

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 6 May 2023
7.30pm

Igor Levit piano
Alexei Volodin piano

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Allegretto in C minor D915 (1827)

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Arabeske in C Op. 18 (1838-9)

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Sonata in D for 2 pianos K448 (1781)

*I. Allegro con spirito • II. Andante •
III. Allegro molto*

Interval

Claude Debussy (1862-1918)

En blanc et noir (1915)

*I. Avec emportement • II. Lent. Sombre •
III. Scherzando*

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943)

Suite No. 1 Op. 5 'Fantaisie-tableaux' (1893)

*I. Barcarolle • II. La nuit ... L'amour •
III. Les larmes • IV. Pâques*

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Two-piano duos occupy a fascinating place in the psychology of performance. It's worth considering their particular nature. A solo piano recital is so familiar that we forget that music is essentially a communal activity. (Solo harp or guitar recitals are less familiar; solo violin recitals are a special case, though one amply represented at Wigmore Hall!) Folksongs, in origin at least, are often for a single unaccompanied voice: but there are many – sea shanties, for instance – with choral refrains; and folk dancing, even solo dancing, requires an interaction with the musician who plays the dance. Turning to more classic forms of music, plainsong demands the anonymity of many voices, choral music requires a choir, and as for chamber music I leave aside the question of whether orchestral music is perhaps really music for a solo conductor, but there the orchestra is at least as necessary as the fiddler in the country dance!

Two or more musicians playing for their own entertainment can be each other's audience, if only in the way that tennis partners might bite their lips as yet another ball is declared 'out'. But in the many ages before public solo performance was usual – up to the later 18th Century – keyboard music was often designed for solitary perusal. The solemnly beautiful pavaues of Byrd, the suites of Couperin and Froberger, the immense systematic works of Bach, all were perfect for the solitary player, who could stop and try things differently, whilst still building up a coherent picture of the piece in his mind, as with a novel or poem, where one can re-read and savour a beautiful sentence. Such leisurely enquiries in the presence of an audience have their limitations: stopping to try things differently would simply seem incompetent.

Two performers or more must relate to each other before they relate to their audience. In so doing, they provide the audience with a model for their own reactions to the music. If they can see give-and-take, call and response, concerted decision-making, on the platform, it is borne in upon them that listening to music is a very active exercise.

Pianists are used to being part of a greater whole, of course – violin sonatas, songs, piano trios. But the two-piano repertoire presents a different, geminous situation, one that has long exerted its fascination upon composers. Johann Christian Bach seems to have been the first to compose for two pianos without orchestra, publishing a sonata in 1778. Unfortunately, the publisher, baffled by the new genre, forgot to include the second instrument's part, and so evaluation of this pioneering work is difficult.

Piano recital audiences are famous for their appreciation of the subtleties and difficulties of the instrument's technical management, and the two-piano genre gives extra scope for this. With the pianos laid out in the usual way, visual cues are limited, and a state of almost telepathic communication is required

between the two players. Even in piano duets, where visibility is good, playing chords together is notoriously difficult, thanks to the different ways pianists have of getting the keys down. With two pianos, it's the most difficult thing of all.

The master of multiple pianos was Percy Grainger, whose basic unit was three pianos, but who was happy to welcome six or nine. Because pianists find it hard to look at conductors (needing, Grainger suggests, to look at their hands) he recommends the addition of beat-counters, one to each piano, whispering in the pianists' ears. The picture begins to resemble that wonderful Samuel Barber song – 'In the evening, as far as the eye can see, herds of black pianos'.

Tonight's concert begins with a couple of solo ranging shots, in C minor and major respectively. **Schubert** wrote his *Allegretto* on 26 April 1827; **Schumann** composed his *Arabeske* in Vienna, round about Christmastime 1838.

Mozart's sonata was composed for a private concert in Vienna with his pupil Josepha Barbara Auernhammer, on 23 November 1781. The great Mozart scholar Alfred Einstein described it as the high point of *concertante* style.

Debussy composed *En blanc et noir* during the Great War, in a bitterly anti-German mood – the same mood that produced his excoriating song 'Christmas carol for the children who no longer have houses'. Each movement is prefaced by an epigraph. The first is a quotation from Gounod's *Roméo et Juliette*: 'he who does not dance is a disgrace'. It's been suggested that Debussy, dying of cancer, was regretting his poor contribution to the war effort. The second is from François Villon's 15th-century 'Ballad against the enemies of France' and quotes the Lutheran hymn-tune 'Ein feste Burg ist unser Gott' as a symbol of German aggression, while a hint of the Marseillaise is deliberately obscured – *pas en dehors*, writes Debussy: 'not out in the open.' The third movement quotes another mediaeval poet, Charles d'Orleans, whose poetry Debussy had also set in wonderful songs: 'Winter, you're a villain'.

In 1893, the 20-year old **Rachmaninov** enjoyed the première of his opera *Aleko*. Tchaikovsky was present, and asked if Rachmaninov 'would object' to it sharing the bill with his own new short opera, *Iolanta*. Rachmaninov was thrilled, of course. He spent the summer on the country estate of a lady who was reminded by Sergey of her own dead son, and who consequently spoiled him. Here, Op. 5 was written. In November, Tchaikovsky died, and the Suite was dedicated to him, and performed that winter by Rachmaninov and Pavel Pabst, a favourite pianist of Tchaikovsky's.

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