

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Tiffany Poon: London Debut

Sunday 26 May 2024, 3pm | Queen Elizabeth Hall

Classical music is an incredible, centuries-long story. As we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – share that story with the world today, we're creating as many ways for as many different people as possible to experience this wonderful art form.

Whether this is your first encounter with classical music or one of many, I'm absolutely thrilled that you're joining us for more powerful human experiences. Welcome to Classical Music: Spring/Summer 2024.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Schumann Kinderszenen, Op.15 18'

1. Von fremden Ländern und Menschen (Of Foreign Lands and Peoples)
2. Kuriose Geschichte (Curious Story)
3. Hasche-Mann (Blind Man's Buff)
4. Bittendes Kind (Pleading Child)
5. Glückes genug (Happy Enough)
6. Wichtige Begebenheit (An Important Event)
7. Träumerei (Dreaming)
8. Am Kamin (At the Fireside)
9. Ritter vom Steckenpferd (Knight of the Hobbyhorse)
10. Fast zu ernst (Almost Too Serious)
11. Fürchtenmachen (Frightening)
12. Kind im Einschlummern (Child Falling Asleep)
13. Der Dichter spricht (The Poet Speaks)

Schumann Papillons, Op.2 15'

- Introduction. Moderato (D major)
1. Waltz (D major)
 2. Waltz. Prestissimo (E flat major)
 3. Waltz (F sharp minor)
 4. Waltz (A major)
 5. Polonaise (B flat major)
 6. Waltz (D minor)
 7. Waltz (F minor). Semplice
 8. Waltz (C sharp minor)
 9. Waltz. Prestissimo (B flat minor)
 10. Waltz. Vivo (C major)
 11. Polonaise (D major)
 12. Finale (D major)

Ravel La valse 15'

Interval

Bach Prelude and Fugue in C, BWV.846 4'

Bach Prelude and Fugue in C minor, BWV.847 3'

Chopin 24 Preludes, Op.28 40'

Performer

Tiffany Poon *piano*

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

A CD signing for all ticket holders also takes place in the Queen Elizabeth Hall Foyer 30 minutes after the concert.

'Sometimes, Robert, you're a child.' Clara's comment, to her future husband Robert Schumann, prompted him in 1838 to write *Kinderszenen* (Scenes from Childhood). Imagining himself back, he came up with 13 pieces, most of them very short. At the centre he placed 'Träumerei' (Dreaming), which quickly took on a life of its own, but hearing the whole lot allows us to appreciate how sophisticated was this childlike Schumann. The opening theme, perhaps suggesting fond reminiscence, reappears in a different rhythm at the start of 'Bittendes Kind' and floats in the air at other points.

A decade earlier Schumann was rushing to embrace music without being quite willing to abandon his first love: literature. *Papillons* (1829-31) testifies to this moment of exultant equivocation, being a piece of music directly modelled on a work of literature, the penultimate chapter of *Flegeljahre* (Years of Indiscretion), by the German novelist who published under his first names as 'Jean Paul'. The book featured people the composer's age; it also chimed with feelings he was beginning to have about himself, concerning the coexistence within one person of outward and introspective aspects, of exuberant and dreamy. 'Jean Paul mirrors himself in all his works, but each time in two characters', he wrote, giving as example the twin brothers of *Flegeljahre*, the sensitive Walt and the vigorous Vult, both of whom, inevitably, are in love with the same girl.

The chapter that particularly affected Schumann – to the extent that he associated each of the first 11 numbers of *Papillons* with specific sentences – takes place at a masked ball, where Walt, Vult and their mutual but undeclared sweetheart Wina are all present. Walt soon sees someone disguised as a giant boot (hence Schumann's heavyweight third dance), then is taken with another dancer costumed as Hope. Is this Wina? No, it's Vult! So it goes. Music tells the story in different ways – in changes of tempo, key and texture, in motivic cross-references, in dialogues between the hands and prevarications of mood, in phases of affirmation or dissolve, all within a dance medley. An introductory salute is followed by 12 dances that, increasingly lengthy and involved, make a tour of keys before returning to the initial D major for the finale. Near the end, the clock strikes six (in the morning): time to go home.

Through a different kind of masquerade, the same themes of longing and uncertainty are at play as in the novel. The immature creatures circling in what Jean Paul called his 'Larventanz' (the German word *Larve* meaning both 'larva' and 'mask') have taken flight as butterflies – *Papillons*.

A century later Ravel was also at the waltz game, composing his grand fantasy *La Valse* in the winter of 1919-20 for Serge Diaghilev's Russian Ballet. Diaghilev turned the piece down, but the score remained.

As with *Papillons* there was a back story, given here in the composer's interpretation: 'Through whirling clouds light falls now and then on dancing couples. Little by little the clouds disperse, to reveal an immense salon filled with a mass of people revolving. The scene becomes progressively brighter. The light of chandeliers intensifies to a fortissimo. An imperial court around 1855.'

The crescendo of light, detail and rhythmic passion comes in two great waves, of which the second ends catastrophically. It is very possible that Ravel had in mind the Edgar Allan Poe story 'The Masque of the Red Death', in which a personification of pestilence arrives at a grand ball and all succumb. But the piece has also been widely understood as its composer's comment on the recent war, which had destroyed the imperial forces engaged in it and brought a whole phase of European culture to an end. As so often with Ravel, the keyboard version is not a whit inferior to the orchestral score in terms of power and colour. It may even add something of edgy brilliance and intensity.

A taste then of JS Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* brings us the opening instalments, in C major and minor. The C major prelude is a properly elemental introduction, traversing harmonic space in interlocking arpeggios; the C minor prelude does the same under minor-key pressure and adds a cadenza. The fugues answer in kind, the C major transparent, the C minor a dance.

Bach's whole book visits all 24 major and minor keys, and Chopin does the same in his Op.28 collection of preludes without fugues, which he composed between 1835 and 1838. He takes a different route, though, not by chromatic steps but from major to relative minor and back to major up a fifth. Brilliant and fantastical, the pieces also make a continuous sequence, where often a prelude will answer what came before, or sweep it away. These are 24 short stories that make a novel, proceeding thus:

1. C major: Broken chords open the sequence with bounding promise. The music seems ready to expand, but trails away, leaving the promise to be fulfilled in what follows.
2. A minor: What follows immediately comes from another world: startlingly chromatic, sombre, numb.
3. G major: Vitality returns, and harmonic sunlight.
4. E minor: The simple gesture of a falling minor second becomes a poignant song.
5. D major: In running semiquavers, the two hands jostle, half a beat out of step.
6. B minor: Another sad song, sung in the bass to pulsing accompaniment.
7. A major: The opening, no more, of a mazurka.
8. F sharp minor: Now the sway between fast major and slow minor pieces has been broken, it is time for speed in the minor, beginning with a movement whose middle-treble melody sings between left-hand broken chords and high figuration.

9. E major: Just 12 bars long, this majestic paean sounding from the bass starts out in the major light and proceeds steadfastly into darker regions.
10. C sharp minor: In clock time, this will be the shortest prelude, the right hand twinkling down to the left's melodic strains. Hans von Bülow, who gave all the preludes names, called this one 'The Night Moth'.
11. B major: And this for him was 'The Dragonfly'. He had surely seen them hovering, wings flickering iridescent in the sun. For Alfred Cortot, however, the piece was 'A Young Girl's Wish'. We can call these pieces what we will.
12. G sharp minor: Rapid repeating notes move in waves to create a moto perpetuo.
13. F sharp major: After three assorted fast preludes comes a long slow one, supported by left-hand quavers.
14. E flat minor: Turmoil, largely in the bass, soon done.
15. D flat major: A quasi-nocturne, and one of the longest pieces, this has a chant-like middle section in the minor. Von Bülow's title – one that has stuck, 'Raindrop' – refers to the main music, with its regularly splashing quavers.
16. B flat minor: Semiquavers throughout make a nightmare swirl.
17. A flat major: Also one of the longer pieces, this is another song, playing out its beautiful melody three times. Second time around, the music becomes more present; then it sounds from far away, punctuated by a tolling A flat.
18. F minor: The alternation between lyricism and violence continues, bringing a sudden agitated piece, stern and bare from the octaves between the hands.
19. E flat major: Delightfulness and brilliance have been in the background a while, but not now.
20. C minor: Regular phrases, slow pulse, common time and a relatively common minor tonality combine to create the idiom of funeral march, one that stays only a short while before once again going into the distance.
21. B flat major: This is another blissful song, but moving into stranger harmonic realms even than usual.
22. G minor: The outburst then of thundering passion may not be so unexpected.
23. F major: Right-hand semiquavers shower the melody with light.
24. D minor: Again a longer piece, the finale has everything: brilliance, drama, melody, passion – and a scary close.

Programme notes © Paul Griffiths, 2024

Tiffany Poon: London Debut is presented by the Southbank Centre & Askonas Holt

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