

WIGMORE HALL

Sunday 9 October 2022
6.00pm

50th Anniversary Gala of the Santander International Piano Competition

Barry Douglas piano

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827) Piano Sonata No. 23 in F minor Op. 57 'Appassionata' (1804-5)
*I. Allegro assai • II. Andante con moto •
III. Allegro ma non troppo - Presto*

Interval

Cuarteto Casals

Abel Tomàs violin
Vera Martínez-Mehner violin
Jonathan Brown viola
Arnau Tomàs cello

Jaeden Izik-Dzurko piano

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897) Piano Quintet in F minor Op. 34 (1862 rev. 1864)
*I. Allegro non troppo • II. Andante, un poco adagio •
III. Scherzo. Allegro • IV. Finale. Poco sostenuto - Allegro
non troppo*

Interval

Jaeden Izik-Dzurko piano

Isaac Albéniz (1860-1909) El Albaicín from *Iberia (Book 3)* (1907)

Sergey Rachmaninov (1873-1943) Piano Sonata No. 1 in D minor Op. 28 (1907)
I. Allegro moderato • II. Lento • III. Allegro molto

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The **Beethoven** 'Appassionata' Sonata is a tortured and unpredictable stream of emotion, quite unlike anything that he (or anyone) had written up to that point. It was composed around the same time as the famous Heiligenstadt Testament: the unsent suicide note that was addressed to his brother, discovered in a drawer at his death, in which he grapples with the loss of his hearing ('the one sense that should be stronger in me than anyone else') and resolves finally to go on writing music.

This turmoil though is created through painstaking craft. Almost the whole of the first movement is derived from the material of the first few bars: the downward plunging arpeggio that comes back up to a trill, and the staccato motif that also opens the fifth symphony. There is no repetition of the exposition; we are on a direct journey that goes through the sharpest turns of mood and harmony, veering between huge explosions and quiet obsessive repeating notes. The music clears in a second movement that is a theme and variations on an impressively stagnant chorale in D flat major, almost devoid of motion or melody, with subtly changing inner voices that leaves its tune up to interpretation. This rises through the ranks of the keyboard in three variations, until its final twinkling incarnation is interrupted by a slash of diminished harmony that begins the final movement.

The harmony is relentlessly hammered before being hushed into an unrelenting running pattern. The whole thing builds with this idea, and when there is nowhere else to go, a manic, rustic dance crashes in. As his hearing declined, Beethoven's piano was said to look like a bird's nest with all of its broken strings, and this passage would have been a strong contributor. The original theme comes back, crisscrossing and fractal in the final thundering coda. Many of Beethoven's works trace a path of darkness to light, but this is not one of them.

The F minor piano quintet of **Brahms** began life as a string quintet in 1862 which was highly praised by his musical and personal confidant, Clara Schumann. The great violinist and musical partner for much of Brahms's string writing, Joseph Joachim, also began in equal praise, but after performing the work several times, became unsure of its scoring and effect, criticism which prompted Brahms to rescore the entire work as a duo for two pianos before destroying the score of the string quintet version. Clara Schumann gave several performances of this new model but now believed that much of the beauty of the music was lost in the harshness of two pianos. On her advice, Brahms created a third and final version of the piece, now combining the two versions in balance as a piano quintet.

The music owes much to the Beethoven 'Appassionata' with its quiet F minor opening, interrupted with rapid *fortissimo* runs in the whole ensemble, before presenting a strong version of the main melody. The songful slow movement is a nod to

another predecessor, the Schubert quintet, where a melody surrounded by texture is presented in thirds, as happens in a particularly special passage in the middle of the movement by the strings in turns.

The *Scherzo*, in C minor, is based on a march-like rhythm that occupies most of the material, with a related trio in flowing major. The *Finale* begins with a slow and harmonically unstable opening, which builds until we arrive at the main theme which is a strong contrast in its simplicity. A heavy coda brings the work to a big finish.

El Albaicín is from the third book of **Albéniz's Iberia** suite, the monumental selection of musical pieces based on the music and places of Spain. This particular selection is about the ancient quarter of Granada, Albéniz's favourite city settled against the 11th-century walls. The music alternates a rhythmic interplay of guitar imitation between the two hands, and a chant melody, eventually combining both in big virtuosic figures.

In 1906, **Rachmaninov** moved to the quieter city of Dresden to take a break from concertising and focus on composition. The first piano sonata is a product of this period, along with the second symphony and fragments of an uncompleted opera. Although the subsequent second sonata has long been favoured by composers and audiences, it is filled with all the best of Rachmaninov: big melodies, harmonies, and his special brand of virtuosic pianism.

Originally conceived as a programmatic work on the story of Faust, the idea was dropped, although many elements of the story remain: the tragic character of D minor; the swirling uncertainty of Dr Faust; and a Lisztian approach to the handling of small ideas that recur throughout movements and in themes. The despair of the large first movement eventually begins to involve religious plainchant in its middle episode, and adds hints of redemption and hope in a grand climax.

The second movement begins in a much calmer mood. The music is lyrical against moving figurations that build it into an intense and passionate statement, eventually leading to a cadenza, before calming to a return of the opening melody. Shimmering trills against a duet of two voices tenderly bring the movement to a close. The third movement begins with furious, stormy music that characterises the especially Faustian struggle of good and evil. There is heroism, and there is darkness, all played out in huge concerto-esque writing. Rachmaninov was obsessive about death, and this piece is one of many which includes his favourite theme: the *dies irae*. We hear it first as a short reference in staccato bass notes, but a valiant major section submerges it for a while until it resurfaces in terrifying power in the finale in a struggle that goes straight to the very end.

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