

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 2 November 2021 7.30pm

Andreas Haefliger piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 16 in G Op. 31 No. 1 (1802)

I. Allegro vivace • II. Adagio grazioso • III. Rondo. Allegretto

Piano Sonata No. 18 in E flat Op. 31 No. 3 'Hunt' (1802)

I. Allegro • II. Scherzo. Allegretto vivace •

III. Menuetto. Moderato e grazioso • IV. Presto con fuoco

Interval

Modest Musorgsky (1839-1881)

Pictures from an Exhibition (1874)

Promenade 1 • The Gnome • Promenade 2 • The Old Castle •

Promenade 3 • Tuileries • Bydlo • Promenade 4 •

Ballet of the Unhatched Chicks • "Samuel" Goldenberg und "Schmuyle" •

Promenade 5 • The Market Place at Limoges •

Catacombs (Sepulchrum Romanum) • Cum mortuis in lingua mortua •

The Hut on Fowl's Legs (Baba-Yaga) • The Great Gate of Kiev

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As the 18th Century slipped into the 19th, everything should have been going brilliantly for **Beethoven**. He had just turned 30, and in the 1790s he had been sweeping all before him as a phenomenal pianist, a stupendous improviser and an increasingly sought-after composer; in short, he, his patrons, his publishers and his public knew his worth. But this god of Viennese music had a dark and, in career terms, potentially lethal secret. He was going deaf. By the time he was only 28, in 1798, his hearing had become impaired enough to be a problem, although he managed to keep performing until around 1814. He also didn't put himself about socially so much, which in fiercely competitive Vienna must have been hard for this intensely communicative man. One-on-one conversations were possible, and he could hear music relatively well. He also sought out generally hopeless cures, including a long summer in 1802 in Heiligenstadt, a village near Vienna, where he composed the Opus 31 set of three piano sonatas, two of which Andreas Haefliger plays this evening. During this time, Beethoven also wrote his famous 'Heiligenstadt Testament', about the suicidal despair afflicting him.

The brilliant tributes to Haydn and Mozart of the Opp. 2 and 10 sonatas and the first two piano concertos were under his belt, and the ambitious Op. 7 piano sonata of 1797 was like a trailer for greater things to come. In the period just before Op. 31, around 1801, he had been experimenting with form (Op. 26, which doesn't use classical sonata form in any of its four movements) and fantasy (the two Op. 27 sonatas), and in Op. 26 he also included a hero's funeral march, a gesture anticipating the more elaborate example in the 'Eroica'. This Symphony No. 3 was the presence looming over all his work in the early 1800s, and its première in April 1805 really upset music's appellation, as Beethoven took the 'new path' he was writing about to his publishers in 1802.

However, the opening of the first Op. 31 sonata does not immediately suggest how crucial these few years were to Beethoven's output. For one thing, the first movement is full of broad, even facetious humour in the failure of two hands to coordinate, and some furiously self-important passage-work subsequently deflated by the trite little dance for the second theme (in a key only a third away, a device Schubert was fond of and which Beethoven returned to in the 'Waldstein'). The slow movement is one of Beethoven's longest, a lengthy Italianate aria suspended over a Bellinesque, mandolin-style accompaniment, with a strange middle section that daringly marks time over repeated chords; and the third movement is an easy-going, conversational *Rondo*.

The third Op. 31 sonata opens with a question that eventually answers to the home key, and the movement as a whole has a

level of dialogue and repartee quartet players would be at home with. There would be only one more four-movement piano sonata, the 'Hammerklavier', although here Beethoven dispenses with a slow movement. Instead, there is a *Scherzo* followed by a minuet, the antique dance that the *Scherzo* increasingly replaced. Here the *Scherzo* is a muscular and trim sonata movement, while the more spacious *Menuetto* reverts to sly humour in the central Trio, when it seems the dancers don't know how to stop bowing to each other. The finale is another sonata-form movement.

Modest Musorgsky was by all accounts a fine pianist but much criticised for the way he wrote for the instrument. On the page, a lot of *Pictures from an Exhibition* looks like a piano reduction of an orchestral score, but then he was taken to task by his 'Mighty Five' contemporaries, particularly Balakirev and Rimsky-Korsakov, for his orchestrations. His output is littered with unfinished business, and his masterpiece *Boris Godunov* was much revised and editorially improved. Yet despite these perceived failings, Musorgsky expressed Russian 'soul' with unaffected depth and immediacy, while drinking deep of the Russian spirits that hastened his death from alcohol poisoning when he was only 42.

He composed *Pictures from an Exhibition* in 1874 as a tribute to his friend, the artist, architect and fellow Russian revivalist Viktor Hartmann, who had died the year before, to coincide with a memorial exhibition of Hartmann's work. Ravel's famous orchestration may have given the suite of 10 pictures interspersed with promenades a wider audience and sonic extravagance, but the piano original has irresistible force and personality. The music makes the pictures move – the writhing aggressiveness side by side with the pathos of 'The Gnome'; the repeated bass note of 'The Old Castle' digging the walls' foundations ever deeper while the troubadour's song spreads its antiquity like ivy; the painfully slow progress of 'The Ox Cart' giving voice to the remorseless hardship of rural Russian life; the huge disparity of fortune that separates "Samuel" Goldenberg und "Schmuyle" – and describes character and situation with astonishing directness. The Promenades themselves are a masterstroke. You might think that a walk round a gallery would call for a simple, common-time pace, but Musorgsky alternates bars of unusual and irregular time signatures that suggest both movement and aesthetic and emotional appreciation in freefall. The listener becomes one with the composer as he reflects with sadness, affection and nostalgia on the company and achievements of a much-loved friend, sending him off in a blaze of bell-ringing glory as the Promenade music is subsumed into 'The Great Gate of Kiev'.

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