

# SOUTHBANK CENTRE

## Víkingur Ólafsson & Yuja Wang: Two Pianos

Friday 1 November 2024, 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.

However you choose to experience the endlessly inventive world of classical music, we're so glad that you're doing it here with us. Welcome to Classical Music: Autumn/Winter 2024/25.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

### Repertoire

Berio Wasserklavier (Water piano) arr. for 2 pianos	2'
Schubert Fantasia in F minor, D.940	19'
Cage Experiences No.1	6'
Nancarrow Player Piano Study No.6 arr. Thomas Adès	4'
John Adams Hallelujah Junction	16'

### Interval

Arvo Pärt Hymn to a great city	3'
Rachmaninov Symphonic Dances arr. for 2 pianos	35'

### Performers

Víkingur Ólafsson *piano*  
Yuja Wang *piano*

*This performance lasts approximately 2 hours.  
There is a 20-minute interval.*

This programme by tonight's star duo offers a dance through time that takes us from the early Romantic era right up to the current day, from Schubert revolutionising the meek piano duet via the greatest pianist in history – Rachmaninov – in the two-piano version of his *Symphonic Dances*. The US also features heavily, both as a place of sanctuary for the émigré in times of war and a haven where maverick composers have found space, literally and metaphorically, to create.

Yuja Wang and Víkingur Ólafsson start with the small scale in terms of duration if not impact, with Berio's *Wasserklavier* (Water piano), a piece dating from 1965 and originally composed for a single piano – the first in a sequence named after the four elements and designed as encores. Much of *Wasserklavier* is extremely quiet, drawing the audience away from the everyday into a world of heightened sensitivity, while also referring back to the piano music of Schubert and Brahms.

So it sets the scene for the Schubert Fantasia in F minor quite naturally. Here is a work that has tempted many notable star pianists to share a piano bench before tonight's pair – just think of Radu Lupu and Murray Perahia, Sviatoslav Richter and Benjamin Britten, Martha Argerich and Sergio Tiempo, or Maria João Pires and Ricardo Castro. Its mastery should come as no surprise given the fact that it dates from 1828, the last year of Schubert's short life, one which also yielded the C major String Quintet, *Schwanengesang* and his final three piano sonatas. In the Fantasia he draws us in with the simplest of dotted-rhythm melodies against a murmuring accompaniment, very much in the manner of one of his *lieder*. It's simple but daunting to bring off in performance – as treacherous in its own way as the voicing of the opening chords of Beethoven's Fourth Piano Concerto. Any hint of the physical limitations of the keyboard are subsumed into a work whose climaxes have an almost symphonic weight and heft, and whose emotional desolation is laid bare in its closing moments.

After this, what could be more different than the world of arch experimentalist John Cage (1912–92)? Except that sonically the understated qualities of *Experiences No.1* seem to channel music of an earlier era. It also, in its sheer spareness and use of only the white keys of the piano, references Cage's hero Erik Satie. The piece's reticence is perhaps partly down to the fact that, like so much of Cage's music, it was created to accompany a dance piece choreographed by Merce Cunningham, a collaboration unveiled on 9 January 1945 at the Hunter Playhouse in New York.

Conlon Nancarrow (1912–97), fellow American experimentalist, born the same year as Cage, followed youthful experiences

playing jazz with formal studies with such traditionalists as Roger Sessions and Walter Piston: it is perhaps no surprise that he didn't find his true musical voice until 1940, when he emigrated to Mexico. The problem of finding musicians capable of dealing with the extreme complexities of his writing, particularly rhythmically, was finally solved when he swapped human endeavour for the player piano, and the resulting 49 studies offer an extraordinary digest of styles, moods and colours. György Ligeti once described Nancarrow's music as 'Utterly original, enjoyable, perfectly constructed but at the same time emotional'; perhaps it is these qualities that have tempted current-day composers to rework them for live musicians. Listening to Thomas Adès' arrangement of No.6 for two pianos, you might not detect just how difficult its rhythms are: only when you see the score do its challenges become apparent – and how delicious is that tension between something devised for a machine but realised by two flesh-and-blood musicians.

John Adams (born 1947) has written relatively little for solo piano and only a single piece for two pianos, but both tonight's pianists are keen proponents of his third piano concerto, *Must the Devil Have All the Good Tunes?*. It's an appropriately memorable title for an effervescent piece, something at which Adams has always excelled. The name of his 1996 duo *Hallelujah Junction* came from a 'small truck stop on Highway 49 in the High Sierras on the California-Nevada border near where I have a small cabin ... it was a case of a good title needing a piece, so I obliged.' A neat explanation, but hardly the whole story, for Adams very deliberately embeds into the fabric of the music a sense of praise by taking the three-syllable Hebrew equivalent of 'Hallelujah' and repeating it over and over again, forming not only the piece's opening but also – transformed – the basis of the slower inner movement. From the off, you're aware of the mastery with which Adams exploits the similar sonorities of the two pianos, at times discombobulating the ear with shifts in the musical pulse, at others demanding the utmost cooperation between the two musicians in fiercely aggressive sequences of chords. The skittishly driving finale culminates in an all-out frenzy of boogie-woogie marked *fff* and daring the two musicians to push at the limits of what is physically possible.

From a truck stop to a celebration of New York in *Hymn to a great city* by Arvo Pärt (born 1935). He composed it in 1984 for two pianos, revising it 20 years later, and it was unveiled by pianists Cheryl Seltzer and Joel Sachs at a concert dedicated to his music at Lincoln Center on 10 March 1984, a major event for the Estonian, whose music had, up to that time, been little played in the West. *Hymn* is striking for the naturalness with which he transfers to the keyboard medium the *tintinnabuli* style of writing he'd developed (roughly, the 'ringing of bells'), creating in three-and-a-half minutes an almost prayer-like intensity through the simplest of harmonies and the refulgence of the key itself, C sharp major.

Yuja Wang and Víkingur Ólafsson end with a work that is – strange to think – nearly contemporary with the Cage piece. Rachmaninov's *Symphonic Dances* dates from 1940 but unashamedly harks back to an earlier era, the Russia he had been forced to leave in 1917. The piece was commissioned by Eugene Ormandy for his Philadelphia Orchestra and as his last major work, offers a fitting summation of Rachmaninov's compositional life. Though we know it best in its orchestral garb, Rachmaninov originally finished it in a short score for two pianos, and hearing the *Symphonic Dances* shorn of its orchestral colours means that other qualities come to the fore, not least the extremes of the writing itself. Dynamics, for instance, seem still more dramatic as we move from the haunting, tentative opening phrases to the giant stomping chords; rhythms are laid bare, the dance of each movement sounding still more urgent. Curiously, too, whereas you might expect something as searing as the famous saxophone melody to be lessened emotionally when transferred to keyboard, somehow it isn't, such is the genius of the way its cradled within the texture. More's the pity, then, that when Rachmaninov offered to record this version of the *Symphonic Dances* with Vladimir Horowitz, his record company, RCA, turned him down.

Programme notes © Harriet Smith, 2024

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#### Find out more

- ▶ Víkingur Ólafsson
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