

WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 6 April 2022 7.30pm

Igor Levit piano

Igor Levit appears by arrangement with Classic Concerts Management GmbH

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Ronald Stevenson (1928-2015) Passacaglia on DSCH (1960-2)

Pars Prima


*Sonata Allegro • Waltz in rondo form • Episode 1: Presto •
Suite: Prelude – Sarabande – Jig – Sarabande – Minuet – Jig – Gavotte – Polonaise •
Pibroch – Lament for the Children • Episode 2: Arabesque Variations • Nocturne*

Pars Altera

*Reverie-Fantasy • Fanfare • Forebodings: Alarm • Glimpse of a War-Vision •
Variations on 'Peace, Bread And The Land' • Symphonic March •
Episode 3: Volante Scherzoso • Fandango • Pedal-point: 'To emergent Africa' •
Central Episode: Etudes • Variations in C minor*

Pars Tertia

*Adagio: Tribute to Bach • Triple Fugue over Ground Bass: Subject 1 Andamento –
Subject 2 Bach – Subject 3 Dies Irae • Final variations on a theme derived from
ground (Adagissimo barocco)*

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Composers are often conscious of the musical imagery of their names. Rachmaninov was fond of signing himself off with a rattled-out *tom-tommy-tom*, the very rhythm of his name. I suspect that Debussy dropped the Achille of Achille-Claude Debussy so that his monogram, engraved on the title-pages of his original editions and on his gravestone, could be CD rather than ACD; Debussy's simplest and yet most significant contribution to musical language was to establish the major second (C-D, for example) as a concord. Edward Elgar dropped his middle William partly in order to be able to refer to himself as The Octave (EE). George Dyson signed himself off with a G and a D in the treble clef.

Johann Sebastian Bach was able to go further, thanks to the German names for notes. The note we call B, they call H, and the note we call B flat, they call B, so Bach could spell out his own name in notes a semitone apart.

Dmitry Shostakovich worked a similar trick – specious at first sight, because DSCH (S is Es – E flat) seems to stop rather lamely once the notes in his name run out. But in Cyrillic script, SCH is a single character, like an upside-down M, so the notes are simply his initials, and not specious at all. Shostakovich used the device in his own music, so it's not surprising that composers who have wished to honour the great Russian have used them too – Schnittke, Denisov and Danny Elfman, for instance.

No homage to Shostakovich outdoes the extraordinary *Passacaglia on DSCH* by **Ronald Stevenson**, which lasts for well over an hour and just might be the longest continuous piece of piano music ever composed.

Stevenson thought that each age found its expression in a particular way of writing music – the Age of Reason in counterpoint, the Age of Enlightenment in sonata form, and the Age of Anxiety (if I may take WH Auden slightly out of historical order) in the 12-note serial techniques of Arnold Schoenberg. Stevenson constructs his theme by playing DSCH twice, and then playing it backwards, in different rhythmic guises. Then he writes a movement in sonata form, followed by a *Waltz in rondo form*, whose interludes allow DSCH to leave the stage from time to time. After an *Episode* comes an entire Baroque suite.

Then comes a tribute to the homeland of Stevenson's father (and his own adopted country) in a *Pibroch – Lament for the Children*, in full bagpipe style. After another *Episode* – of arabesques – he nods towards Chopin in a *Nocturne* to conclude the *Pars Primo*. This opening 20 minutes or so has explored some of the more tonal ways of interpreting DSCH.

The *Pars Altera* begins with a *Reverie-Fantasy* that is explicitly polytonal, in that each hand has a different key

signature. The pianist resorts to the inside of the piano, which was cutting-edge in 1963, though not so cutting-edge as the splendid note: 'in radio performances the < > [dynamic signs] can be obtained electronically'. But Stevenson is too interested in explicit, note-y counterpoint to stay long in the interior pianistic world that George Crumb made his own, and we return to the keyboard for fanfares and alarums of war, culminating in a set of variations on Lenin's 1917 slogan 'Peace, Bread And The Land'. Stevenson writes a chromatic that fits the rhythm of the words (in English), and he presents this theme in a round or canon, DSCH meanwhile continuing beneath. A *Symphonic March* and a *Fandango* lead us to an extraordinary episode called '*To emergent Africa*' that takes us back inside the piano for urgent rhythms. The ghosts of Chopin and Beethoven appear in the ferocious *Central Episode: Etudes*, and in the C minor *Variations* that follow it.

The *Pars Tertia* opens with an *Adagio*, a tribute to Bach. Then comes what Stevenson describes as a triple fugue over a ground bass. 'Ground Bass' is just the English term for passacaglia, but its use here is slightly misleading, since DSCH by no means sticks in the bass. The passacaglia has visited the Ages of Reason and of Enlightenment. Now comes Anxiety – the fugue subject contains all 12 notes, and the harmonic combinations become appropriately dissonant. BACH is introduced, noted in Gothic script in the score ('Shostakovich' is simultaneously noted in Cyrillic). The 12-note fugue joins in. Now comes the *Dies Irae*, the medieval plainsong theme from the Requiem Mass, 'in memory of the six million' killed by the Nazis. The ancient haunting tune is marked with the wonderful word '*Ponderosissimo*', which scarcely requires translation, with the added exhortation '*con paura primevale*' ('with primal fear'). It's stamped out in single notes in extreme bass, marked to be played just with the third finger. In the end, the 12-note fugue is added in with everything else. The last ten minutes of the work are *Final variations on theme derived from ground (Adagissimo barocco)*. A final performing direction is '*con un senso di spazio quasi gagarinesco*', reminding us that the Soviet astronaut Yuri Gagarin was the first man in space, in 1961.

This monstrous *Passacaglia* tells us in itself most of what we need to know about Ronald Stevenson, the socialist pacifist who went to jail rather than do National Service, the South African professor who was a thorn in the side of the repressive regime (his *Passacaglia* was the subject of a police raid), the proud Scot, the great teacher, and the admirer of Busoni, whose *Fantasia Contrappuntistica* inspired this *Passacaglia*.

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