

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 8 December 2024
7.30pm

Nikolai Lugansky piano

Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Song without Words in E Op. 19b No. 1 (1830)
Song without Words in A flat Op. 38 No. 6 (1836)
Song without Words in C Op. 67 No. 4
Song without Words in E Op. 67 No. 6
Song without Words in F sharp minor Op. 67 No. 2
Song without Words in D Op. 85 No. 4 (1845)

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-1849)

Ballade No. 3 in A flat Op. 47 (1841)
Nocturne in D flat Op. 27 No. 2 (1835)
Ballade No. 4 in F minor Op. 52 (1842)

Interval

Richard Wagner (1813-1883)

4 Scenes from *Götterdämmerung* transcribed by
Nikolai Lugansky
*Siegfried's Funeral March • Siegfried's Death •
Siegfried and the Rhinemaidens • Höre mit Sinn*

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Isolde Liebestod from *Tristan und Isolde* S447 (1867)
based on Richard Wagner

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We hear the piano in three 19th-century settings tonight: at home with amateur musicians playing new music by great composers; on stage with a famous virtuoso; finally, somewhere between the two as keyboard transcriptions made orchestral scores accessible to music lovers at home and also offered virtuosi an opportunity to display astonishing feats of pianistic tone-painting and dramatic evocation.

Music publishing in the mid-19th century reflected these three milieux, and the most successful of composers were those who could straddle them all - none more so than **Mendelssohn**. His 'Songs Without Words' have often provoked disdain from music critics, perhaps because of the very accessibility that made them so popular. Yet – besides the charms they so obviously possess – Mendelssohn's invention of them in the 1830s was very much of the moment. Music was changing: fewer symphonies or sonatas were composed. Instead, composers invented their own, shorter genres (including the three in tonight's first half), which drew on song or dance and prioritised lyrical appeal and fantasy to serve poetic expression. This chimed with the prevalent philosophical belief in music as the ultimate art form, able to communicate feeling powerfully to the listener without words or images. This in turn contributed to the notion that music could be 'about' something which many found uncomfortable. Both Mendelssohn and **Chopin** hinted at poetic inspirations while deftly side-stepping pressure to go further. 'For that is the rub in such a "Lied ohne Worte", that each one conceives its own words and sense, and allows its own interpretation...it depends on one's own perception...Therefore, discover for yourself the verses so that you will understand the meaning...' [Mendelssohn's letter to Josephine von Miller, 1833].

Still, he could not prevent audiences and publishers inventing and applying titles. Op. 38 No. 6 acquired Duetto for the fair reason that melodies in the tenor and soprano range answer each other. 'Spinnerlied' (Op.67, No.4) owes its nickname to the restless figuration – a distant relation to Schubert's 'Gretchen am Spinnrade'. Does that add to the enjoyment? Perhaps it is better to enjoy these pieces as Mendelssohn advised.

If Mendelssohn's 'Songs without Words' are amateur music par excellence, Chopin's Ballades and Nocturnes were conceived for one professional virtuoso: Chopin himself. His recital programmes commonly consisted of short-ish (10-12 minutes max) pieces, arranged carefully much as a curator might hang pictures. He exploited contrast and continuity to show each one off to advantage, not unlike Lugansky in tonight's first half. In one Glasgow recital he had two bursts of serious pianistic fireworks (a selection of Etudes and then his *Grand Valse Brillante*) frame a gentle Nocturne and Berceuse. Nicely, that arrangement is echoed tonight with a Nocturne between two Ballades. Like Mendelssohn's Op. 38 No. 6, this Nocturne is a duet without words, but for two sopranos perhaps, supported by gorgeous harmonies in

the left-hand arpeggios. One important difference to the ballades is that Chopin sustains a single, ecstatic mood throughout the piece.

Whatever the details of its composition, a piece called 'Nocturne' might fairly be expected to be beautiful, restful, reflective and dreamy. What does 'Ballade' suggest? The word is ambiguous. It once meant a specific type of medieval song, but later could be a song to dance to or – quite differently – a song to tell a heroic and emotional tale. Both dance and the heroics find their place in Chopin's 4 Ballades, which belong to broadly the same period as Mendelssohn's wordless songs (1831-1843). He is said to have been inspired to write them by poet, Adam Mickiewicz (1798-1855), but like Mendelssohn, he declined to elaborate on specifics so they could perhaps be considered action-less dramas, or dance-less ballets. Tonight's pair are beautifully contrasted: No. 3 a bittersweet sibling to No. 4, a true Romantic epic. Both embrace passages of stirring gravitas alongside lilting dances, but in No. 3, the balance favours dance. The arresting opening mood yields (after two minutes) to a charmingly off-beat waltz which in turn finds its own dark and intense moments. Ballade No. 4 – the longest and most demanding of them all – is reflective and sombre right from its stark, unison opening. When they come, its moments of pianistic brilliance are spectacular flashes of lightning.

After the interval, Lugansky follows in the footsteps of such pianists as Liszt, Busoni, Godowsky and Gould in seeking to render **Wagner's** huge 90-musician-orchestra with just 10 fingers – a crazy undertaking? At one time, of course, there was no other way for most music lovers to hear Wagner at all as few places had the resource to stage his work. Now that anyone can find the Ring Cycle for free on YouTube, transcription satisfies a pair of different musical urges.

First, to play the music you love: having adored Wagner since he was a teenager, Lugansky faced the cruel truth that Wagner's own piano output is slim so created his own. Second, to explore what the piano and pianist can achieve, expressively. Godowsky asserted that 'The piano as a medium for expression is a whole world by itself'. Wagner's own father-in-law, Liszt believed this profoundly, and Lugansky closes with his matchless version of the 'Liebestod' from *Tristan und Isolde*. He himself tackled the *Götterdämmerung* scenes you hear tonight more than 20 years ago, using the full orchestral score and a vocal score which gave him great freedom to elaborate and respond to the moment. From *Götterdämmerung* he picks four scenes that span the doomed love story of Brünnhilde and Siegfried from its ecstatic height to their and the world's doom. Each episode has its distinctive orchestral treasures, and all but the first are thrillingly dominated by cohorts of strings, brass and timpani: quite a challenge for those 10 fingers!

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