrical, gently unfurling second theme. The second movement makes a feature of the warm tenor register of the piano, where the first theme sits. The middle section reaches an angst-ridden climax before making an unsettling feature of a doleful tolling bell. The finale has the perpetual motion of a toccata, spiked by percussive attacks, dissonant chords and an angular 7/8 time signature. The battle is tense and brutal (certainly for the pianist) but the victory is conclusive.

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