WIGMORE HALL

Wednesday 2 October 2024
1.00pm

Can Çakmur piano

Franz Liszt (1811-1886)	Ballade No. 2 S171 (1853)
Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)	3 Klavierstücke Op. 11 (1909) *Mässig • Mässige Achtel • Bewegt*
Franz Schubert (1797-1828)	3 Klavierstücke D946 (1828) *Klavierstück in E flat minor • Klavierstück in E flat • Klavierstück in C*
Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)	Chaconne from Partita No. 2 in D minor for solo violin BWV1004 (1720) *arranged by Johannes Brahms*

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'Suddenly there appeared the most extraordinary person I had ever seen. Tall, extremely thin, pale, with large, sea-gtreen 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 wrote the Countess Marie d'Agoult, who bore **Liszt**'s three children. George Eliot was just as impressed: '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'.

Liszt's second *Ballade* dates from 1853. Taking his cue from Chopin, the inventor of the ballade, Liszt (despite himself inventing the overtly meaningful symphonic poem) was in this instance reticent about what the music might be 'about'.

Schoenberg wrote the *3 Klavierstücke* in 1909, a fruitful period before he contracted that 'composer's block' that could only be swept away by his celebrated 'method of composing with twelve notes'. In 1909 he also composed the *5 Pieces for Orchestra* somewhat improbably premièred in London three years later by Henry Wood, who encouraged his players with the words, 'Stick to it, gentlemen! This is nothing to what you'll have to play in 25 years' time.'

The pieces evolve from a method of Brahms that Schoenberg was later to call 'developing variation'. The first piece employs the effect of 'silently depressed' keys which allow their strings to vibrate in sympathy with notes played elsewhere on the keyboard. The effect was invented in 1883 by Jules Burgmein (the pen-name of the music publisher Giulio Ricordi, the begetter of Verdi's last two operas, and father-figure to Puccini) in a luxurious album of multi-national serenades for piano duet dedicated to Liszt, garnished with coloured woodcuts and prefatory poems in French.

Ferrucio Busoni made a fascinating 'concert version' of the second piece, amplifying gestures through repetition at different registers and elaborating the piano writing – a splendid lesson, had Schoenberg been performer enough to take advantage of it. The third piece treads new ground, far from Brahms.

On 26 March 1828, **Schubert** gave his public concert – just the one, in his whole lifetime. It dropped like a very small pebble into the Viennese musical pool, completely eclipsed by the enormous splash made by Paganini that same week. The receipts were soon spent, and Schubert, his health affected by the early industrial fug of Vienna, was so hard-up that he had to refuse offers from well-wishers of almost free holidays in the country. That May he composed these three piano pieces, which were not published till 40 years later, edited by Brahms. In September, in an attempt to find cleaner air, he went to stay with his brother Ferdinand in his new apartment in a developing suburb. He was expecting to die from syphilis: but because the well in Ferdinand's courtyard was not dug deep enough, syphilis found itself in a race with typhoid. On 19 November, at the age of 31, Schubert died.

The pieces are carefully contrasted. The first, tempestuous in E flat minor, moves to a consoling B major for a slower middle section. The second, in a serene E flat major, seems to be winding to a conclusion when it suddenly takes a quiet plunge into A flat minor (a key even more extreme than E flat minor), and then to B minor, before resuming A flat minor again. The eventual brief return of E flat major scarcely resolves the unsettling undercurrents. The third piece, in C major, is taut, nervous and unexpected in its pacing, until it relaxes into a very broad waltz in D flat, very similar to the finale of the B flat Piano Trio that he wrote about this time.

Bach's Second Partita for solo violin seems at first the most modest of the whole set of sonatas and partitas for unaccompanied violin – the *Gigue* comes to its conclusion after about a quarter of an hour. Bach's first audiences, doubtless unprovided with printed programmes, had no way of knowing they were only half-way through, and their wonder must have grown and grown as the magnificent *Chaconne* unwound itself majestically. Both Mendelssohn and Schumann wrote piano accompaniments to Bach's violin part, which must have eased the path for many an over-tasked fiddler. Brahms arranged the actual violin part to be played on the piano, thoughtfully limiting himself to the left hand alone, in order to match the 'limitations' of an unaccompanied violin. Ernst Pauer and Joachim Raff both arranged the *Chaconne* at about the same time as Brahms, but for two-handed piano. It's particularly interesting, in these arrangements and the many, many others, to see how the possibility of filling in the chords comes to grief where Bach has cleverly used his very limitations to imply a harmony that cannot be pinned down to actual notes. My favourite spot for this is the falling, sighing figures just after the first set of upward-rushing scales. But such amplifications are at least partly justified by Agricola, Bach's student from 1738 till 1741, who reports that Bach 'often played [the solo violin pieces] on the clavichord, adding as much in the nature of harmony as he found necessary'. By general consent, Busoni's piano version of the 1890s is the classic, but perhaps Brahms's version captures more of Bach's spirit.