

WIGMORE HALL

Monday 8 April 2024
1.00pm

Nicolas Altstaedt cello
Dénes Várjon piano

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Fantasiestücke Op. 73 (1849)

*Zart und mit Ausdruck • Lebhaft, leicht •
Rasch und mit Feuer*

Jörg Widmann (b.1973)

5 Albumblätter arranged for cello and piano (2022) *world
première of arrangement*

Co-commissioned by Wigmore Hall and Alte Oper Frankfurt
*Adagio ohne Allegro • Liebelei • Lied im
Volkston • Bossanova für Clara und Robert •
Mit Humor*

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Cello Sonata No. 1 in E minor Op. 38 (1862-5)

*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Allegretto quasi
menuetto • III. Allegro*



This concert is being broadcast on BBC Radio 3



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Schumann originally scored his *Fantasiestücke* Op. 73 for clarinet and piano while simultaneously providing alternative arrangements for violin or cello. In his choice of clarinet Schumann was typically innovative, only Weber among major composers having previously composed for clarinet and piano. The three pieces are melodically interrelated, creating a unity underlined by the absence of breaks between them, and by their respective keys – A minor moving into A major; A major; the third, again A major. Sometimes Schumann composed at obsessive speed, the two days required for these pieces (in February 1849) being a prime example. Fantasy was an essential element of his musical personality – not restricted to compositions with that specific title, such as the eight *Fantasiestücke* for piano Op. 12 or the *Phantasie* for violin and orchestra Op. 131.

The first piece of the Op. 73 group – marked *Zart und mit Ausdruck* ('tender or delicate, with expression') – is gently melancholy, the piano's triplet figuration maintained almost throughout. The middle section blossoms into arpeggio-like writing, with contrary motion between clarinet and piano. Belatedly the minor key resolves into A major. The more animated central piece has as its main theme a piano phrase from bar three of the opening movement. In the F major middle section the two instruments exchange phrases based on a little ascending figure. The final piece is urgent and impetuous, with a slightly calmer middle section. A substantial coda accommodates two increases of tempo and a recall of the opening phrase of the central movement, before crescendo-ing to the exuberant final bars.

Widmann originally scored his *5 Albumblätter* of 2022 for cello and orchestra, but while composing these pieces he already envisaged – and even began to work on – a cello and piano version. In the Queen Elisabeth Competition, held in Brussels, the finalists are expected to study two unpublished pieces and in 2022 Jörg Widmann was commissioned to compose one of these required works. The *5 Albumblätter* represent his homage to Schumann, a composer he has long admired and who has often inspired his own music. He writes: 'The most obvious reference is probably in the opening piece, *Adagio ohne Allegro*, which alludes to a Schumann composition that is particularly close to my heart, the *Adagio und Allegro* for cello and piano.' Of the second piece, characterised by obsessive rhythm and subsequently referencing the second of Schumann's *Märchenbilder*, Widmann writes 'The piece becomes freer and freer until it resembles a folk song, before returning playfully to the rapid staccato beat'. In the following adagio, which the composer memorably describes as resembling 'a slowed-down melancholic yodel', a descending minor third recurs. The fourth piece is a delightful bossanova for Robert and his wife Clara, then the last of these *Albumblätter*, drawing upon the first of Schumann's *5 Stücke im*

Volkston, is marked *Mit Humor* – 'humor' meaning good humour rather than wit.

Brahms began the first of his two cello sonatas in 1862 but did not complete the finale until three years later. Scholars have debated whether he originally planned to include an adagio slow movement but then discarded it. The opening movement – longer than the other two put together – begins with a noble but melancholy theme low on the cello. The passionate second subject in the dominant minor is written in close imitation between the instruments. A third theme in B major of soothing character closes the exposition. In the development Brahms exploits both his first two themes in turn, crescendo-ing to a sustained passage of *fortissimo*, before the cello returns to the third theme over a dream-like accompaniment of triplet arpeggios. The recapitulation begins with the opening theme enhanced by a newly expressive accompaniment, but then proceeds with minimal changes, and the movement ends peacefully.

The A minor central movement is in the manner of a minuet but is also a kind of intermezzo, gentle, charming and wistful. In his symphonies and chamber works Brahms quite often turned to this relatively relaxed kind of inner movement, probably influenced by Schumann, who had shown this same preference in works such as his Third Symphony. The contrasting trio section, after a hesitant beginning, is characterised by flowing quavers almost throughout.

In the finale, a hybrid combination of fugue and sonata form, Brahms's main subject is almost identical to the theme of *Contrapunctus 13* from Bach's *Art of Fugue*. This acknowledgement of one of Brahms's idols is matched, in his choice of fugal writing, by the influence of Beethoven, whose last cello sonata ends with a fugue. The fugal opening of this finale represents the robust first subject but the second theme is more expansive. After a development section in which Brahms primarily concentrates on the triplets of the fugal section, the recapitulation, approached by the customary dominant pedal, remains in B minor for the return of the second subject, before eventually settling in the home key of E minor. A slight broadening leads to the vigorous coda marked *più presto*.

Brahms's typically thick-textured piano writing in his duo sonatas often creates a potential balance problem of which this finale is a classic example, presenting an especially daunting challenge to the cello in its lower register. However, a sense of struggle is often an essential characteristic of Brahms's music. Clearly the conquering of the balance problem adds to the exhilarating nature of this muscular finale.

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