

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Alice Sara Ott & Francesco Tristano: Two Pianos

Thursday 16 May 2024, 7.30pm

Queen Elizabeth Hall

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Francesco Tristano <i>A Soft Shell Groove</i> for 2 pianos	12'
Francesco Tristano <i>Serpentina</i> †	4'
Francesco Tristano <i>In the beginning was</i> *	5'
Satie <i>Gnossienne No.3</i> *	3'
Frescobaldi <i>Partite sopra l'Aria di Folia, F.2.16</i> †	7'
Debussy <i>Nuages</i> from <i>Nocturnes</i> arr. Ravel for 2 pianos	7'
Satie <i>Gymnopédie No.1</i> *	4'
Francesco Tristano <i>Toccata</i> †	5'
Ravel <i>Boléro</i> arr. Tristano for 2 pianos	16'

Performers

Alice Sara Ott *piano**

Francesco Tristano *piano*†

Tonight's duo recital reunites two artists – Alice Sara Ott and Francesco Tristano – for a typically unorthodox programme. The Luxembourg-born Tristano makes no distinction between playing, composing and arranging: all are part of his creativity, and he draws on an eclectic mix of sources to inspire him, be it the music of Bach and Frescobaldi or the techno beat of the club scene. He says of *A Soft Shell Groove*, which he originally wrote for his album of duos with Ott: 'I wanted to write a piece that would be a stark contrast to the other pieces [on the album], which are very fast-paced and very virtuosic. So this is rather soft but still rhythmic.' For Ott, 'It was a leap in the dark for me to play this piece ... I liked it, always felt drawn to it, but on the other hand I had the feeling that I was coming face to face with my limits. And at first it really was very challenging. But then later, I started to have fun with it.'

The overall sensation of the piece is one of momentum, of rhythmic patterns shifting in a minimalistic way. Its two protagonists are required to be absolutely in synch with one another, rhythmically, dynamically and in terms of phrasing. Deep bass notes propel the music forward and the players clap as well as play, and its sense of energy is utterly exhilarating.

The next two Tristano works – *Serpentina* and *In the beginning was* – are for solo pianist, the first sitting comfortably among early music (as Tristano demonstrated on his album *On Early Music*), its darting playfulness giving way at times to exuberant outbreaks of virtuosity, before revisiting the initial idea with gorgeously refulgent chordal writing. *In the beginning was* begins with an echo of the opening of Bach's first Prelude from his famous *Well-Tempered Clavier* Book 1, heard as if from afar, mistily pedalled; the dream-like state gradually cedes to something more certain, the Bach motif becoming the focus of a minimalist treatment, growing in confidence (and loudness); yet it remains playfully elusive right up to the close.

'Elusive' could also fit the next composer on the programme: Erik Satie. Here was a composer hailed by Ravel, no less, as the precursor of modern music, admired by Debussy and Les Six, considered indispensable by John Cage, but remembered

This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 10 minutes without an interval.

today mainly for one piece, the First *Gymnopédie*. His own eccentricities, and his fierce independence, helped swathe him in myths that sometimes overshadow the music.

The *Gnossiennes* radically do away with time signatures and barlines. The Third is, like the others, peppered with Satie-esque instructions that are wonderfully head-scratchingly vague, not least *Munissez-vous de clairvoyance* (roughly: Arm yourself with clairvoyance) and *De manière à obtenir un creux* (So as to form a hollow)! What is not in doubt is its distilled beauty, a subtle rocking motion underpinning eloquent phrases in the right hand, flirtations with non-Western harmonies and the lasting impression of purity of expression, all of which give the impression of having grown from something ancient.

From something that sounds ancient to something that truly is: the Italian Girolamo Frescobaldi was one of the earliest composers to write keyboard music that was as full of emotion as it was virtuosity. His *Partite sopra l'Aria di Folia* is based on a theme that twists between major and minor, giving it a musically questioning quality. On this Frescobaldi writes variations that may be compact, but range from the wistful to the almost punchily exuberant. To play them on a modern piano is as much as a transcription as the orchestral reworkings of the orchestral soundscapes of Ravel and Debussy.

The latter was famously as obsessed with the visual arts as he was by music, and nowhere is that more apparent than in his three orchestral *Nocturnes*, which took their title from a sequence of paintings by Whistler that explore the notion of 'tonal harmony'. As the composer wrote: 'The title *Nocturne* is ... not meant to designate the usual form of the *Nocturne*, but rather all the various impressions and the special effects of light that the word suggests. "Nuages" renders the immutable aspect of the sky and the slow, solemn motion of the clouds, fading away in grey tones lightly tinged with white.'

As early as 1901 Ravel was working with Raoul Bardac and Lucien Garban, fellow students at the Paris Conservatoire, on the elusive task of transforming these subtly shifting tone-poems for the keyboard. No easy task, particularly when it came to the third piece, 'Sirènes'. Ravel admitted in 1901 that this last piece was the most troublesome in terms of transcription, and even in his later published version of 1909 this is arguably (perhaps inevitably) less successful than the other two, not least because of the almost impossible task of capturing the timbre of the wordless female voices. But there are no such qualms about the success of 'Nuages': its hypnotic beauty laid bare when transferred to the keyboard.

Satie's *Gymnopédie* No.1 is so famous that it perhaps needs no introduction, yet it's also a piece whose very simplicity – like that of Mozart – is perilous for the unwary pianist. Technically, what could be simpler than its guileless chordal accompaniment in triple time, at a whispered *pianissimo*, to which the haunting fragment of melody is then added. But it requires true musicianship to bring it to life.

From here we move to Tristano's Toccata: a term that Frescobaldi himself used and which is synonymous with great acts of (usually keyboard) virtuosity, from JS Bach to Schumann and Prokofiev. Tristano's breathily darting piece seems to hark back to Frescobaldi et al, and yet remix it in an entirely contemporary way, its rhythms propulsive, obsessive, its theme a dangerous earworm. Talking of earworms, Ravel's *Boléro* is one of the great examples, so where better to end?

It is the dancer Ida Rubinstein who we have to thank for the existence of Ravel's *Boléro*. Initially a member of the Ballets Russes, she then set up her own dance company, for which she commissioned works by the leading composers of the day, among them Debussy, Stravinsky, Honegger and Milhaud. She took a while to commission Ravel, probably on account of his legendary slowness. Knowing this, she asked him in 1928 to orchestrate a sequence of pieces from Albéniz's *Iberia*; Ravel began work but soon became embroiled in contractual problems. He came up with a simple solution: an original piece consisting, as he put it, 'of one long, very gradual crescendo.' The piece is brought to life by the hypnotic effect of its pulse, plus an all-important change of key and, of course, his unrivalled ear for orchestral colour.

It was a great hit at its premiere at the Paris Opéra on 22 November 1928, though there was one dissenting voice. Ravel's brother Edouard noticed an elderly woman shouting above the applause 'Rubbish! Rubbish!' When told of this, the composer responded: 'That old lady got the message!' What would Ravel have made of Tristano's arrangement, which strips away the colour still further and emphasises the trance-like element? We'll never know; but it forms a thrilling endpiece to tonight's concert.

Programme notes © Harriet Smith, 2024

Find out more

- ▶ Alice Sara Ott
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