

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 30 October 2023
1.00pm

Nicholas Daniel oboe
Huw Watkins piano

Joseph Bologne (1745-1799) /
Althea Talbot-Howard (b.1966)

The New Chevalier Sonata (c.1779/2020-2)
I. Andante • II. Tempo minuetto • III. Rondeau

Clara Schumann (1819-1896)

3 Romances Op. 22 (1853)
*Romance in D flat • Romance in G minor •
Romance in B flat*

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Fantasiestücke Op. 73 (1849)
*Zart und mit Ausdruck • Lebhaft, leicht •
Rasch und mit Feuer*

Michael Berkeley (b.1948)

Second Still Life (2007-8)

David Matthews (b.1943)

Montana Taylor's Blues (1992, rev. 1996)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Sonata in F K376 (1781)
*I. Allegro • II. Andante •
III. Rondeau. Allegretto grazioso*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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Joseph Bologne, Chevalier de Saint-Georges, was the son of a French planter on Guadeloupe and an African slave. Brought up in France a gentleman, he excelled in the appropriate pursuits of soldiering, fencing, riding and music. He stayed on in Paris, writing operas and violin concertos, as well as violin sonatas that he may well have played with Marie Antoinette, for he was among the musicians she would summon. In the summer of 1778 he and Mozart both lived in the residence of Madame de Montesson. Later he sided with the Revolution.

He was the first person of colour to make a reputation as a composer. Many of his concertos and sonatas were published, but not the sonata for harp and flute that **Althea Talbot-Howard** has reworked to make an appealing recital opener for oboe (or other melody instrument) and piano. The three movements, all done in ten minutes, are an *Andante* on an elaborated song theme with a middle section on a variant, a minuet that wants to be a march, and a curtailed rondo, ABA. Talbot-Howard tentatively dates the piece to when Saint-Georges could have been spending time with Mozart, or soon after.

Moving on to two composers who were more than neighbours, we might, did we not know, have difficulty determining which of the next sets of three pieces was by Clara Schumann and which by Robert. The old explanation was that Clara, so involved with her husband's music, naturally imitated his manner, but in some respects she pre-empted him. She was the first to write a piano concerto - and in A minor. By the time he got round to his 'year of song', 1840, she had composed half a dozen, and some of hers were published as his. Perhaps we should think of a joint composing personality, to which both contributed.

Neither of their contributions here was written for oboe. **Clara** had the violin in mind - specifically the violin of the young Joseph Joachim, who had just been visiting the Schumanns. All three of her romances - songs without words that fit the oboe quite as well - move into middle sections and back again with seamless artistry. The year was 1853, and this was one of Clara's last compositions. When Robert gave up, so did she.

Robert composed his *Fantasiestücke* of 1849 for clarinet, allowing violin or cello as alternatives, though his music again lends itself to a lyrical oboe. This was the second of his four sets of 'Fantasy Pieces', a title that reminded him of his favourite writers, ETA Hoffmann and Jean Paul, and that introduced no formal implications. Equally, though, the three movements might suggest a sonata without an opener, going straight into its slow movement and so to its scherzo and finale, all subtly connected by their themes' contours.

Moving on again, faster and further, we come to a pair of composers of our own era: Michael Berkeley

and David Matthews. Commissioned to write a piece for oboe and harp in 2007, **Berkeley** found a phrase coming into his head from 20 years before: a cue for the film *Captive*, based on the Patty Hearst case. 'This music', he writes, 'came from a moment of absolute but menacing tranquillity in which a very simple line is repeated in the bass of the harp as a kind of mantra, rather like the understated music of Erik Satie. Over that a melody begins to unwind. Stripped of narrative, the music loses any sense of menace and rejoices in a meditative purity. The title was a play on words: the heart beats around once per second; the film music has a second life; the piece indeed is very still and spacious; and it is my second musical still life.' The work can also, one might add, take on a second life when the harp part is transferred to piano.

David Matthews's *Montana Taylor's Blues*, which he arranged in 1996 from the fourth movement of his Oboe Concerto of 1992 (a work first performed by Nicholas Daniel), is also based on a memory, as he explains: 'Arthur "Montana" Taylor was a remarkable but little-known blues pianist who made a handful of recordings in the 1930s and 1940s. My piece is based on a piano blues of his which I heard on the radio and which has haunted me ever since. I was particularly struck by the poignant harmony which suggested that Taylor must have heard some classical music - Schubert? - during his itinerant life.'

Finally we double back to the age of the Chevalier de Saint-Georges and to his sometime housemate **Mozart**. This final piece - dating from the summer of 1781, when Mozart was just beginning his career as an independent composer in Vienna - also gives the programme a palindromic close, for it is similarly a three-movement sonata, though in Viennese rather than Parisian form. In addition, being originally a violin sonata, it maintains the theme of music magically transformed here by oboe and piano.

When the work was published, with five other violin sonatas, Mozart duly dedicated the volume to one of his piano pupils, Josepha Barbara Auernhammer. 'The Miss is a monster!', he wrote of her, '- plays delightfully though; however, she lacks the genuine fine and lilting quality of cantabile; she plucks too much.' Yet she was not too much of a monster, or too lacking in cantabile, for him not to give several concerts with her in 1781-2.

Coming in so often second with a variant of the piano's theme, the oboe has the chance to establish its difference. The development section of the opening sonata *All'egro* starts as a song for the two instruments in turn. The slow movement is in B flat, and the finale picks up the bouncing repeated notes of the first movement.

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