

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 5 November 2022
7.30pm

Two Pianos, Four Hands

Benjamin Frith piano
Heidi Rolfe piano

Benjamin Britten (1913-1976)

Mazurka elegiaca Op. 23 No. 2 (1941)

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Divertissement à la hongroise in G minor D818 (1824)

I. Andante • II. Marcia. Andante con moto • III. Allegretto

Interval

Gustav Holst (1874-1934)

The Planets Op. 32 (1914-6)

I. Mars, the Bringer of War

II. Venus, the Bringer of Peace

III. Mercury, the Winged Messenger

IV. Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity

V. Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age

VI. Uranus, the Magician

VII. Neptune, the Mystic

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In the summer of 1941, **Britten** was visiting California. He had been resident in the United States since May 1939 with his partner, the tenor Peter Pears, and both men were taking full advantage of the artistic and personal opportunities that life in America afforded them. Their sojourn also offered an escape from the war that was then raging in Europe, and to which, as conscientious objectors, they were opposed. Yet the war made itself felt in other ways, if still only indirectly. In June 1941, Paderewski died in New York. Famed as one of Europe's greatest piano virtuosos, Paderewski had served as prime minister of the newly independent Polish Republic for ten months in 1919. He returned to public life two decades later, when Poland was once again divided, this time by Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union. To honour Paderewski's memory, Britten's publisher, Ralph Hawkes, planned a volume of solo piano pieces by leading European composers, including Bartók, Martin and Milhaud. Hawkes cabled Britten in California, but his original request for 'two piano pieces' was transmitted as one for a 'two piano piece.'

This typographical accident gave rise to Britten's *Mazurka elegiaca*, which was premièred by the husband-and-wife duo of Ethel Bartlett and Rae Robertson in New York on 9 December 1941. A review the next day in *The New York Times* rightly praised the work as 'a tender and fitting tribute, for it had dignity and a touch of nobility.' Its title alludes, of course, to Chopin and the Polish folk dance he made so famous, and its dedication to Paderewski honoured him not just as a musician, but as a symbol of Polish nationhood and of his country's proud resistance to military aggression. Not long after the *Mazurka elegiaca* was performed, Britten and Pears decided to return home to England.

Ethel Bartlett and Rae Robertson did much to promote the two-piano repertoire in the 20th Century. In the 19th, it was **Schubert** who truly elevated the piano duet to the status enjoyed by other instrumental combinations. In 1818, he spent the summer near the Hungarian town of Zseliz (now Želiezovce in Slovakia), where he had been engaged as music tutor to the daughters of Count Esterházy of Galanta. The works for piano duet that he began to write reflect the kind of domestic music making that would have been common in such a setting, although initially he seems to have been rather unimpressed by what he found there. As he complained to a friend, 'At Zseliz I am obliged to rely wholly on myself. I have to be composer, author, audience and heaven knows what else. Not a soul here has any feeling for true art.'

When he returned to Zseliz six years later, he seems to have felt rather differently. He promptly fell in love with the younger of Esterházy's daughters, and the works for piano duet that date from this year suggest that both of his pupils were more

accomplished performers than many aristocratic amateurs would have been at the time. In addition to an entire sonata (the 'Grand Duo'), a sequence of variations, and sets of popular dances and marches, he composed his *Divertissement à la hongroise*. Its title is somewhat misleading. Cast in three substantial movements and lasting more than half an hour in performance, it shows Schubert at his most expansive and even symphonic (he had attended the first performance of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony in Vienna in May 1824). As for the Hungarian flavour of the work, then it was certainly part of the vogue for Magyar music that swept Austria and Germany in the 19th Century. Whether the *Divertissement's* themes are authentically Hungarian or the invention of its composer is the subject of scholarly debate. One contemporary recalled that Schubert heard one of its melodies 'from the lips of a maid standing by the range in the Esterházy kitchen.'

Holst's *The Planets* is so famous as a virtuoso orchestral showpiece that hearing it played on two pianos can come as something of a shock. In fact, the work was originally scored for two pianos, with the composer relying on his friends and colleagues, Vally Lasker and Nora Day, to give life to his initial musical ideas. Holst was then employed at St Paul's Girls' School and he had to fit composition around his busy teaching schedule. Having drafted his new work at the piano (a rather lovely Broadwood that he kept in a specially soundproofed office), he would entrust it to Lasker and Day, before setting about the orchestration. *Mars, the Bringer of War* dates from 1914, followed by *Venus, the Bringer of Peace* and *Jupiter, the Bringer of Jollity*. 1915 saw the composition of *Saturn, the Bringer of Old Age*, *Uranus, the Magician*, and *Neptune, the Mystic*. *Mercury, the Winged Messenger* was completed in 1916, although Holst eventually placed it third in the sequence. The orchestration was finished by 1917.

Britten's *Mazurka elegiaca* was written in California to honour a Polish pianist and statesman. Schubert's *Divertissement* captures the sounds of a Hungarian summer. Appropriately enough for a composer with Baltic, German and Scandinavian ancestry, *The Planets* also escape the orbit of Holst's Englishness. He first planned to call his suite *7 Pieces for Large Orchestra* – a nod, perhaps, to Schoenberg's *5 Orchesterstücke*, which he heard in London in 1914. That year, he also discovered the music of Stravinsky, and both *The Planets* (at least its opening movement, *Mars*) and *The Rite of Spring* seem to capture the mood of impending war. Indeed, both works exist in parallel versions for two pianos, which allow us to get beneath their lush orchestral surfaces and sense the muscle and sinew beneath.

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