

WIGMORE HALL 125

Monday 4 May 2026
7.30pm

Francesco Piemontesi piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Fantasy Sonata in G D894 (1826)

I. Molto moderato e cantabile • II. Andante •

III. Menuetto. Allegro moderato – Trio • IV. Allegretto

Interval

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Années de pèlerinage, première année, Suisse S160 (1848-55)

I. Chapelle de Guillaume Tell • II. Au lac de Wallenstadt •

III. Pastorale • IV. Au bord d'une source • V. Orage •

VI. Vallée d'Obermann • VII. Eglogue • VIII. Le mal du pays • IX. Les cloches de Genève



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Schubert's two major instrumental works of 1826, the String Quartet D887 and the Sonata D894, share the same key and the same sense of infinite spaciousness. Yet in mood they could hardly be more different. While the quartet is restless and troubled, the Sonata, despite occasional moments of disturbance, is lyrically serene. There is no truly fast, or indeed truly slow, music in the entire work. It was a favourite of Robert Schumann, who deemed it the most perfect of all Schubert's sonatas.

Dedicated to Schubert's staunchest friend Joseph von Spaun, the G major Sonata was advertised on the title page as 'Fantasy, or Sonata'. With the genre of the piano sonata in decline, the publisher evidently calculated that 'Fantasy' would prove more alluring to prospective purchasers.

The first movement seems to hover between dream and dance – another reason, perhaps, why the publisher styled it 'Fantasy'. The opening theme, drifting into the remote key of B major and back again (shades here of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto), exudes a hypnotic tranquillity. Not for the only time in Schubert's piano works, the textures suggest a string quintet with two cellos. The second theme, minimally contrasted with the first, is a spiritualised waltz that Schubert proceeds to embellish with playful figuration high in the keyboard.

The central development immediately plunges to G minor for a dramatic reinterpretation of the main theme, with truculent imitations between the hands, then further heightens the tension in two cataclysmic *fff* climaxes. Schubert's piano music so often evokes other sound worlds. Here he treats the keyboard as a surrogate orchestra, replete with brass and timpani.

In 1827 the reviewer of the Leipzig *Allgemeine Musikalische Zeitung* dubbed the opening of the *Andante* 'a beautiful and gentle song, which is also beautifully written in four parts throughout'. The delicately ornamented melody distantly evokes an 18th-century minuet; and as that early review hinted, it could easily be transcribed for string quartet. Schubert contrasts this with a strongly rhythmic episode that veers between *fortissimo* agitation and *pianissimo* pathos, with bittersweet major-minor equivocations.

Although marked *Menuetto*, the third movement, with its obsessive repeated-note patterns, is more a countrified *Ländler*. The main section, in B minor, contrasts a stomping repeated-note motif with a soft, luminous response, while the Trio slips from minor to major for a Schubertian vision of bucolic innocence.

The minuet's repeated-note pattern recurs in the main theme of the rondo finale, whose musette drones and slow-moving harmonies evoke an idealised rusticity. As the movement unfolds it develops the bustle and swagger of an *écossaise*. Songful contrast comes courtesy of a plaintive melody in C minor, which migrates to the bass, *fortissimo*, against leaping right-hand figuration before emerging in a limpid C major – a magical, *echt*-Schubertian transformation. True to the intimate spirit of the whole sonata, the movement ends *pianissimo*, with a dream-echo of the main theme.

Early in 1833 the 21-year-old **Franz Liszt** was introduced to Countess Marie d'Agoult by mutual friends in Paris.

Instant attraction quickly blossomed into an illicit love affair between the composer and the Countess, locked in a marriage of convenience to a much older man. As Marie later wrote, 'The voice of the young enchanter opened out before me a whole infinity, into which my thoughts were plunged and lost.' In 1835, after Marie became pregnant, she and Liszt eloped, scandalously, to Switzerland.

Over the next 16 months, while living in Geneva, Liszt composed a series of mainly short pieces evoking Swiss landscape and history. They originally appeared in 1842 under the title *Album d'un voyageur* and were then revised between 1848 and 1854 for inclusion the first book of *Années de pèlerinage* (Liszt was an inveterate reviser).

The (mainly) idyllic surroundings of Liszt's Swiss sojourn inspired some of his most atmospheric painting-in-sound. The opening 'Chapelle de Guillaume Tell', with its evocations of alphorn calls echoing across the valleys, is a portrait of the Swiss national hero, by turns solemn and (in the music evoking Tell and his freedom fighters) vehement. The flamboyant keyboard lion emerges in 'Orage', a spectacular depiction of a mountain storm. This was the only one of the Swiss pieces that Liszt completely recomposed when he revised the collection for publication in 1855.

In contrast with this barnstorming virtuosity is a vein of delicate poetry in pieces like the barcarolle 'Au lac de Wallenstadt', the shimmering 'Au bord d'une source', and 'Les cloches de Genève' with its magically tolling carillons. Marie d'Agoult described 'Au lac de Wallenstadt', written on the shores of the lake, as 'a melancholy harmony imitating the sigh of the waves and the cadence of the oars which I have never been able to hear without weeping'. Two of the Swiss vignettes, 'Eglogue' and the nostalgically yearning 'Le mal du pays', have a folklike freshness and simplicity.

By far the longest and most ambitious piece in the collection is 'Vallée d'Obermann', a 15-minute tone poem inspired by an episode in Étienne Pivert de Senancour's 1804 epistolary novel *Obermann*. The novel's eponymous hero is a solitary, Byronic figure seeking a mystical union with nature in his Swiss Alpine refuge. Liszt was a passionate admirer of Byron and inscribed his score with a quotation from *Child Harold*.

'Vallée d'Obermann' opens with a desolate 'motto' in the piano bass that will undergo continual thematic transformation, in the manner of Liszt's orchestral tone poems and Piano Sonata. The motto, in a chromatically ambiguous E minor, encapsulates the composer's description of Obermann as 'the monochord of the relentless solitude of human pain'. The music moves through a series of dissolving chromatic harmonies – astonishingly bold for the mid-1830s – via a cataclysmic tempest (prefigured by distant, *misterioso* rumblings), to a radiant E major apotheosis. After a euphoric, quasi-orchestral climax, *fff*, the music suddenly breaks off; and the last two bars are broodingly ambiguous, with no final resolution. Has Obermann's epiphany proved to be merely an illusion?

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