

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Marc-André Hamelin: Beethoven, Medtner & Godowsky

Friday 23 February 2024, 7pm

Queen Elizabeth Hall

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Beethoven Sonata in B flat, Op.106 (Hammerklavier) 46'

Interval

Beethoven Adelaïde, Op.46 arr. Liszt for piano, S.466 vers.3 10'

Medtner Sonata reminiscenza, Op.38 No.1 14'

Godowsky Symphonic metamorphosis on Strauss' 'Wine, Women & Song' 12'

Performers

Marc-André Hamelin *piano*

This performance lasts approximately 2 hours including a 20-minute interval.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Sonata in B flat, Op.106 (Hammerklavier) (1818)

1 *Allegro*

2 *Scherzo: Assai vivace*

3 *Adagio sostenuto*

4 *Introduzione: Largo... Allegro – Fuga: Allegro risoluto*

Maybe it's down to the forbidding 'hammer' half of its nickname, but Beethoven's Op.106 Piano Sonata has a notorious reputation for overwhelming force, even violence. In fact, 'hammerklavier' is simply Beethoven's preferred German-language version of the more common Italian term 'pianoforte' (or, strictly speaking, 'fortepiano', our modern-day piano's lighter, smaller ancestor). The composer's German publishers had used the word on the title pages of several of his earlier sonatas.

In the case of Op.106, however, that title stuck. And there's no denying that it feels particularly apt in conveying the Sonata's sheer ambition, power and density of invention. It's Beethoven's longest piano sonata, and it took him over a year to compose, from the summer of 1817 to the late autumn of 1818.

It came, too, towards the end of one of the least productive and most difficult periods in the composer's life. He'd been consumed by a lengthy legal battle over the custody of his nephew Karl, son of his deceased younger brother Kaspar Karl, with his detested sister-in-law Johanna, which dragged on from 1815 until 1820 (and which left young Karl so traumatised that he later attempted suicide). Though Beethoven eventually won custody, alongside his ever worsening deafness and his perpetual financial insecurity, it was a time in Beethoven's troubled personal life that felt particularly difficult.

The composer had an interesting relationship with the idea of 'difficult', however. He'd previously written to his publisher about the supposed 'difficulty' of an earlier piano sonata: 'What is difficult is also beautiful, good, great, etc, therefore every person understands that this is the greatest praise that one can give, because the difficult makes one sweat.' It's probably not too far-fetched, then, to imagine the composer attempting to overcome his frustrations by channelling them into creating music that pushes against the boundaries of conventional musical form, and pushes its performer, too, in terms of its extreme demands on their technique, their stamina and their emotional resilience.

Beethoven's ambition is evident from the Sonata's very beginning, and the mighty chords of its first main theme, which eventually give way to music that's lighter and more lilting. The first movement restlessly shifts between dynamics, harmonies, textures, even keyboard registers in an apparently endless succession of tensions and releases. The brief second movement is a slightly manic scherzo, powered along by driving rhythms, but it does little to prepare us for the expansive vistas of emotion in the long, slow third movement, whose sense of visionary spirituality surely looks ahead to Beethoven's final works.

Beethoven's finale is so grand that it even receives its own improvisatory-sounding introduction. It eventually launches into a three-part fugue, with a rushing subject in scales and trills, though a calmer, more hymn-like theme arrives about halfway through. Via surprises, unexpected side-swerves, false endings and more, Beethoven finally delivers an appropriately triumphant close.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827),

arr. Franz Liszt (1811–86)

Adelaïde, Op.46/S.466 vers.3 (1795)

From Beethoven pushing boundaries in 1818, we jump back to a very different Beethoven in 1795. He'd arrived in Vienna three years earlier with the aim of following his musical calling, and was in the process of making a name for himself among the capital's aristocracy and music lovers. The poem by German Romantic writer Friedrich von Matthisson that he set to music in his song *Adelaïde* no doubt struck a chord with the young composer. He'd never been lucky in love (and never would be), and Matthisson's vision of an idealised woman and the young man who simply can't get her out of his head probably felt particularly pertinent. Beethoven conjured a dreamy opening section reflecting the almost bewitched mindset of Adelaïde's admirer, who sees her wherever he looks, and a surprisingly joyful setting of Matthisson's concluding vision of flowers growing from his grave, symbolising his undying love.

Franz Liszt was, of course, a famously inveterate transcriber and elaborator of other composers' music, which he would remould into breathtakingly virtuosic piano showpieces to demonstrate his staggering keyboard prowess. He made three piano versions of Beethoven's *Adelaïde*, which, while sticking relatively faithfully to the original, also grow steadily more embellished. Tonight you'll hear the third of them, from 1847, in which Liszt separates the two contrasting halves of Beethoven's song with an elaborate, extended cadenza. He wrote to his publishers specifically to ask for the cadenza to be printed in smaller notes (it still is), so that purists could ignore it if they'd prefer. Understandably, few pianists do.

Nikolai Medtner (1880–1951)

Sonata reminiscenza, Op.38 No.1 (1922)

Born just six years before Liszt's death in 1886, Nikolai Medtner came from another generation entirely, and is for many the great unrecognised Russian composer of the early 20th century. He attempted to remain in his homeland following the 1917 revolution, but finally fled in 1921, first for Berlin, then to Paris, finally settling in London in 1935. He died in Golders Green in 1951, and is buried in Hendon Cemetery.

And while the musical world was changing beyond recognition around him, Medtner stayed largely loyal to the musical values and sounds of the previous century, earning himself the pejorative nickname 'the Russian Brahms'. That said, there's plenty about his *Sonata reminiscenza*'s rich, sometimes dissonant music that aligns it with other musical preoccupations of the times.

It effectively forms the tenth of Medtner's 14 piano sonatas, and he wrote it near Moscow shortly after the revolution (it

was published in 1922) as the opening work in the first of three cycles of what he called *Forgotten Melodies*. Those tunes that Medtner unearthed from his memory are inevitably sad ones: perhaps of a better life before the revolutionary turmoil, and almost certainly in recognition of his inevitable departure.

The Sonata is in a single movement. Its very first theme – a poignant, rippling melody – is immediately memorable, and makes a distinctive return before a more dissonant central development section. A brighter theme arrives towards the end, but the piece closes in apparent stoic resignation, with a final, limpid return of the theme we heard right at the start.

Leopold Godowsky (1870–1938)

Symphonic metamorphosis on Strauss' 'Wine, Women & Song' (1912)

From post-revolutionary Russia, we hop back just a few years for tonight's final piece – to glittering Vienna, in the dazzling days before the First World War detonated everything it stood for. Leopold Godowsky had left audiences staggered by his piano performances as a child, and after a glorious recital in Berlin in 1900, he was virtually begged to take up the directorship of the Piano School at Vienna's Kaiserliche Akademie für Musik in 1908 (a post theoretically answerable only to the Emperor himself). He lived a gloriously happy life as a composer/teacher/performer in the city for the next five years, before war forced him to flee to England, then America.

His keyboard reimagining of *Wine, Women & Song* is one of three paraphrases of music by Johann Strauss II that Godowsky published in 1912, and his sense of joy at Viennese music and life is everywhere apparent. He opens with a long, ferociously inventive introduction entirely of his own making, before leading us through a waltz sequence that stays relatively faithful to Strauss' original, even if Godowsky's treatment is anything but. It's a dance right across the breadth of the piano, and one that sets its pianist enormous challenges in teasing apart layers of melody, accompaniment and effusive invention – as breathtakingly original as it is wildly entertaining.

Programme notes © David Kettle, 2024

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