# SOUTHBANK CENTRE

# Imogen Cooper in Recital

## Friday 1 December 2023, 7.30pm
## 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: Autumn/Winter 2023/24.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

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**Repertoire**

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| **Bartók** 14 Bagatelles, Op.6 | 26' |
| **Liszt** Bagatelle without tonality, S.216a | 3' |
| **Beethoven** 15 Variations and Fugue on an original theme in E flat (Eroica), Op.35 | 23' |
| *Interval* | |
| **Bach** Chorale-prelude, Nun freut euch, lieben Christen gmein, BWV.734 arr. Kempff | 3' |
| **Bach** Chorale-prelude, Nun komm' der Heiden Heiland, BWV.659 arr. Busoni | 5' |
| **Dowland** In darkness let me dwell (a recording for voice & lute) | 5' |
| **Thomas Adès** Darknesse visible | 7' |
| **Beethoven** Sonata in A flat, Op.110 | 20' |

**Performer**

Imogen Cooper *piano*

The Dowland recording is by Anne Sofie von Otter (mezzo soprano) and Jakob Lindberg (lute), released on Deutsche Grammophon in 2020.

*This performance lasts approximately 2 hours and 10 minutes and there is a 20-minute interval.*

*In the second half we invite you to hold any applause until the end of the performance.*

The construction of this programme has two strands to it, clearly in each half. The Bartók /Liszt group is a little teaser around tonality; the Liszt *Bagatelle sans tonalité* is a fantastic piece but difficult to programme as very short and not really belonging anywhere. After choosing the Bartók Bagatelles Op.6 – a masterpiece so rarely heard – it occurred to me that Bartók too was playful with tonalities and keys – the first bagatelle is written with the right hand in C sharp minor and the left hand in C minor (fairly novel for 1908) and in the successive bagatelles, he hardly stays in the keys he initially chooses. It seemed the obvious work into which to insert the Liszt, not least as, surprisingly, there were only around 25 years between the two compositions – and both composers were of course from Hungary. I like the idea of a certain aspect of destabilisation when listening, and my insertion of the Liszt in the body of the Bartók work is randomly placed in the sequence.

I hope that this does justice to the wit and originality of both composers.

It certainly makes the return to full tonality in the Beethoven *Eroica* Variations all the more startling, with the call to arms of the opening E flat major chord. There is wit aplenty in this work too, as so often in this particular form of Beethovenian composition – a certain wild energy too, and little melancholy.

In the second half of the recital, I have an image of a descent from joyfulness into dark depths followed by a kind of triumphal resurrection. The first of the Bach chorales is ebullient and optimistic, the second reflective and sombre. Dowland then takes us into real blackness with his extraordinary poem, from which Adès' glittering rejoinder emerges, with its final two lines a direct quote of Dowland's music. Somehow the only exit from there has struck me as being Beethoven's Op.110 Sonata, which comes as balm to the soul as it starts on its own journey, not without profound grief in the two great Ariosi, but terminating in an affirmative return to life that gives us hope and strength to go forward.

**Imogen Cooper**

## Béla Bartók (1881–1945)

### 14 Bagatelles, Op.6

*i* *Molto sostenuto*
*ii* *Allegro giocoso*
*iii* *Andante*
*iv* *Grave*
*v* *Vivo*
*vi* *Lento*
*vii* *Allegretto molto capriccioso*
*viii* *Andante sostenuto*
*xi* *Allegretto grazioso*
*x* *Allegro*
*xi* *Allegretto molto rubato*
*xii* *Rubato*
*xiii* *Elle est morte. Lento funebre*
*viv* *Valse: Ma mie qui danse. Presto.*

Though calling a piece a 'bagatelle' might imply something lightweight, unpretentious, even throwaway, several composers have used the term for music that's far more more pioneering and challenging – almost as if they're implying we shouldn't take their musical experiments entirely seriously. Béla Bartók was 27 when he composed his Op.6 Bagatelles in 1908, and reeling from romantic rejection by violinist Stefi Geyer, who'd infatuated him for quite some time. He vents his despair and anger in the last two of the 14 pieces: No.13 is a sinister funeral march named 'Elle est morte', while the final bagatelle, 'Valse (ma mie qui danse)' is a bitter, grotesque waltz. The rest of the set of pithy miniatures, however, are similarly forward-looking, and daringly experimental, from the pianist's hands playing in two unrelated keys in No.1 to the bracing folk tunes of Nos.4 and 5, from the bare unisons of No.9 to the driving rhythms of No.10.

## Franz Liszt (1811–86)

### Bagatelle without tonality, S.261a

Like Bartók two decades later, Franz Liszt designated one of his most extreme musical explorations a mere 'bagatelle', one 'without tonality', indicating that there's no clear sense of a home key. Liszt's concentrated miniature – written in 1885, the year before his death – certainly explores a pungently rich harmonic language, but it's far from downright dissonant, though the composer leaves things tantalisingly inconclusive at its showy ending. It's been suggested that Liszt drew inspiration for the Bagatelle from a moment in Nikolaus Lenau's version of the Faust legend, in which Mephistopheles takes up the fiddle in a village band to set the damned Doctor dancing with a local beauty. Whatever the truth, there's definitely something devilish about the scintillating, prancing fingerwork that Liszt demands from his pianist.

## Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

### 15 Variations and Fugue on an original theme in E flat (Eroica), Op.35

From supposedly lightweight bagatelles to something far weighter, and more heroic. Beethoven clearly loved the theme he used as the basis for his 1802 Op.35 Variations: it began life entertaining Viennese dancers as one of the 12 Contredanses he composed in 1801 for the Austrian capital's ballrooms, and he went on to use it in his ballet score *The Creatures of Prometheus*, and, most famously, in the finale of his *Eroica* Symphony (the piece that gives today's piano work its nickname). Perhaps it's the tune's very simplicity that inspired him, or the way he could explode it and explore its potential across a whole range of moods and settings – something he did in the Symphony, and something he similarly does in tonight's Variations. Beethoven opens with just the theme's bassline, offering three variations, before moving on to 15 contrasting settings of the tune as a whole, ending with a richly decorated slow section, a mind-bending fugue, and a dazzling conclusion. With hand-crossings, athletic runs across the length of the keyboard, and free-flowing cadenzas, it's a piece that's clearly designed to show off the skills of its performer.

## Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

### Chorale-prelude, Nun freut euch, lieben Christen gmein, BWV.734 arr. Kempff

### Chorale-prelude, Nun komm' der Heiden Heiland, BWV.659 arr. Busoni

After pioneering bagatelles and virtuosic variations, there's a slightly more sober, even spiritual mood to the concert's second half. JS Bach wrote no fewer than 46 chorale preludes for organ, works that take well-known hymn tunes and elaborate them with rippling accompaniments, unusual harmonies and more – often to prepare a congregation to sing the hymn in question itself. A tradition of reworking these organ pieces for piano has continued since the 19th century, bringing Bach's creations out of the church and into concert halls and even private homes. Pianist and composer Wilhelm Kempff made his piano version of Bach's 'Nun freut euch, lieben Christen gmein' (Now rejoice, dear Christians) in 1926, reimagining the original organ piece from Bach's Weimar years between 1708 and 1717 as a brisk and joyful piano creation. Italian composer Ferruccio Busoni – a devoted admirer of Bach – saw transcribing, adapting and freely composing as part of the same musical continuum, and one that Bach himself had also explored. The original Chorale Prelude 'Nun komm' der Heiden Heiland' (Come, saviour of the nations) weaves a web of sometimes anguished lines around its 1524 hymn tune, with words by Martin Luther. Busoni's piano version maintains the original's poignant interplay of melody and accompaniment voices in music that's sometimes dramatic and despairing, other times moving and meditative.

## John Dowland (1562/3–1626)

### In darkness let me dwell (a recording for voice & lute)

Composer, lutenist and singer John Dowland was a musical superstar in the 16th and 17th centuries, with an output of often deeply troubled, melancholic lute songs that charmed and captivated admirers across a growing English middle class, who'd even take up the instrument to emulate him (Henry VIII, for example, insisted that his three children – who'd become Edward VI, 'Bloody' Mary and Elizabeth I – each learned the lute). Published in 1610, 'In darkness let me dwell' is one of Dowland's most bleakly beautiful creations, a setting of an anonymous poem (see below), included in the 1606 *Funeral Teares* collection by John Coprario, whose writer abandons light, music, or any sense of consolation, preferring the peace of the grave. The song's grinding dissonances, halting structure and apparently premature, cut-off ending only serve to emphasise its overall despair and resignation.

### In darkness let me dwell

In darknesse let mee dwell
the ground shall sorrow be,
The roofe Dispaire to barre
all cheerfull light from mee,
The wals of marble black
that moistened still shall weepe,
My musicke, hellish, jarring sounds
to banish friendly sleepe.
Thus wedded to my woes,
and bedded to my Tombe,
O let me living die,
till death doe come.

## Thomas Adès (b.1971)

### Darknesse visible

By his own description, British composer Thomas Adès 'exploded' the Dowland lute song we've just heard in his 1992 piano piece. His aim, however, was 'of illuminating the song from within… No notes have been added; indeed, some have been removed.' His austerely powerful work is a far more radical transformation than Kempff and Busoni's piano reimaginings of Bach, though its piercing accents, its wavering tremolos and its ghostly, blurred harmonies provide a compelling contemporary perspective on Dowland's deep melancholy.

## Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

### Piano Sonata in A flat, Op.110

*Moderato cantabile molto espressivo*

*Allegro molto*

*Adagio ma non troppo – Fuga allegro ma non troppo*

From darkness and death to spiritual transcendence. Beethoven the young pioneer, out to demonstrate his compositional and pianist prowess in the earlier *Eroica* Variations, had become a very different composer two decades later, when he came to write his final trilogy of piano sonatas: more contemplative, philosophical, even otherworldly. Op.110 is the middle sonata in the trilogy, composed in 1821 and published the following year, and it packs a huge amount of drama, insight and innovation into its relatively brief 20-minute span. A prayer-like theme (marked 'amiable') opens its tender first movement, whose ethereal beauty is quickly dispelled by the boisterous, earthy second movement, based on two German folksongs. To end, Beethoven effectively combines two separate movements: first a tragic, song-like lament (you might even hear certain resonances from Dowland), and second a vigorous, life-affirming fugue that builds to a shattering climax. The lamenting song returns, exhausted, only for the music to gather confidence (Beethoven indicates 'little by little gaining new life') as it heads towards its joyful, transcendent climax.



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