

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Mitsuko Uchida: Beethoven & Schubert

Friday 7 March 2025, 7pm
Royal Festival Hall

Classical music has always had reinvention at its core. Throughout our programme, we at the Southbank Centre – alongside our Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists – capture that trailblazing spirit with works that broke the mould across the ages and brand-new approaches to timeless classics.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Beethoven Sonata in E minor, Op.90

13'

Schoenberg 3 Pieces, Op.11

15'

Interval

György Kurtág Márta ligatúrāja

1'

attacca

Schubert Sonata in B flat, D.960

38'

Performers

Mitsuko Uchida *piano*

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

ideas in his mind – seemingly unhindered by his hearing loss – and the technical confines of contemporary instruments. The Sonata in E minor, Op.90, may have been a case in point: the keyboard of the time would have stopped at an F, a semitone above the satisfying low-pitched E he may have wished for to affirm the sonata's home key.

Even so, this sonata represented a pivotal moment in Beethoven's solo piano output, so much so that reams have been devoted to its status and significance. The work dates from 1814 – the final year of his so-called 'middle period', and the first of his 'final period' – and although there is a gap between this and the final five sonatas, the work ushers in many of the characteristics we hear in later Beethoven: concision and introspection, and a rather elusive lyricism. Its ending also seems to anticipate the opening of the Sonata Op.101 that followed in 1816, which begins as its predecessor ends – with an E major chord.

The Op.90 Sonata is, unusually, in two movements (many earlier sonatas were in three or four), and was written for one of Beethoven's patrons, Prince Moritz von Lichnowsky, although not to a commission. Beethoven planned to surprise Lichnowsky with the work, but on receiving a generous letter from his patron decided he couldn't wait any longer: 'I required no new motive thus publicly to testify my sense of your friendship and kindness'. The sonata coincided with a burst of patriotic spirit sweeping Vienna following Napoleon's defeat, which may have prompted Beethoven's use of German instructions in the score.

The compact first movement exudes a noble quality: taut and unfussy, with moments of introspective tenderness. Beethoven's material centres more on shorter ideas and textures than full-blown melodies, including distinctive dotted rhythms, dramatic scales and widely-spaced writing for the left hand. The movement ends wistfully, but this is soon brushed aside by a sunny second movement that anticipates Schubert in its songful serenity, and in the understated grace of its final bars.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Sonata in E minor, Op.90 (1814)

1. *Mit Lebhaftigkeit und durchaus mit Empfindung und Ausdruck*
(with liveliness and with feeling and expression throughout)
2. *Nicht zu geschwind und sehr singbar vorgetragen*
(not too swiftly and conveyed in a singing manner)

Beethoven made no secret of his frustrations with the limitations of the piano of his day, right up until the end of his life. In his final year, he lamented to his secretary, Karl Holz: 'It is and remains an inadequate instrument.' It seems at first astonishing that Beethoven could have felt so frustrated with the vehicle for some of his greatest achievements, but he was perhaps alluding to the discrepancy between the vivid musical

Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951)

3 Pieces, Op.11 (1909)

1. *Mässige* ♩ (at a moderate speed)
2. *Mässige* ♩ (very slowly)
3. *Bewegte* ♩ (with motion)

Beethoven had a profound influence on Brahms, who in turn was one of the figures most admired by Schoenberg. In his essay 'Brahms the Progressive', Schoenberg pointed out the innovative techniques used by his hero, emphasising in the process that he and his fellow composers of the Second Viennese School – Berg and Webern – had enormous respect for the past even as they paved the way for the future. They became famous, even notorious, for using Schoenberg's revolutionary 12-tone serial techniques, which he developed in the early 1920s.

Schoenberg's *3 Pieces* date from 1909, the same year as the monodrama *Erwartung* (Expectation) and the *Five Orchestral Pieces*, Op.16. Schoenberg was becoming immersed in the movement known as Expressionism, with its emphasis on atonality, directness and grown-up sensuality; dream-like, sometimes nightmarish, vivid without being descriptive. For Schoenberg, brevity and intensity of expression went hand in hand, and the *3 Pieces* draw us into this stream-of-consciousness world with its mercurial sense of structure and key. Along with the song cycle *The Book of the Hanging Gardens*, these pieces represented Schoenberg's first major statements in atonality, and were received with puzzlement.

There is a sense of nocturnal resignation in the first two pieces, the first like a hazy train of thought in a smoke-filled room at 2am. The second is a succession of embedded thoughts surfacing, sometimes with disturbing force; a descending scale and three closing-off gestures, the fingers of both hands moving towards one another, seem to shut things down again, returning us to the oscillating opening texture. The third piece is one of volcanic turmoil, determined as much by dynamics and texture as by pattern – anticipating a form of serialism that took hold in the 1950s, in which every aspect of the music was given specific parameters and gradations. Again, the outbursts are diffused by the pianist's fingers moving towards one another in brief gestures before the work ends with electrifying stillness.

György Kurtág (b. 1926)

Márta ligaturája (2020)

Of the Second Viennese composers, it was Webern, with his emphasis on concision and minute detail, who most influenced György Kurtág. Kurtág was born in Romania and later moved to Budapest, becoming a Hungarian citizen. He studied at the Franz Liszt Academy of Music, where he met his wife, pianist Márta Kinsker. They married in 1947, and within a few years Márta had embarked on an impressive teaching career. She had a deep influence on every aspect of her husband's output, often playing through and advising him about his works.

The pair regularly performed together, playing the four-hands pieces from Kurtág's educational piano series, *Játékok* (Games), as well as his transcriptions of Bach. These performances continued until the end of Márta's life and were celebrated for their intimacy, audiences often feeling as though they were witnessing a domestic duet rather than a public concert. One reviewer observed that 'their performance embodies a lot about the Kurtág ethos of simplicity and understatement. They sit before a humble upright piano, just as if they were at home, in private, playing for their own enjoyment.' Another noted: 'Some of Kurtág's duets interlace the players' hands so that one person must stretch across the other... in this familiar embrace, husband and wife played them with beautiful understatement.'

Márta Kurtág died at the age of 92 in 2019, and in the following year, her husband paid tribute to her with *Márta ligaturája* (Márta's Ligature), originally written for a type of dulcimer, the cimbalom; an unedited manuscript is used for this piano performance.

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

Sonata in B flat, D.960 (1828)

1. *Molto moderato*
2. *Andante sostenuto*
3. *Scherzo. Allegro vivace con delicatezza – Trio*
4. *Allegro ma non troppo*

It is risky to talk of 'late Schubert'; his prolific output shows extraordinary development, but he was still only 31 when he died. And yet perhaps the gravitas implied by the expression is fitting for his last three piano sonatas, which are truly exceptional and suggest a maturity well beyond his years. The Piano Sonata in B flat, D.960, was his last sonata and combines melancholy with a profoundly ecstatic quality – although, for all its otherworldly qualities, there are also moments of *joie de vivre*.

The sonata opens serenely, but a rumbling trill, reminiscent of a timpani roll, intrudes – like Chekhov's gun, it signals its early significance and is later unleashed with explosive power. Yet the rest of the movement is imbued with a spaciousness and melodic richness in which moments of anguish only briefly come to the fore. The poignant, fragile second movement unfolds like the gentlest of barcarolles – a piece that evokes the rocking of a boat – although the slow pace and remote keys reached suggest an eternal rather than earthly destination. The scherzo brings us back down to earth with its deft harmonic slides and playful melodic flourishes, its apparently solemn 'trio section' punctuated by humorous accents in the left hand. The finale boasts a wealth of ideas including a folk-like opening theme, a singing melody over undulating accompaniment, a seemingly heroic outburst that disintegrates into a lively dance, and, after a deceptively tranquil interlude, an emphatic, almost symphonic conclusion. Schubert once famously asked, 'Who can do anything after Beethoven?' before promptly answering his own question.

Programme notes © Joanna Wyld, 2025

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