

# WIGMORE HALL

Monday 30 October 2023  
7.30pm

Elisabeth Brauss piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in A D664 (?1819)

*I. Allegro moderato • II. Andante • III. Allegro*

Maurice Ravel (1875-1937)

Le tombeau de Couperin (1914-7)

*I. Prélude • II. Fugue • III. Forlane •*

*IV. Rigaudon • V. Menuet • VI. Toccata*

Interval

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Carnaval Op. 9 (1834-5)

*Préambule • Pierrot • Arlequin • Valse noble •*

*Eusebius • Florestan • Coquette • Réplique • Papillons •*

*Lettres dansantes • Chiarina • Chopin • Estrella •*

*Reconnaissance • Pantalon et Colombine •*

*Valse allemande • Paganini • Aveu • Promenade •*

*Pause • Marche des Davidsbündler contre les Philistins*

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Although the evidence is not watertight, it is almost certain that the delectable A major sonata, D664, was composed during **Schubert's** two-month holiday in the mountain region of Upper Austria in the summer of 1819. A schoolfriend, Albert Stadler, later recorded that Schubert presented the manuscript of a new piano sonata to Josephine Koller, the gifted and (Schubert's words) 'very pretty' daughter of one of his hosts in the town of Steyr. We can assume that the gift to Josephine was this A major sonata, a more intimate companion to the 'Trout' Quintet which was likewise inspired by the glorious Alpine scenery around Steyr.

The 'little' A major, as it is often known, is the quietest and most compact of all Schubert's sonatas, and the one that comes closest to the traditional image of the composer as a genial, effortlessly spontaneous lyricist. The serene, songful opening sets the tone. It is typical of Schubert at his most undynamic that the skipping second theme should start in home key before casually slipping into the expected dominant, E major.

The *Andante* is one of Schubert's ravishing nocturnes, whose lulling theme initially tantalises us as to whether it is in 3/4 or 6/8 time. As elsewhere in Schubert's sonatas, the textures often suggest a string quartet or quintet. The finale is the most obviously pianistic movement of the three, a cascading waltz full sly deflections of key and such witty touches as the sudden hold-up in the middle of the second theme.

Small and slight, **Maurice Ravel** was determined to fight for France in World War One. 'Surely they'll finish up being seduced by the grace of my anatomy', he commented wryly after being rejected for military service in autumn 1914. While he was attempting to enlist he began a projected *Suite française* by composing a *Forlane* modelled on François Couperin. (The forlane began as a lively Italian folk dance before being tamed and refined at the court of Louis XIV.) As the criteria for enlistment relaxed, Ravel was pronounced fit for service in March 1915, though even then the would-be bombardier was directed to drive lorries at Verdun. Only in the summer of 1917, when he had been discharged with a heart condition, did he return to the planned suite, adding five pieces to the original *Forlane* and retitling it *Le tombeau de Couperin*.

Ravel wrote that 'The tribute is directed not so much towards the individual figure of Couperin as to the whole of French music of the 18th Century.' Filtering desolation through the styles and forms of a more elegant age, *Le tombeau de Couperin* is also a memorial to six of Ravel's friends killed in the War, and to his own mother who had died early in 1917.

Characteristically, the opening *Prélude* spices Baroque *moto perpetuo* figuration with some very un-Baroque sideslipping harmonies. The pianist Alfred Cortot described the following *Fugue*, based on a modal theme, as 'timid voices of nuns at prayer, the gentle atmosphere of the cloister, resigned peace of the spirit'.

Next come three dance movements. In the *Forlane* a lilting, bittersweet refrain alternates with episodes whose playfulness is soured by acidic harmonies. The *Rigaudon* - a dance of Provençale origin - contrasts boisterous outer sections (based on an actual Couperin dance) with a more reflective 'trio'. Elegy is more overt in the gracious *Menuet*, whose central 'musette' mingles mournful plainchant with an evocation of bagpipe drones. Finally, the wrist-breaking *Toccata* tempers its high spirits with fleeting moments of yearning tenderness.

'Schubert is still "my only Schubert", especially as he has everything in common with "my only Jean Paul". When I play Schubert I feel as if I were reading a novel of Jean Paul set to music.' Writing to his piano teacher and future father-in-law Friedrich Wieck in 1829, **Robert Schumann** identified his twin heroes, one musical, the other literary. Little read today, Jean Paul (alias Johann Paul Richter) was a purveyor of tangled, antic fantasies. The young Schumann eagerly devoured his novels, noting in his diary, 'If everyone read Jean Paul they would be better, if a lot more miserable.'

In his dance suite *Papillons* Schumann paid simultaneous tribute to his two idols. Just over a year later, in 1833, the masked ball in Jean Paul's novel *Flegeljahre* (roughly 'Years of wild oats') and Schubert's keyboard waltzes inspired a new suite of dances originally titled *Fasching: Schwänke auf vier Noten* ('Carnival: Jests on four notes'). Schumann was an inveterate lover of codes and ciphers; and his original title for what became *Carnaval* conceals the four notes on which the whole suite is built, in two different configurations, A-S-C-H, and S-C-H-A (in German H = B natural, and S, or Es, = E flat). The latter evokes Schumann's own name, while Asch was the home town of Schumann's fiancée Ernestine von Fricken, a fellow-pupil of Wieck's. When he completed *Carnaval* early in 1835 he may have intended to dedicate it to Ernestine. But his affections cooled. On New Year's Day 1836 Schumann broke off the engagement. By then he and Clara Wieck had declared their love.

'A higher kind of *Papillons*' was Schumann's own summary of the 21 dances that make up *Carnaval*. Assorted characters, including Clara (in the impassioned No. 11, *Chiarina*) and Ernestine (No. 13, *Estrella*) flit in and out amid the whirl of the *commedia dell'arte* masked ball. *Chopin* (No. 12) and *Paganini* (in the flashy No. 17) are vividly portrayed, as are the two sides of Schumann's own fictional persona, the dreamy *Eusebius* (No. 5) and the extrovert *Florestan* (No. 6). The opening *Préambule* returns in the final number, where the *Davidsbündler* (Schumann and his band of fellow-artists) march against the Philistines, duly mocked in the lumbering *Grossvateranz* which Schumann had quoted in *Papillons*.

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