

# WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 9 March 2022 7.30pm

Leon McCawley piano

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Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)

Piano Sonata in E minor HXVI/34 (c.1770s)

*I. Presto • II. Adagio • III. Finale. Molto vivace*

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Rondo in A minor K511 (1787)

Piano Sonata in D K576 (1789)

*I. Allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegretto*

Interval

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Piano Sonata in A D959 (1828)

*I. Allegro • II. Andantino • III. Scherzo. Allegro vivace •  
IV. Rondo. Allegretto*

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By the 1780s **Haydn** was incontestably Europe's most famous composer. Publishers fell over each other to acquire the rights to his latest quartets and symphonies, while the less scrupulous among them (and the epithet often went with the job) marketed other composers' works under Haydn's name. With lax copyright laws, works frequently appeared without the composer's knowledge. One such case was a set of three Haydn sonatas issued in London in 1783, from which the publisher, typically, made all the profit.

Probably composed in the late 1770s, the most vivid of the set is the Sonata in E minor, No. 34. The powerful opening *Presto*, in galloping 6/8 metre, worries obsessively at its main theme, cast as a laconic dialogue between bass and treble. The coda rises to a splenetic climax before the initial phrase vanishes enigmatically into thin air. Only the major-keyed second theme, sounded in dulcet thirds and sixths, offers momentary relaxation.

The central *Adagio*, lavishly embellished with Rococo arabesques, leads via a passage of quasi-operatic recitative into the *Finale*, whose folklike theme lives up to its *innocentemente* marking. This is a typically Haydnesque fusion of rondo and variations, with a recurring E major episode closely related to the main, E minor, theme.

With a Classical artist it is always dangerous to hear music as autobiography. But we do know that **Mozart** suffered a brief illness in the early spring of 1787, and that his popularity as a composer-virtuoso was on the wane. So perhaps it is not being over-fanciful to link the depressive, almost morbid tone of the A minor Rondo, K511, dated 11 March 1787, to Mozart's physical and emotional state.

With its yearning appoggiaturas, unquiet chromaticism and rhapsodic ornamentation, the siciliano-style main theme sounds more prophetic of Chopin than anything else in Mozart. Even the two assuaging episodes are increasingly tainted by chromatic harmonies. When the main theme returns for the last time, Mozart intensifies its melancholy fatalism with desultory counterpoint and a final fragmentation of the texture.

Mozart's final keyboard sonata, the Sonata in D K576, dated July 1789, originated in the trip to Berlin he made to boost his flagging fortunes that spring. The Prussian King Friedrich Wilhelm II apparently commissioned the composer to write a set of six 'light' or 'easy' sonatas for his daughter Friederike. In the event Mozart completed only this one sonata, in a style anything but 'easy'.

Like the near-contemporary String Quintet K593, the D major Sonata marries a light, convivial tone with dazzling contrapuntal craft. The opening theme, in rollicking 'hunting' style, lends itself naturally to canonic imitation; a hint Mozart quickly takes up, then pursues further when the same tune launches the second group of themes.

The *Adagio* contrasts an expressive, richly ornamented melody in A major with a forlorn central episode in F sharp minor. One

inspired touch is the way the coda alludes to the episode's rhythm and texture, but not its exact melodic outline.

Like the first movement, the rondo finale develops its breezy, popular-style tunes in athletic polyphonic textures, now with an added virtuosity. Belying Mozart's original intention to write an 'easy' sonata for Princess Friederike, this is perhaps the most technically demanding keyboard movement he ever wrote. Did the princess ever play it, one wonders?

By the summer of 1828 **Schubert's** often precarious health had deteriorated to the point where he was plagued by headaches and attacks of nausea. Yet he not only kept up a more-or-less active social life but continued to work at a feverish rate. In September he completed four masterpieces that crowned his work as a composer of instrumental music: the C major String Quintet, and three sonatas, in C minor (D958), A (D959), and B flat (D960). We should be wary, though, of hearing these works as a protracted farewell. While Schubert realised that he was unlikely to make old bones, he had no inkling until his final illness that the autumn of 1828 would be his last. There is pathos, anguish and a sense of evanescence in the sonatas, but also exuberance, humour and a sheer zest for life.

The C minor and A major sonatas seem to confirm the notion that Schubert was determined to establish himself as Beethoven's successor after the master's death in March 1827. He modelled the finale of the Sonata in A D959 on the last movement of Beethoven's Sonata in G Op. 31 No. 1, right down to the fragmentation of the theme in the coda and the whirlwind send-off. But the contrasts between the composers are revealing. Where Beethoven is terse, Schubert is expansive in his lyricism. In an unprecedented ploy, his finale ends with an overt allusion to the work's opening bars - the kind of unifying cyclic device later favoured by Liszt, Schumann *et al.*

In the sonata's first movement, the orchestrally-inspired opening theme generates some trenchant motivic argument *à la* Beethoven. Yet Schubert's leisurely time-scale and sensuous harmonic shifts are entirely his own; and there is nothing Beethovenian about the central development, where Schubert uses a whimsical melodic fragment as the basis for calm lyric sequences.

The *Andantino* opens as a melancholy barcarolle, harmonised first in F sharp minor and then, with bittersweet effect, in A major. After what sounds like a cadenza, the keyboard then embarks on a seismic fantasia that pushes the music to the brink of incoherence. Alfred Brendel has described this terrifying episode as the musical equivalent of a nervous breakdown: a world away from the familiar, *gemütlich* Schubert, but a searing expression of an equally crucial aspect of his creative persona and, dare one say, of the despair that intermittently raged within the man himself.

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