

# WIGMORE HALL 125

Wednesday 7 January 2026  
7.30pm

Kirill Gerstein piano

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Tre sonetti del Petrarca S158 (1843-6)

*Benedetto sia'l giorno • Pace non trovo •  
l' vidi in terra angelici costumi*

Après une lecture du Dante from *Années de pèlerinage, deuxième  
année, Italie* S161 (1838-61)

*Interval*

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Scherzo in E flat minor Op. 4 (1851)

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor Op. 5 (1853)

*I. Allegro maestoso • II. Andante espressivo •  
III. Scherzo. Allegro energico – Trio • IV. Intermezzo.  
Andante molto • V. Finale. Allegro moderato ma rubato*



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‘Suddenly there appeared the most extraordinary person I had ever seen. Tall, extremely thin, pale, with large, sea-green eyes flashing with sudden brilliance like waves glinting in the sun, strong features shot through with suffering, hesitant in his movements and seeming to glide rather than walk, seemingly preoccupied yet at the same time restless, like a ghost waiting for the clock to strike and summon him back to the shades.’ Thus the Countess Marie d’Agoult, who bore Liszt’s three children. George Eliot was just as impressed, later on, in a different way. She wrote: ‘Liszt is the first really inspired man I ever saw. His face might serve as a model for a St. John in its sweetness when he is in repose, but seated at the piano he is as grand as one of Michelangelo’s prophets. He is a glorious creature in every way – a bright genius, with a tender, loving nature, and a face in which this combination is perfectly expressed.’

That this remarkable man’s music is not constantly in our ears, is partly explained by a remark from his grandson, Siegfried Wagner (the Siegfried of the *Idyll* rather than the *Ring*): ‘A man who is a musician and nothing but a musician can establish no relationship to Liszt’s works. One has to bring to them a certain poetic empathy.’

The second book of the *Années de Pèlerinage* (1848, polished versions of pieces inspired by his travels in the 1830s) is Liszt’s survey of the whole world of Italian art. He starts with Raphael (*Sposalizio*), and then turns to Michelangelo as sculptor and poet in *Il penseroso*. Tonight’s selection is the second half of the collection – first, piano solo transcriptions of Liszt’s own settings of Petrarch – ‘Blessed be the day I found you’, ‘I find no peace’, and ‘I saw angelic virtue on the earth’. Some of Liszt’s many versions and editions, both songs and piano transcriptions, reverse the order of the first two.

In March 1838, sipping a coffee in the Piazza San Marco, Liszt glanced over someone’s shoulder to read the headlines of a German newspaper, to discover that Budapest had suffered a catastrophic flood. Liszt returned to his Hungarian homeland for the first time since he left it in 1823, pausing in Vienna on the way to raise money. It was in Vienna in 1839 that he performed the first version of *Après une lecture de Dante*, inspired not by reading Dante, but by a poem of the same name by Victor Hugo! The final version published in 1856 deploys thematic ideas with familiar meanings – wailing chromatics, diabolical tritones – with a richly harmonised melody that leaves no doubt as to Liszt’s stylistic influence on the music of his son-in-law, Wagner.

The violinist Joseph Joachim had already worked closely with both Mendelssohn and Liszt before, at the age of 22, he met Robert Schumann at the Lower Rhine Music Festival in May 1853. Schumann was immensely impressed with him, and even more impressed when, on 30 September, Joachim introduced his newly

discovered protégé, the 20-year-old **Johannes Brahms**. Schumann hatched a secret plan to write, with his student Albert Dietrich and with Brahms, a composite violin sonata for Joachim. The violinist arrived in Dusseldorf to play in one of Schumann’s orchestral concerts on 27 October, and the next day he was presented with the Sonata, which he sight-read with Clara, Schumann’s wife, at the piano. Brahms contributed the penultimate movement, a vigorous *Scherzo*, a style he had already made his own in the *Scherzo* in E flat minor for solo piano of 1851 – the piece with which he introduced himself to Liszt.

It is interesting that Schumann’s immediate effect on Brahms was to produce a sonata. Brahms wrote some remarkable duo sonatas throughout his life – three for violin, two for cello, culminating in the two late sonatas for clarinet and piano. But his three solo piano sonatas were all composed in 1852 or ‘53 – he never returned to the solo sonata. It has been suggested that this was due to the ghost of Beethoven, and that was certainly the case with Brahms’s attempts to write a symphony. But in the absence of an explanation from Brahms himself, Schumann’s remarks on the solo piano sonata may cast some light.

‘It is remarkable that those who write sonatas are generally unknown men; and it is also strange that the older composers, yet living amongst us, who grew up in the season of bloom of the sonata, and even among whom only Cramer and Moscheles are distinguished, cultivate this form the least. ... For young artists there exists no better form in which they can please the higher class of critics: therefore most sonatas of this kind can be regarded as studies in form; they are seldom the result of an irresistible inward impulse. There is, doubtless, a reason why the older composers no longer write sonatas; we leave others to guess what this reason may be’.

Perhaps Brahms was thus embarrassed out of the solo piano sonata by his mentor. In passing, it’s worth mentioning that Sir Hubert Parry’s two piano sonatas are also very early works.

The *Andante* of Op. 5 is headed by a verse from the poet Sternau:

The shade of evening falls:  
The tender moonbeams bath  
Two wedded hearts,  
In blissful love embraced.

The fourth movement, entitled ‘*Rückblick*’ (Backward Glance) recalls the *Andante*’s melody in the minor key, with a funereal drum-beat. As E Markham Lee exclaimed: ‘Here is romanticism indeed! This clue to the feelings is rare enough in Brahms.’

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