

WIGMORE HALL

Tuesday 4 January 2022 7.30pm

Elisabeth Leonskaja piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791) Fantasia in C minor K475 (1785)

Piano Sonata in C minor K457 (1784)

I. Molto allegro • II. Adagio • III. Allegro assai

Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)

Suite for piano Op. 25 (1921-3)

*I. Präludium • II. Gavotte - Musette • III. Intermezzo •
IV. Menuett. Trio • V. Gigue*

Interval

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor Op. 5 (1853)

*I. Allegro maestoso • II. Andante espressivo •
III. Scherzo. Allegro energico • IV. Intermezzo. Andante molto •
V. Finale. Allegro moderato ma rubato*

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'Tradition is the handing down of the flame, not the worshipping of ashes.' Many have been credited with these words, though a dubious attribution to Mahler seems particularly apt, given how tradition remains central to Vienna's musical life – and to tonight's programme. Brahms frequently performed Mozart's music and even edited his *Requiem*. And although Schoenberg would seem to break the inheritance, he rightly insisted on his place within it, claiming Brahms, the supposed bastion of musical conservatism, as 'the Progressive'. Yet tradition and progress are not mutually exclusive, nor are spheres of influence limited.

Mozart is a guiding light in this regard: a prodigious talent who was as eager to escape the traditions of Salzburg as he was to embrace those of other musical centres. Eventually settling in Vienna in 1781, he wrote to his father that the imperial capital 'is certainly the land of the clavier! And, even if they do get tired of me, they will not do so for a few years.' Such a period had elapsed by the time Mozart wrote his Piano Sonata in C minor K457, on 14 October 1784, followed by a Fantasia in the same key (K475) the next May. Judging by Artaria's immediate publication of the works as a pair, however, there had clearly been no reduction in Mozart's renown.

As the title of the Fantasia suggests, it is a free work, bound by a recurrent, rising theme. This material is quickly fragmented, with variations in texture, tone and dynamic, with neither an F major *Allegro* nor a more even-tempered *Andantino* offering stability for long. Impressive cadenzas and black harmonies further deny the anchor of the initial material and its home key, though that is where the work eventually returns.

It is likely that Mozart partially conceived his October 1784 Sonata as a teaching aid, with the publication dedicated to his pupil, Thérèse von Trattner. And yet, like the associated Fantasia, its music poses considerable challenges to any aspiring player, not least in the imposing sonata-form movement that opens the work. The central *Adagio*, in the relative major, is an aria (without words), albeit with shifting emphases. And then the pluck of the opening *Allegro* returns in the Rondo-Finale, with an unpredictable theme that contrasts with a reserved second subject, thereby looking to the Fantasia's dialectical tactics.

There is no *fons et origo* for **Schoenberg's** serial practice. His 12-tone methods developed out of a long-held fascination for expanding harmonic possibilities. Yet the emancipation of dissonance also prompted thoughts of fresh parameters, as Schoenberg described in 1937: 'I was preoccupied with the notion of deliberately basing the structure of my music on a uniform musical idea, one which would not only foster all other ideas, but also regulate their accompaniment and the chords, the "harmonies"'. Again, dialectics inform all.

Even if there was no blue touchpaper for Schoenberg's revolutionary approach, his Suite for piano Op. 25, composed between 1921 and 1923, was the composer's first complete serial opus. Its use of Baroque and Classical forms was an attempt to address a fundamental paradox in serial practice, where each gesture is altered before the listener can grasp its original form, potentially undermining any intensification of meaning over the course of the work. The repeated notes in the brief opening *Präludium* are another didactic attempt to clarify the technique, with subsequent movements, at turns playful and profound, providing their own illustrations. And if the recollection of historical genres is not enough for some to link this music to a wider tradition, the retrograde (or backwards) form of the row begins with a B flat, an A, a C and a B natural, i.e. B–A–C–H in German nomenclature.

It is Beethoven rather than Bach who stands behind the young **Brahms's** Piano Sonata No. 3 in F minor Op. 5, with the characteristic motif from his Fifth Symphony – a work that would similarly haunt the long gestation of Brahms's First. That is still a long way off, however, in 1853, when the 20-year-old Brahms wrote this towering five-movement Sonata. It was an important year, during which he met Joseph Joachim and, in September, at the violinist's bidding, the Schumanns. Brahms showed Robert and Clara the two slow movements of his new Sonata, as well as other works, and clearly made an impression, given Robert was soon describing the 'young eagle' who had 'sprung like Minerva fully armed from the head of the son of Cronus'.

Encouraged, Brahms completed his F minor Sonata that October. It was clearly designed to astonish, with an aptly named *Allegro maestoso* that opens with both Lisztian intent and Beethoven's four-note rhythmic motif. Brahms, however, denies the security of either metre or tonality and only with a move to A flat major do things begin to calm, if briefly, in this manifestly grand structure – at times, the writing can even appear like an orchestral reduction.

If the slow movement, as in the *Adagio* of the Mozart Sonata, seems to suggest a song without words, that is because it and the *Intermezzo* are indebted to the poetry of Otto Inckermann (writing as CO Sternau): the *Andante* is an amorous nocturne, while the fourth movement offers a fond if melancholy remembrance of things past. Between them comes an unbridled *Scherzo*, which its *Trio* seeks to soothe, though both the return of the *Scherzo* and the beginning of the *Rondo-Finale* confirm that the stormy spirit of F minor – witnessed right across Brahms's output – cannot be easily overthrown. And yet the inclusion of Joachim's signature, F–A–E or 'Frei aber einsam' (free but lonely), will provide a path to triumph in the apotheosis to both the last movement and the Sonata's entire 40-minute form.

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