

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Vadym Kholodenko Performs Mozart & Rzewski

Sunday 14 April 2024, 3pm

Queen Elizabeth Hall

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Mozart Requiem arr. Klindworth for piano

50'

Interval

Rzewski 36 Variations on 'The People United Will Never Be Defeated!'

50'

Performers

Vadym Kholodenko *piano*

This performance lasts approximately 2 hours and 10 minutes with a 20-minute interval.

the unfinished work. Constanze assigned some of the task to Mozart's other students, but the bulk fell on Süßmayr's shoulders. It is on his version that the German pianist and conductor Karl Klindworth based a seemingly unlikely transcription of the work for solo piano.

Klindworth, born in 1830 in Hanover, was no stranger to virtuoso transcriptions. He was a student of Franz Liszt and a friend of Richard Wagner, whom he first met in London. Klindworth turns out to have been an Anglophile with a special fondness for Hampstead Heath. As a young twenty-something musician, he was living in a cold room on Manchester Square, surviving on bread, cheese and port in a local pub, when Liszt sent the visiting Wagner his way. The composer took a liking to the youth, even wishing that he could sing tenor because he had the perfect physique for the role of Siegfried.

In 1868 Klindworth moved to Moscow where he spent 14 years teaching at the Moscow Conservatory; there too, he made piano transcriptions of Wagner's entire *Ring* Cycle. He then became one of the conductors of the Berlin Philharmonic in 1882. Later he and his wife, Henrietta, adopted a young English girl, a distant cousin from Hastings: Winifred Williams, whom they raised to be 'the perfect Wagnerian'. Aged 17, she married Wagner's son, Siegfried, and went on to run the Bayreuth Festival from 1930 to 1945. Here she became close to one Wagner devotee, Adolf Hitler – but that is another story.

The exact date of Klindworth's Mozart Requiem transcription is elusive, though an early Russian edition of the sheet music suggests it was probably from his years in Moscow. Transforming a work for full orchestra, chorus and soloists for solo piano inevitably meant a great deal to squeeze into one keyboard and ten fingers. Klindworth treats the music with essential respect, adding pianistic figurations only when seeking the instrument's equivalents to string techniques such as the furious momentum of the 'Dies Irae'. At times he introduces slight expressive enhancements, such as extended registers and plentiful rolled chords in the 'Hostias'. Throughout, the intensity of Mozart's contrapuntal and fugal writing, the imposing scale of the choruses and the music's sheer emotional power transfer to the piano with almost startling conviction.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–91)

Requiem (1791) arr. Klindworth for piano

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's Requiem has always been surrounded by legend, some of it lurid. There are grains of truth among the myths: for instance, it was indeed a mysterious commission from an unnamed nobleman – one Count Franz von Walsegg, who wished to pass the music off as his own. Any idea that Salieri was poisoning Mozart, however, is best confined to a theatrical stage. The reality is more mundane, though more tragic still.

Mozart was beset by the in-demand freelancer's most destructive habit: the inability to say no. He was driving himself hard, writing two operas, *Die Zauberflöte* and *La Clemenza di Tito*, before starting on the Requiem in September 1791. When his wife, Constanze, came home from a spa in Baden, she found him suffering dangerous exhaustion. By early December he was critically ill, his kidneys failing. On his deathbed he gave his student Franz Xaver Süßmayr instructions on how to complete

Frederic Rzewski (1938–2021)

The People United Will Never Be Defeated (1975)

'I am a musician, I only have opinions. I basically try to write good music. But when things are happening in the world, that's where your ideas come from.' So said Frederic Rzewski, the American composer and pianist known for his left-wing sympathies and engagement with the European avant-garde, even if ultimately his music occupied a space all its own.

Born in Westfield, Massachusetts, Rzewski was the son of two pharmacists of Polish descent; he studied at Harvard under the tutelage of Walter Piston, at Princeton with Roger Sessions and in Italy with Luigi Dallapiccola. From 1977 he based himself chiefly in Brussels.

He enjoyed a love-hate relationship with the strictures of the 1970s avant-garde and its seeming disregard for the audience. Although he recorded music by Stockhausen and Boulez, as a composer he preferred other idioms: 'It seemed to me', he wrote, 'there was no reason why the most difficult and complex formal structures could not be expressed in a form which could be understood by a wide variety of listeners. ... I explored forms in which existing musical languages could be brought together.'

His 36 Variations on the resistance anthem *¡El Pueblo Unido Jamás Será Vencido!* by Chilean composer Sergio Ortega (1938–2003) dates from 1975, while he was living in New York; it was his response to a commission from the pianist Ursula Oppens, its dedicatee. It builds on the tradition of giant sets of variations for solo keyboard – Bach's *Goldberg Variations*, Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* and many more. 'My writing is strongly influenced by improvisation and I like to find ways of composing that allow me to write down as easily and simply as possible what's going through my head,' he said in an interview with the present writer (1990). 'Variations seem to be the natural way to do this.'

Whether 'easily and simply' are terms that could genuinely apply to *The People United* is another matter. The set lasts about an hour and its variations are grouped in six 'cycles' of six variations each. They traverse an eclectic range of inventive styles and

pianistic techniques, whether jazzy, pointillist, contrapuntal, minimalist or involving the performer slamming the piano lid, shouting or whistling.

Rzewski wrote: 'Two songs, aside from the theme itself, appear at various points: the Italian revolutionary song "Bandiera Rossa", in reference to the Italian people who in the 1970s opened their doors to so many refugees from Chilean fascism, and Hanns Eisler's 1932 antifascist "Solidaritätslied", a reminder that parallels to present threats existed in the past and that it is important to learn from them ... The extended length of the composition may be an allusion to the idea that the unification of people is a long story and that nothing worth winning is acquired without effort.'

Each of the six cycles consists of six stages:

1. simple events;
2. rhythms;
3. melodies;
4. counterpoints;
5. harmonies;
6. combinations of them all.

Each 'cycle' is also given a character appropriate to its corresponding 'stage', matching the microcosm in the macrocosm. The sixth cycle sums up all that has gone before; and after it the composer gives the performer space to improvise a cadenza. The set closes with a return of the theme, defiant and determined to the last.

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