

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 4 April 2022 1.00pm

Alexander Gadjiev piano



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Fantasie in C Op. 17 (1836-8)

I. Durchaus phantastisch und leidenschaftlich vorzutragen - Im Legendenton • II. Mässig. Durchaus energisch • III. Langsam getragen. Durchweg leise zu halten

Sergey Prokofiev (1891-1953)

Piano Sonata No. 7 in B flat Op. 83 (1939-42)

I. Allegro inquieto • II. Andante caloroso • III. Precipitato

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In 1830, the 20-year-old **Schumann** abandoned his legal studies to devote himself to a life in music. His piano teacher – Friedrich Wieck – was father to a gifted daughter, Clara, although it would be another five years before she and Robert fell in love. Wieck objected to the match, and it would not be until 1840 that the couple finally married. The *Fantasie in C* emerges from this tumultuous period and attests both to the intensity of the young composer's emotional experience, and to the richness of his artistic inspiration. Its first movement – originally titled 'Ruins' – dates from the summer of 1836, not long after Wieck had taken Clara away from Leipzig in an attempt to frustrate her infatuation with Robert. Schumann later described it to his wife as 'the most passionate thing I have yet written – a profound lament for you.' But there is more to the *Fantasie* than autobiographical confession. By that autumn, he had added two more movements ('Trophies' and 'Palms'), hoping to publish what he now referred to as a 'Grand Sonata' in order to raise funds for a memorial to Beethoven. When it appeared in print in 1839 – having been turned down by two publishers before being accepted by Breitkopf & Härtel – the *Fantasie* had lost its original titles and now carried a dedication to Liszt. Liszt returned the compliment by dedicating his own Sonata in B minor to Schumann in 1853.

Inspired by and dedicated to two of the 19th Century's greatest pianists, the *Fantasie* is a virtuosic showpiece, closer to a rhapsody than a conventional sonata. Liszt, in fact, never played it in public, and Clara Schumann began to perform it only a decade after her husband's death in 1856. The *Fantasie* is also lyrical and introspective – especially its finale, marked 'solemn and slow, to be played quietly throughout.' A clue to its structure can be found in an epigraph from the poet and philosopher, Friedrich Schlegel:

Through all the notes
Of earth's colourful dream,
One note resounds, played
For he who listens secretly.

Early reviewers were baffled by Schumann's inventive approach to musical form. As one critic wrote: 'Eccentricity, arbitrariness, lack of definition, and disregard for boundaries could hardly be taken any further: just as the striving for originality results, every now and then, in the extravagant and the unnatural, so does a much-appreciated sense of effusiveness turn occasionally into bombast and complete incomprehensibility.' Now, though, the *Fantasie* can be seen as the purest expression of German Romanticism, with its rejection of classical proportion and its cult of the imagination, spontaneity and the figure of the inspired and unruly genius.

Like Schumann's *Fantasie*, **Prokofiev's** Piano Sonata No. 7 emerged from a time of turmoil – this time military, diplomatic and political. It was first conceived – along with the sixth and eighth sonatas – in 1939. Nazi Germany and Stalin's Soviet Union were then uneasy allies, bound together through the Molotov–Ribbentrop

Pact. By the time that Prokofiev completed the sonata in 1942, however, Hitler's armies had invaded the Soviet Union. When Sviatoslav Richter gave its première in Moscow on 19 January 1943, fierce fighting still raged for control of the city of Stalingrad. Shortly after, on 2 February, the Germans surrendered. This background has meant that Prokofiev's sixth, seventh, and eighth sonatas have often been referred to as his 'war' sonatas, and the seventh is sometimes even dubbed the 'Stalingrad', in an echo of Shostakovich's Symphony No. 7, the 'Leningrad'.

Richter was one of those who believed that Shostakovich's symphony and Prokofiev's sonata should be heard as complementary works. As he later recalled of the sonata:

With this work, we are brutally plunged into the anxiously threatening atmosphere of a world that has lost its balance. Chaos and uncertainty reign. We see murderous forces unleashed. But this does not mean that what we lived by before thereby ceases to exist. We continue to feel and to love. Now the full range of human emotions bursts forth. In the tremendous struggle that this involves, we find the strength to affirm the irrepressible life force.

There is plenty to justify such an interpretation. The mood of the sonata is often harsh and militaristic, and its harmonies can be unsettling and dissonant, yet its overarching narrative is also heroic and resolute. Unlike Schumann's iconoclastic approach to form (two fast movements followed by a slow one), Prokofiev pays homage to the conventions of the classical sonata structure, as if celebrating the survival of tradition in the face of unspeakable barbarity.

The opening movement displays many of the established features of sonata form, with starkly contrasting first and second subjects. Its tempo marking – *Allegro inquieto* – aptly captures the atmosphere of the time. The long, ruminating second movement offers intimate respite, if only temporarily. It shares its home key – E major – with 'Wehmut' ('Sadness'), the ninth song of Schumann's *Liederkreis* Op. 39, to words by Eichendorff. That song's opening words – 'Ich kann wohl manchmal singen, als ob ich fröhlich sei' ('I can sometimes sing as though I were happy') – surely voice the predicament of a composer during wartime. The finale is one of Prokofiev's characteristic toccatas, full of nervy, percussive ostinatos. It has become something of a showpiece, and when played very fast and very loud, it can sound hollow and bombastic – a terrifying, destructive automaton. When played, though, with due attention to Prokofiev's scrupulously marked dynamics and with space between its cascading notes, it can embody our universal human hopes, we as stumble – breathlessly, defiantly, precipitously – towards a painful victory won at great cost.

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