

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Federico Colli: Mozart, Schubert & Prokofiev

Thursday 23 February 2023, 7.30pm
Queen Elizabeth Hall

Welcome to Classical Music: Spring/Summer 2023. With this programme, we continue to celebrate classical music in all its forms with leading artists and ensembles from the UK and around the world.

In close collaboration with our dynamic family of Resident Orchestras and Resident Artists, we are presenting the full spectrum of classical music, as well as embracing new approaches to how we do so. We are thrilled to welcome such an incredible range of global artists to our spaces – and beyond – to perform, and you to see them.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart

Fantasia in C minor, K.396 9'

Fantasia in C minor, K.475 12'

Franz Schubert

Fantasia in F minor, D.940 arr. Grinberg for solo piano 20'

Interval

Sergei Prokofiev

Visions fugitives, Op.22 20'

Peter and the Wolf Suite arr. Nikolayeva for piano 20'

Performer

Federico Colli *piano*

Strictly speaking, however, Mozart's K.396 isn't really a fantasia at all, at least in its original form. Mozart wrote some of it as part of a violin sonata, in Vienna in 1782, but left it unfinished. It was fellow Austrian composer Maximilian Stadler who 'completed' the work after Mozart's early death, transforming it into a short piece for keyboard alone that he called 'fantasia'. Nonetheless, its music fits the fantasia description perfectly: it is dark and stormy from the very beginning, with daring dissonances and unexpected harmonic sidesteps. A brighter central episode offers some respite, and the piece even ends in the more optimistic major – but with a sense of resignation rather than victory.

Fantasia in C minor, K.475

Mozart's K.475, however, is a true fantasia. It was completed by the 29-year-old composer on 20 May 1785, and published as an unfettered counterpart to the Keyboard Sonata in C minor, K.457 (with which it is often played). These were good times for Mozart: he was in high demand in the Austrian capital as both a composer and a pianist. In fact, it was as an accomplished, flamboyant keyboard improviser that Mozart drew particular acclaim.

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756–91)

Fantasia in C minor, K.396

Freewheeling, rule-breaking freedom of expression is the order of the day in the first half of tonight's concert. The keyboard fantasia dates right back to the 16th century, and was a catch-all name given to pieces in which a composer foregrounded intense emotional expression, with the textbook rules of conventional musical forms abandoned, even forgotten. Fantasias grew more refined and cultured over time, of course, but they nonetheless maintained that original sense of improvisation, volatility, surprise.

Almost 250 years later, we'll never know what a Mozart improvisation sounded like. But a work like this C minor Fantasia might be the closest we'll get. It bears all the hallmarks of something conjured on the spot, with an unrestrained emotional freedom that Mozart seldom expressed amid the formal clarity of his keyboard sonatas. But despite its freedoms, the work retains a sense of shape: Mozart divides it into five large, contrasting sections, and brings his sombre opening theme back to close the piece.

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

Fantasia in F minor, D.940

(arr. Maria Grinberg for solo piano)

Allegro molto moderato – Largo – Allegro vivace – Tempo I

Schubert's D.940 might be the least freewheeling fantasia among tonight's collection, but it nonetheless subverts conventional musical forms, if more quietly. Schubert wrote the piece in 1828 – the final year of his brief life – originally as a piano duet (tonight's solo piano adaptation was made by Russian/Ukrainian pianist Maria Grinberg), a form that was all the rage among well-heeled Viennese families with more than one pianist but just a single instrument in their residences. It is questionable, however, whether music of such profound emotion – of hope, despair, and aching resignation – would have been the kind of thing they'd have been accustomed to playing.

The D.940 Fantasia essentially compresses the four movements of a traditional piano sonata into a single span of music. But in doing that, Schubert took a significant step forward to the freer-flowing forms of later works by Liszt and others that would recycle themes from movement to movement, or adapt musical structures for their storytelling potential.

Schubert's first 'movement' opens with a quiet, haunting, somewhat hypnotic theme, later contrasted with a violent, stormier idea. A sudden shift of harmony leads us into Schubert's slow but tense second 'movement', and his third builds powerful momentum as a fast-moving waltz. His opening material returns in the final 'movement': after a gritted-teeth fugue, it veers towards the light, only to retreat back into darkness.

Sergei Prokofiev (1891–1953)

Visions fugitives, Op.22

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| 1 <i>Lentamente</i> | 20 <i>Lento</i> |
| 2 <i>Andante</i> | 13 <i>Allegretto</i> |
| 3 <i>Allegretto</i> | 11 <i>Con vivacità</i> |
| 4 <i>Animato</i> | 14 <i>Feroce</i> |
| 7 <i>Pittoresco (Arpa)</i> | 15 <i>Inquieto</i> |
| 5 <i>Molto giocoso</i> | 16 <i>Dolente</i> |
| 6 <i>Con eleganza</i> | 17 <i>Poetico</i> |
| 8 <i>Commodo</i> | 18 <i>Con una dolce lentezza</i> |
| 9 <i>Allegretto tranquillo</i> | 19 <i>Presto agitatissimo e molto accentuato</i> |
| 10 <i>Ridicolosamente</i> | |
| 12 <i>Assai moderato</i> | |

Like Mozart, Sergei Prokofiev was a pianist as much as he was a composer, and had written several substantial pieces for his instrument – including two of his nine piano sonatas – by the time he completed his *Visions fugitives* in 1917. The *Visions fugitives*, however, are like nothing else in Prokofiev's keyboard output – a set of 20 miniatures (a few barely make it to the 30-second mark) that the composer seemed to be using as a testing ground for experimental ideas before committing to them in larger-scale pieces. The set's quirky title comes from verse: Prokofiev played a few of the pieces to Russian poet Konstantin Balmont in August 1917, and Balmont responded with a sonnet dreamt up on the spot, which included the lines:

'I do not know wisdom – leave that to others –
I only turn fugitive visions into verse.
In each fugitive vision I see worlds...'

Prokofiev considered it the ideal description, and the name stuck.

Federico Colli has made some minor changes to the 20 pieces' original ordering, so that tonight's performance ends in strong confidence rather than (as usually happens) quiet contemplation.

Peter and the Wolf Suite

(arr. Tatiana Nikolayeva for solo piano)

- I *Peter*
- II *The Bird*
- III *The Duck*
- IV *The Cat*
- V *The Grandfather*
- VI *The Wolf*
- VII *Triumphal March*

Prokofiev fled the chaos of post-Revolution Russia in 1918 for the USA and France, only to return, of his own accord, into the maelstrom of Stalin's terror in 1936. Many wondered why. But it was shortly after his return that he took his two young sons to a show at Moscow's Musical Theatre for Children. He was so astonished at the quality of performances for youngsters (something he'd never encountered in the West) that he discussed creating one himself with the Theatre's director, Natalya Sats. The result, *Peter and the Wolf*, was premiered to enormous acclaim on 2 May 1936, and went on to become the go-to piece for parents wanting to introduce their offspring to classical music. It is a charming, touching story of a country boy, his animal friends, and how he protects them (or most of them) from a prowling wolf – as well as saving the wolf from the guns of some rather tipsy-sounding hunters.

It was distinguished Soviet pianist Tatiana Nikolayeva – a long-time friend and valued interpreter of Shostakovich – who transformed Prokofiev's original score for narrator and orchestra into a suite for solo piano. And in doing so, she shuffled around Prokofiev's music so that almost everything is retained but reordered into vivid portraits of the piece's characters.

Hence Peter's theme undergoes five substantial variations in the first movement, followed by a brief movement dedicated to the Bird's fluttering theme. The Duck's movement tells virtually its entire life story, from easy-going pond life to alarmed squawks at the arrival of the Wolf, right up to its desolate calls from within the predator's belly. In its own movement, the Cat chases the Bird up a tree and promptly gets stuck, while Peter's Grandfather warns the boy of lupine dangers, later joining the Cat at the rear of the final, celebratory procession. The Wolf's theme even gets a surprising transformation into the bright major mode in Nikolayeva's sixth movement, indicating that the beast is no longer a danger. If anyone's wondering what's become of the Hunters, rest assured that they kick off Nikolayeva's final 'Triumphal March', before Peter propels the procession to a sprinting close.

Programme note © David Kettle, 2023

Find out more

- ▶ Federico Colli
- ▶ southbankcentre.co.uk