

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 5 November 2022
1.00pm

Two Pianos, Four Hands

Benjamin Frith piano
Heidi Rolfe piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Fantasia in F minor K608 (1791)

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

6 pieces in canonic form Op. 56 (1845) *arranged by
Claude Debussy*

Study in canonic form in C
Study in canonic form in A minor
Study in canonic form in E
Study in canonic form in A flat
Study in canonic form in B minor
Study in canonic form in B

Erik Satie (1866-1925)

3 morceaux en forme de poire (1903)

Manière de commencement
Prolongation du même
Morceau I. Lentement
Morceau II. Enlevé
Morceau III. Brutal
En plus
Redite

Emmanuel Chabrier (1841-1894)

3 valse romantiques (1880-3)

Très vite et impétueux
Mouvement modéré de valse
Animé

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For many years, the most advanced pieces of modern technology that people were likely to encounter were clocks and organs. Both are linked to **Mozart's** Fantasia in F minor K608, one of three pieces he wrote for mechanical organ in 1790 and 1791. They were most likely commissioned by Count Joseph Deym, who ran an art gallery and waxwork museum in Vienna and who wanted ceremonial works to celebrate the memory of Field Marshall Ernst Gideon von Laudon, one of the stalwarts of the Habsburg military. The piece that Mozart composed was, however, too good to be sequestered in such a cabinet of curiosities, and it survives in a version that he later made for piano duet. For a piece with such peculiar, even unpropitious origins, it is a minor masterpiece. It opens with a dramatic flourish redolent of a French Baroque overture, before embarking on a masterly fugue that shows just how carefully Mozart had studied the works of JS Bach. A lyrical andante hints at the world of the opera house, before a yet more complicated iteration of the fugue returns. If the mechanical organ inspired Mozart to compose music of complex ingenuity, Mozart's title of Fantasia reminds us of the importance of the human imagination.

Schumann's *6 pieces in canonic form* are born of a similar interaction between heart and mind. They were written in Dresden in 1845, where Schumann had moved with his wife, Clara, after a serious bout of depression. The couple devoted themselves to the study of fugue, consulting works by Bach, as well as Cherubini's influential 1835 treatise on counterpoint. Clara wrote a set of preludes and fugues on subjects by Bach and her husband, and Schumann himself underwent what he described as a veritable 'passion for fugues.' Keen to get inside Bach's musical thinking, he rented a pedal piano so that he could better understand the basics of the organ, and the *6 Pieces* are the product of his domestic explorations on that instrument. Schumann is often seen as the archetypal Romantic composer, and it is certainly true that fantasy and imagination were central to his artistic constitution. Yet what is perhaps most touching about these works is the sense of pleasure and satisfaction that their composer clearly derived from subjecting himself to the discipline of Bach's example. At the same time, they are full of the kind of genteel lyricism and wistful interiority that was so common in Biedermeier Germany, and which one encounters in the works of Mendelssohn, that other great disciple of Bach.

The pedal piano is rarely encountered these days, so Schumann's pieces for the instrument are seldom heard in their original form. But their artistic qualities were too good to be allowed to languish unheard for long, and they are nowadays mainly heard in the version for two pianos made by Debussy in 1891. Debussy is so often thought of – wrongly – as an 'impressionist,' yet he was a serious and thoughtful

scholar who had made a careful study of the works of other composers. In addition to his transcription of Schumann, there are important arrangements for two pianos of works by Saint-Saëns and Wagner, and equally important editions of Bach, Chopin and Rameau.

Innocent listeners who applaud after the third of **Satie's** *3 morceaux en forme de poire* are in for a surprise (and risk the ire of their neighbours...). There are, in fact, seven pieces in Satie's suite, which he fashioned in 1903 out of a number of earlier compositions. Such numerological confusion is typical of Satie's wayward sense of humour, as is the title itself. 'Poire' can mean 'dimwit' or 'blockhead' as well as 'pear' in French, and Satie was surely sending up his own meagre musical education (he had been famed as 'the laziest student at the Conservatoire' in the 1880s and made a living in the bohemian world of the cabaret and the café-chantant). He may also have been poking fun at Debussy, who had reputedly criticised his poor command of musical form. The pieces were not published until 1911, when a younger generation of composers – led by Ravel – suddenly 'rediscovered' Satie's eccentric genius and claimed him as a source of rebellious inspiration. Together with Florent Schmitt, Ravel gave what may have been their première in Paris in June 1912.

The *3 valse romantiques* that **Chabrier** composed in 1880 and 1883 also have an illustrious performance history. Chabrier himself premièred them with André Messager in Paris in 1883, and Messager would later play them with Poulenc, who went on to record them with Marcelle Meyer in 1955. The list goes on. Debussy took the score with him to Rome in 1885, where he performed them with Paul Vidal to none other than Liszt. Chabrier would later coach Ravel in them too. The esteem in which Chabrier was held by his peers is all the more remarkable when we recall that he was not initially destined for a career in music. After studies in law, he went to work in the French interior ministry, where he laboured until 1880. That year, having heard Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* in Munich, he resolved to devote himself fully to music, which he did until his death in 1894. Unlike Satie, however, Chabrier's lack of formal training never hindered his professionalism. Whilst working as a civil servant, he assiduously took lessons in performance and composition, and although he never became an 'academic' composer, he was revered by his contemporaries and by later generations of French composers. The title of the *3 valse romantiques* might suggest the world of the salon, yet even a cursory inspection of the score reminds us that Chabrier was famed as the equal of Liszt and Anton Rubinstein.

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