

WIGMORE HALL

Thursday 3 October 2024
1.00pm

Clare Hammond piano

Clara Schumann (1819-1896)

3 Romances Op. 21 (1853-5)

Romance in A minor • Romance in F • Romance in G minor

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Piano Sonata in D K311 (1777)

I. Allegro con spirito • II. Andante con espressione • III. Rondeau. Allegro

Gabriel Fauré (1845-1924)

Nocturne No. 12 in E minor Op. 107 (1915)

Nocturne No. 8 in D flat Op. 84 No. 8 (1902)

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 14 in C sharp minor Op. 27 No. 2
'Moonlight' (1801)

I. Adagio sostenuto • II. Allegretto • III. Presto agitato

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Etude in A flat Op. 25 No. 1 (1835-7)

Etude in F minor Op. 25 No. 2 (1835-7)

Etude in A minor Op. 25 No. 11 (1835-7)

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For **Clara Schumann** (1819-1896) to be celebrated as one of the greatest pianists of Europe was a remarkable achievement, not least because she was a woman in a ferociously masculine world, one who bore eight children – often performing in an advanced state of pregnancy, which disturbed 19th-century proprieties – and who was the main breadwinner, underpinning her husband Robert Schumann's career. As a composer, however, Clara Schumann was not so confident: 'I once believed I had a creative talent, but I have given this idea up. A woman must not wish to compose.' The 20-year-old Brahms had come into the Schumanns' lives in the autumn of 1853, when Robert's behaviour was becoming increasingly erratic, leading to his suicide attempt early in 1854 and his entering the sanatorium where he stayed until his death in 1856, with Clara forbidden to visit him until the very end.

Her 3 *Romances* Op. 21 were among the last works she wrote, beginning them at the age of 34. She presented the first in A minor to Brahms as a birthday present in 1855, when their relationship was becoming increasingly close. The outer sections are a melancholy reality surrounding a central episode in F major that muses on what might have been. F major is also the key of the second *Romance*, marked to be played 'sehr zart' (very tenderly), that borrows its tune from her husband's *Wiegenliedchen* ('Little lullaby') Op. 124 No. 6. The third is a haunted Chopinesque *agitato* in G minor.

Mozart's vigorous Sonata in D K311 was written under the Mannheim influence – the orchestra was famous for its virtuosity and flamboyant, expressive style, with the sky-rocketing 'Mannheim crescendo' still a recognisable feature. It is strange, though, that such an ebullient work should have been published (in 1778) in the group of three that also includes the Sonata in A minor K310, one of Mozart's most personal and anguished works. It had been a difficult time for the 21-year-old virtuoso/composer still trying to make a name for himself. He had not secured employment in Mannheim, he had fallen unsuccessfully in love with Aloysia Weber, a cousin of the composer Carl Maria von Weber (Mozart went on to marry her sister Constanze), and his mother died while they were on tour in Paris in the summer of 1778.

He had written K311 at the end of 1777, before K310, from the stay in Paris around the time of his mother's death. Its key, D major, for Mozart has orchestral and festive connotations. It also has a concerto-like character, even with a 'solo' cadenza in the jaunty rondo finale. In the opening expansive *Allegro con spirito* he plays games with form that his audience would have appreciated, and the brash orchestral effects are substantially muted in the lovely *Andante con espressione* middle movement, in which Mozart makes poise and subtlety seem almost too easy.

There follow two of **Fauré's** elusive *Nocturnes*. Apart from the sublime setting of the *Requiem*, Fauré's reputation could rest equally well on his songs, his large-scale chamber music, or his significant output for piano. Placing the piano at the centre of Parisian music, he used the same genres as Chopin – nocturne, impromptu, barcarolle, prelude – but more for publishing expediency's sake, with none of his pieces carrying a suggestive title. By all accounts, he was a very fine pianist, but the role of concert pianist was not for this least flamboyant of artists. The *Nocturne No. 12 in E minor* has passages of intense passion, floated on Fauré's genius for slippery modulations taking us fleetingly to distant harmonies, the quiet opening theme just about held together by a shifting barcarolle rhythm – this *Nocturne* was originally intended as one of his barcarolles, but its sense of anxiety and failing light definitely have something of the night about it. With its rippling arpeggios and a blissful melodic line rising and sinking through both hands, the short *Nocturne No. 8* is close to Chopin in rhapsodic mode.

Continuing the thread of Romantic nocturnal imagery **Beethoven's** 'Moonlight' Sonata was an early anticipation of impressionism. Its nickname came from the poet Ludwig Rellstab and has stuck. The first movement's even triplets supported by long bass notes, relieved by a scrap of a horn refrain, create their own special melancholy, and Beethoven's description of it as a 'sonata quasi una fantasia' marked a radical new direction and loosening of classical stays. The *Allegretto* is marked as neither a minuet nor scherzo, although it is in triple time and has the familiar format with a contrasting central trio. The stormy finale is more to do with fierce rhythm than with melody and is cast in tight, classically correct sonata form, whereas the opening *Adagio sostenuto* refers, seemingly in passing, to the form's traditional harmonic scheme.

Chopin, who has been a presence felt by two of the composers in this recital, comes into his own to close it with three *Etudes* from the Op. 25 set of 12. The first, with the nickname 'Aeolian Harp' apparently conferred on it by Robert Schumann, has a serene melody with just a hint more substance than the supporting weightless arpeggios. The second gives each hand conflicting triple rhythms, the right hand's liberated chromaticism supported, sort of, by the left's stronger harmonic purpose. The set's penultimate *Étude No. 11* is sometimes called 'Winter Wind' but perhaps 'Danse macabre' would also be appropriate. It opens with a couple of bars of a solemn chorale that set the piece's melodic and rhythmic agenda, with a torrent of notes completing the sense of high drama.

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