

WIGMORE HALL

Saturday 25 June 2022 1.00pm

Allan Schiller & John Humphreys piano duo



This concert is part of the CAVATINA Chamber Music Trust ticket scheme, offering free tickets to those aged 8-25

- Johann Christian Bach** (1735-1782) Keyboard Duet in F Op. 18 No. 6 (by 1781)
I. Allegro • II. Rondeau
- Franz Schubert** (1797-1828) Andantino varié from *Divertissement sur des motifs originaux français* D823
(c.1825)
- Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart** (1756-1791) Fantasia in F minor for mechanical organ K608 (1791)
- Maurice Ravel** (1875-1937) Ma mère l'Oye (1908-10)
*Pavane de la belle au bois dormant • Petit poucet •
Laideronnette, impératrice des pagodes •
Les entretiens de la belle et de la bête • Le jardin féerique*
- Antonín Dvořák** (1841-1904) Slavonic Dance in A flat Op. 46 No. 3
Slavonic Dance in E minor Op. 46 No. 2
Slavonic Dance in G minor Op. 46 No. 8

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It was Charles Burney, indefatigable chronicler of the state of music across the whole of Europe, long-sighted historian, friend of JC Bach, father of the novelist Fanny Burney and, in his spare time, a composer of pronounced modernist tendencies (in his piano trios, the cello is rarely to be found playing the bass note), who first had the idea, in a publication of 1777, of sitting two pianists at the same instrument. The instrument he had in mind, internal evidence suggests, was the type of small square piano that was developed in London about 1766 by the Saxon, Johannes Zumpe. There was very little elbow room at these five-octave instruments, so the cheeky intimacies slyly encouraged by later composers at more expansive keyboards – the sharing of notes and crossing of arms that made piano duets so popular as a mixed double in the later 19th Century – were forced upon duettists from the start.

Any chamber music ensemble needs to get along, of course, but piano duettists need to be particularly close – making today's celebration of a remarkable and lengthy partnership a particularly welcome occasion. Not only close personally and musically, but technically too. People play the piano in many different ways, and one of the key tests of a duo is whether they can play a chord together. Thanks to a quirk of the curriculum at the University of Southampton, the writer of these notes has spent many years actually coaching piano duets for performance – not a thing that happens everywhere – and in his experience this first hurdle is the highest.

Peddalling, too, can be a source of conflict. The Polish-American pianist Artur Balsam recorded Mozart's duets twice. The recording that won all the awards was the one that employed TWO pianos, because he could not agree with his partner about pedalling. (Oral history, in Aldeburgh back in 1977, did not relate which partner it was – Nadia Reisenberg or Gena Raps.) Traditionally, it's always Secondo (the left-hand, bass partner) who looks after the sustaining mechanism. This must certainly have been the case at the Zumpe square, where the levers that control the dampers are on the left-hand side. It may have been more complicated for Schubert. The bewildering variety of pedals on Viennese pianos – felt mutes of varying thicknesses, a shifting pedal to go from three (sometimes four) strings per note down to just one string (*una corda*), a pedal that lowered a roll of parchment onto the strings of the tenor register, giving a comb-and-paper quality to the sound – brilliantly exploited in the final song of *Winterreise*, 'Der Leiermann' – and a pedal to ring a bell and drop an assortment of metallic objects onto the bass strings, while banging on the underside of the soundboard, to imitate bass drum, triangle and cymbals – so-called 'Turkish Music' – as well as the ordinary sustaining pedal... That bewildering variety was by no means standard in order, and some give and take might have been necessary.

In the middle of the 19th Century, the piano duet found an extra function, as a means of experiencing orchestral music in places where there were no orchestras. In the 1820s this function was performed by an ensemble of flute, violin, cello and piano – composer-pianists like Clementi, Cramer, Hummel and Moscheles arranged Beethoven symphonies and Mozart concertos for these instruments; but the greater utility of a medium that employed only one instrument and only two players swept such quartets away. At Southampton we have the Cadwallader Collection, piano duet arrangements of practically the entire orchestral output of Haydn, Mozart, Beethoven, Mendelssohn, Schumann and Dvořák, with surprises like all the symphonies of Saint-Saëns, and remarkably, the Complete Works of Brahms, including the solo piano sonatas – arranged for piano duet!

Burney wrote that **JC Bach** 'seems to have been the first composer who observed the law of contrast as a principle', which is a splendidly brief yet accurate description of the early Classical style, and its incipient sonata form. This duetto reminds us of how much his young disciple, Mozart, learned from him.

Schubert's French *Divertissement* (he also wrote a Hungarian one) is a three-movement work published in separate parts. This middle movement is in B minor. There are four variations.

The barrel-organs incorporated into musical clocks give us valuable information on matters of ornamentation and even phrasing in 18th-century performing practice. Master clockmakers like Johann Georg Strasser, or Joseph Niemez, who worked with Haydn at Esterháza, 'pinned' their barrels with great accuracy. Haydn and **Mozart** both wrote music especially for such brilliant artisans.

Ravel's 'Mother Goose' suite presents Sleeping Beauty, Tom Thumb, Little Ugly - Empress of the Pagodas, Beauty and the Beast, and a less specific Fairy Garden, all from Charles Perrault and other French sources (which is perhaps why few of us will know the story of Little Ugly, though its ingredients – forgetting to invite the wicked fairy to the christening, the spell, the prince sadly disguised by enchantment – are familiar from such sources as the Brothers Grimm and Walt Disney. The presence of the legend of Orpheus in the Underworld in the mix is more of a surprise!). The most brilliant moment of a characteristically brilliant work is where the Beast's theme, hitherto threateningly low in Secondo, is finally transformed, with beautiful harmonies, by Primo at the top of the piano, before combining with Beauty's theme.

It was the *Slavonic Dances*, written after a recommendation from Brahms, that catapulted **Dvořák** to international fame. No. 3 is a *Polka*, No. 2 a *Dumka*, and No. 8 a *Furiant*.

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