

# WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 8 January 2022 7.30pm

Louis Lortie Presents: Musicians from Chapelle Reine Elisabeth

## Musicians from Chapelle Reine Elisabeth

Louis Lortie piano

Salih Can Gevrek piano

Hélène Mercier piano

CLASSIC *f*M

Wigmore Hall £5 tickets for Under 35s supported by Media Partner Classic FM

### Beethoven/Liszt

Symphony No. 5 in C minor Op. 67 S464/5 (1837 rev. 1863-4)

*I. Allegro con brio • II. Andante con moto • III. Scherzo • IV. Allegro*

Interval

Symphony No. 9 in D minor Op. 125 S657 (1851)

*I. Allegro ma non troppo, un poco maestoso • II. Molto vivace •  
III. Adagio molto e cantabile - Andante moderato • IV. Finale. Presto*

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In 1837 Liszt (1811-1886) set about making transcriptions of the Fifth, Sixth and Seventh of Beethoven's (1770-1827) symphonies. It was a happy time for Liszt. The bloom had not yet worn off his relationship with the novelist Daniel Stern (the Comtesse d'Agoult), and they were spending the summer at the country estate of another novelist, George Sand. Liszt entered these transcriptions into the list of pieces that he performed between 1838 and 1848. Schumann, for one, could see that they were something rather different from just big piano sonatas.

'Liszt has worked out his arrangement with so much industry and enthusiasm, that it may be regarded as an original work, a résumé of his profound studies, a practical pianoforte school in score-playing. This art of reproduction, so wholly different from the detail-playing of the virtuoso, the many kinds of touch that it demands, the effective use of the pedal, the clear interweaving of separate parts, the collective grasp of orchestral masses; in short, the understanding of means and possibilities as yet hidden in the piano, can only be the work of a master.' (Schumann was writing about the other symphony in Liszt's repertoire list, Berlioz's *Symphonie fantastique*, but his remarks apply equally to the Beethoven transcriptions.)

The Viennese publisher, Anton Diabelli, had published solo piano versions of Beethoven symphonies as early as 1816, but in general, keyboard versions of symphonies were for four hands – piano duets. This was a wildly popular genre. The Cadwallader Collection, for instance, which we recently welcomed to Southampton University, contains amongst its beautifully bound riches, duet versions of most of the symphonies of Haydn, all the orchestral works of Bach, Dvořák, Mendelssohn and Beethoven (including the piano concertos), the symphonies of Saint-Saëns, and, amazingly, pretty well the complete works of Brahms, including the *solo* piano sonatas!

Richard Wagner spotted what was important about solo transcriptions. In 1869, Wagner gave his opinion that it was only when Beethoven symphonies began to be heard on the piano that people could appreciate the true import of the music. And this was because at that time, only a solo pianist could control the necessary flexibility of tempo.

When Liszt retired as a solo pianist at the age of 36, he moved on to the Court Orchestra at Weimar, where he experimented with methods of transferring the freedom he had enjoyed at the piano to his orchestral performances. He invented new tempo signs for his orchestral works – a big A for something less than an *accelerando*, for instance – and he also invented sectional rehearsals. By the end of the century, Heinrich Ehrlich could describe conductors as 'orchestral virtuosi – the instrument they play is the orchestra. They are the precise opposite of the conductors of former generations, whose over-

riding concern was to play everything accurately and scrupulously in time'.

As to the symphonic originals, their importance goes even beyond the innovations in performance style – impetuosity, tempo variation, extreme expressivity – that both Liszt and Wagner were convinced Beethoven was trying to introduce in all his music. Considered purely as musical architecture, the symphonies are extraordinary in their development of thematic relationships, their employment of modulation as a means of musical argument, and their sheer revelry in new orchestral sounds. Even their mere quantity – nine of them – has become established as something of a touchstone.

The Fifth Symphony was first performed on December 22nd 1808 at Beethoven's mammoth four-hour concert in a freezing hall. The occasion also saw the premières of the Sixth Symphony, the Fourth Piano Concerto, the Choral Fantasy, extracts from the Mass in C, and a piano improvisation. The orchestra was double-booked (by Salieri, Mozart's rival and one of Beethoven's teachers), and consequently depleted. Worse, the players refused to rehearse under Beethoven's direction, though history does not record who might have stood in. The soprano soloist took offence at something Beethoven said, and her understudy was paralysed by stage-fright. Finally, increasing deafness made this Beethoven's very last appearance as a pianist. Even one of Beethoven's most ardent admirers, the composer Reichardt, wrote: 'we confirmed for ourselves the maxim that one may easily have too much of a good thing, still more of a powerful one'.

This sorry start has not held the Fifth Symphony back. It manages to be at once both typical and unique; to make its surprises retrospectively inevitable; and to unite the emotional and the intellectual gamut. In short, perhaps the greatest piece of music ever written, even in the opinion of some for whom Beethoven is not the greatest of all composers.

The Ninth Symphony was first performed on May 7th 1824. Its incorporation of words in the *Finale* was controversial from the start, though that's unquestionably the aspect that brings about so many performances, since for many people, words can be quicker to catch an audience's attention than music. Liszt was very sensitive to the relationship between words and music – his Schubert song transcriptions always include the poems, and so does his transcription of this symphony. We won't hear the words tonight, but only a few of us will be hearing the symphony for the first time, and its message of freedom and Universal Brotherhood is well-known. To compensate for the absence of words, how perfectly the transcription – like all the others – magnifies that important Beethovenian concept, of being practically unplayable!

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