

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 30 May 2022 7.30pm

Leif Ove Andsnes piano

Marc-André Hamelin piano



This concert is part of the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust ticket scheme, offering free tickets to those aged 8-25

John Adams (b.1947)

Hallelujah Junction (1996)

I. • II. • III.

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

6 studies in canonic form Op. 56 (1845) *trans. Claude Debussy*

*Study in Canonic Form in C • Study in Canonic Form in A minor •
Study in Canonic Form in E • Study in Canonic Form in A flat •
Study in Canonic Form in B minor • Study in Canonic Form in B*

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

En blanc et noir (1915)

I. Avec emportement • II. Lent. Sombre • III. Scherzando

Interval

Igor Stravinsky (1882-1971)

The Rite of Spring (1911-3)

*Part I: Adoration of the Earth • Introduction: Lento, tempo rubato – • The Augurs of
Spring (Dances of the Young Girls): Tempo giusto – • Game of Abduction: Presto –
Spring Rounds: Tranquillo – • Games of the Rival Clans: Molto allegro – Procession of
the Wise Elder: Lento – • Adoration of the Earth: Lento – Dance of the Earth:
Prestissimo
Part II: The Sacrifice • Introduction: Largo – Mysterious Circles of the Young Girls:
Andante con moto – • Glorification of the Chosen Victim: Vivo – Evocation of the
Ancients: Vivo – • Ritual of the Ancients: Lento – Sacrificial Dance (The Chosen
Victim)*

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American Minimalist **John Adams** has described how *Hallelujah Junction* was a title waiting for a composition. Hallelujah Junction is the truck stop on Highway 49 on the California/Nevada border, close to where Adams had a cabin in the Sierra mountains. The word 'Hallelujah' literally drives the music from the start, the bouncy three-note opening figure relating to the syllables '-le-lu-jah'. The music is often very similar for both pianists, but one is narrowly out of phase with the other, creating what Adams saw as 'the acoustical version of a digital delay'. Each new shift in style or material ingeniously cross-fades in as if seamlessly merging onto the highway from a slip road. After an interplay of stabbing chords, a gentle Romantic section begins over a simple rocking accompaniment. The final section focuses on a chordal texture that builds in grandeur, eventually erupting in a four-note figure that shouts 'Hal-le-lu-jah' (the word now complete). But at this arrival point the two pianos temporarily fall apart, like a giant malfunctioning mechanical player piano, before catching each other in sync at the very end.

Towards the end of 1844, **Robert Schumann** was suffering a physical and mental breakdown. Early the following year, having moved with his family to Dresden, Robert and his wife Clara made a study of counterpoint, including works by Bach. The Schumanns rented a pedal-board attachment – a device which, when attached to a piano, allowed a range of bass notes to be played by the feet, as on an organ. The idea was to aid their organ practice but, Clara said in her diary, 'Robert soon found a higher purpose for the instrument'.

The *6 studies in canonic form* are the first of three works Robert composed for the pedal piano between April and June 1845.

Debussy made the arrangement we hear tonight for two pianos in 1891.

In these pieces, Schumann combined the rigour of Bach's counterpoint with the fantasy of the salon character piece: not such an incongruous matching, given Schumann had declared 'most of Bach's fugues are character pieces of the highest kind'. No. 1 could be from Bach's *Two-Part Inventions*. After the yearningly lyrical second and the elegant third studies, the fourth carries a more troubled mood in its middle section. The fifth study is a spirited scherzo in the style of Mendelssohn, while the last has three canon themes, the second of which is treated like a fugue (a more advanced contrapuntal device than canon).

In the summer of 1915 Claude Debussy escaped Paris for the Normandy coastal town of Pourville. He was unsettled by the First World War, frustrated by his waning productivity and suffering from the colorectal cancer that would kill him three years later. Yet here he produced his 12 *Etudes* for solo piano, as well as *En blanc et noir* for two pianos – major works of his last phase of creativity.

Debussy said the three movements of *En blanc et noir* 'draw their colour, their emotion, simply from the piano, like the "greys" of Velázquez'. Each of the movements is prefaced with lines of French poetry, the first quotation apparently criticising those unwilling to fight in the war. The second piece was dedicated to 'Lieutenant Jacques Charlot, killed by the enemy on 3 March 1915'. This said, the first and third pieces sound unencumbered by war; the first is more carefree, even playful, the third graceful. In the second piece Debussy sets up an opposition between French and German, with echoes of the *Marseillaise* pitted against veiled quotations from the Lutheran chorale 'Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott'. The last piece of *En blanc et noir* is dedicated 'à mon ami Igor Stravinsky'.

Debussy had known **Stravinsky** since the première in Paris of *The Firebird* in 1910 and, prior to the first performance of *The Rite of Spring* (109 years ago, almost to the day) he had given a private performance with Stravinsky in the composer's piano-duet reduction – apparently without fault.

Even while he was writing *The Firebird* Stravinsky had a vision for a new ballet, of 'a solemn pagan rite: wise elders, seated in a circle, watching a young girl dance herself to death. They were sacrificing her to propitiate the god of spring.' The notorious riot that took place on opening night at the Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris was first prompted by the music of Stravinsky's *Introduction*, an impression, he later said, of the Russian spring, which 'was like the whole Earth cracking'. Then, the curtain rose to reveal what Stravinsky described as 'a group of knock-kneed and long-braided Lolitas jumping up and down'. With the dancers' angular movements, inward-pointing feet and pounding, flat-footed jumps, the choreography by Vaslav Nijinsky was equally explosive. (Only two weeks earlier, Nijinsky had danced in the première of Debussy's ballet *Jeux*, which Stravinsky had attended.)

After the opening awakening of spring, Part 1, *The Adoration of the Earth*, continues with a sequence of dances and games. The most savage music is reserved for the arrival of the Sage, who officiates over the climactic *Dance of the Earth*. Part 2, *The Sacrifice*, opens with a magical nocturnal *Introduction*. During the *Mysterious Circles of the Young Girls*, the one to be sacrificed emerges. It is this Chosen One who performs the closing *Sacrificial Dance*, rhythmically so irregular that Stravinsky could at first play it but not write it down.

The Rite of Spring is the first piece that Leif Ove Andsnes and Marc-André Hamelin performed together when they first collaborated back in 2008. They play Stravinsky's piano duet arrangement, but on two pianos, allowing them to reinstate some of the missing lines along the way.

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