SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Maurizio Pollini

Friday 23 June 2023, 7.30pm

Royal Festival 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

Schumann Arabesque in C for piano, Op.18	6'
Schumann Fantasie in C, Op.17	32'
Interval	
Chopin Mazurka in C minor, Op.56 No.3	5'
Chopin Barcarolle in F sharp, Op.60	9'
Chopin Scherzo No.1 in B minor, Op.20	9'

Performer

Maurizio Pollini *piano*

This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 50 minutes, including a 20-minute interval.

Robert Schumann (1810-56)

Arabeske in C for piano, Op.18

Clara Wieck (who would later become Clara Schumann) is the crucial figure who hovers behind both of tonight's opening pieces (as she does behind so much of Robert Schumann's music, in fact). They had first met when Schumann moved into the Wiecks' Leipzig household in 1830, as a 20-year-old pupil of Clara's renowned piano teacher father Friedrich. She was just 11 at the time, but their admiration and love grew steadily over the ensuing years, so much so that Clara's father effectively banned their relationship, outraged at the idea of his daughter hitching up with such a dissolute dreamer.

In 1838, Schumann was attempting to dispel that reputation in Vienna, then capital of the musical world, where he hoped to find himself both a publisher and an appreciative audience for his lyrical but idiosyncratic keyboard music. Viennese music publisher Tobias Haslinger told him: 'You'll regret ever having come here.' Haslinger wasn't wrong: by the spring of the following year, Schumann was back in Leipzig.

But among the music he had created during his ill-fated Viennese excursion was tonight's opening piece. It is music in which Schumann surely aimed to transform his sadness at being alone in an unfamiliar city – and at being separated from his beloved Clara – into great elegance, charm, and a quiet melancholy too. His unusual title has a double meaning: it refers not only to the piece's delicate tendrils of melody, but also to its unconventional, almost organic shape, as if it's music that has simply grown.

The *Arabeske* opens with a rippling melody that feels bathed in bright sunlight, though two contrasting episodes beckon us into the shadows. Following the return of his luminous opening music, however, Schumann seems to allow his material simply to dissolve, and time to expand, in a mood of wistful yearning.

Fantasie in C, Op.17

Let's skip back two years in Schumann and Clara's relationship. In January 1836, Friedrich Wieck removed his daughter to Dresden in an attempt to separate the young lovers. (It didn't work: Schumann made a clandestine trip to see her, and they eventually married in 1840 following lengthy legal tussles). But Schumann was nonetheless distraught at this enforced separation, and poured his feelings into a piano work for her that he portentously titled *Ruins*: 'the most passionate [piece] I have ever composed; it is a profound lament on your account,' he later wrote to Clara.

It was another figure, however, who would exert a profound influence on what later became Schumann's Op.17 Fantasie: Ludwig van Beethoven. Schumann was an ardent admirer – he was 16 when Beethoven died in 1827 – and planned to transform his *Ruins* into the first movement of a larger 'grand sonata' in honour of the earlier composer. Once the piece had been published, Schumann would donate any revenue to funds for a Beethoven memorial, a project being championed by Franz Liszt. When it came to publication, however, Schumann got cold feet, naming the piece simply Fantasie, but nonetheless dedicating it to Liszt (though there's no record of any money from it contributing to the Beethoven memorial, which was unveiled in Bonn in 1845).

Despite its complex genesis, however, Schumann's Fantasie is widely considered one of his greatest piano works, certainly one of his most original. That originality lies not only in its unusual fast-fast-slow arrangement of movements, nor even in the fearsome technical challenges he sets his performer (not least in the fistfuls of notes that resound through the second movement's joyful march). Instead, the Fantasie's real originality lies in reshaping and even disregarding conventional forms and ideas in favour of free-flowing expression – something Schumann achieves exquisitely in the poignant intimacy of his dream-like closing movement.

Fryderyk Chopin (1810-49)

Mazurka in C minor, Op.56 No.3

Fryderyk Chopin wrote nearly 60 piano mazurkas over the course of his relatively brief career. In reimagining this traditional Polish dance for salons and concert halls, it's probably not going too far to suggest that he was aiming to elevate a rustic folk form into something that would charm and entertain high society, while also looking back wistfully from his Paris home to his roots far further east.

Comprising three mazurkas, his Op.56 set was published in 1844 and probably written a year or two earlier. The third, which we hear tonight, is so complex and finely crafted that you might even have to remind yourself that it's supposed to be dance music. Chopin begins simply, with almost just the bare bones of music that will later develop into the piece's main theme, which blossoms in rich, shifting harmonies that look ahead to those of Wagner and even early Schoenberg.

Barcarolle in F sharp, Op.60

Unlike those dozens of mazurkas, Chopin wrote just a single barcarolle. It was clearly one of his favourite pieces, however: he frequently included it in recitals during the last years of his short life. Supposedly evoking the gentle lapping of water in the Venetian canals, and the melancholy song of the city's gondoliers, the barcarolle as a form had become something of a cliché by the time Chopin composed his in 1845-46, through operatic incarnations by Rossini, Donizetti and Auber, and also the 'Venetian Gondola Songs' from Mendelssohn's piano *Songs Without Words* (which Chopin is known to have taught to his keyboard students). Chopin, however, never visited Venice, and his only encounter with Italy was on a boat trip from Marseilles to Genoa. His Barcarolle retains the indelible features of the form – the rocking rhythmic accompaniment, the sweetly harmonised melody – but transforms them through the delicacies of his musical imagination, adding sparkles of colour from high on the keyboard, glittering trills and richly coloured harmonies. The piece floats between poetic reveries and more passionate outbursts, as two melodies emerge sweetly, swelling to climaxes before subsiding again.

Scherzo No.1 in B minor, Op.20

As in the Mazurka and the Barcarolle we've just heard, in the four Scherzos that he wrote, Chopin took an established musical form and made it entirely his own. That said, the supposedly playful, jokey scherzo genre had long carried a sense of mischief and darkness – even demonic energy – from the complex, ambiguous scherzos that Beethoven introduced into many of his symphonies.

The first three of Chopin's Scherzos, however, take things to another level entirely in terms of sheer drama, emotion and ambition. The set was published in 1835, and is thought to have been written a couple of years earlier – perhaps, it's been suggested, after Chopin had learned of the brutal Russian suppression of the November Uprising of 1830 in his native Poland. London publisher Wessel & Co later released the First Scherzo under the name of *The Infernal Banquet*: it's a title that's stuck, and you can understand why.

Two piercing, long-held chords set the expressionist intensity right from the opening, before Chopin's main theme flashes by at lightning speed. A contrasting central section reflects serenely on the Polish Christmas carol 'Sleep, little Jesus', before the nervy, quicksilver music returns, leading to keyboard hammer-blows and a violent but brilliant conclusion.

Programme notes © David Kettle, 2023

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