SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Paul Lewis: Beethoven, Brahms & Mozart

Sunday 4 May 2025, 3pm
Queen Elizabeth 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: Spring/Summer 2025.

Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Beethoven Piano Sonata in C minor, Op.10 No.1 18'

Mozart Piano Sonata in C, K.330 18'

Interval

Brahms 3 Intermezzi, Op.117 15'

Schubert Piano Sonata in G, D.894 37'

Performer

Paul Lewis *piano*

This performance lasts approximately 2 hours including an interval.

Unless you are lucky enough to have 'perfect pitch' – when you can effortlessly identify a note or key – it is easy to imagine that a composer's choice of key may be slightly arbitrary, dictated by the demands of instruments or performers, or even chosen on a whim. Yet even without this gift, the listener can discern that keys have distinct characters and colours, so that choosing a key can seem as personal to a composer as choosing what to wear – something bright and outgoing, or dark and demure? (In the film *This Is Spinal Tap*, a character speaks of D minor as being 'the saddest of all keys', and the joke works because it's exactly how many musicians approach their craft.)

The composers on this programme all selected keys with great care, associating them with distinct moods. For **Beethoven**, C minor was of particular significance. As the pianist and scholar Charles Rosen suggested: 'Beethoven in C minor has come to symbolise his artistic character… C minor does not show Beethoven at his most subtle, but it does give him to us in his most extrovert form'. One of Beethoven's early explorations of this key is the Sonata Op.10 No.1, composed between 1796 and 1798. All three Op.10 Sonatas were published in Vienna in 1798 'for the Harpsichord or for the Fortepiano' – a commercially astute but inaccurate description intended to boost sales among those who still owned a harpsichord, even though the music is not suitable for the instrument.

The Op.10 Sonatas are more experimental than Beethoven's previous sonatas, and show remarkable maturity. If we listened to the C minor Sonata without knowing it was an early work, would we guess? Already we hear Beethoven taking us in unexpected harmonic directions and plumbing emotional depths. Opening with a striking ascending figure, the first movement is dominated by dotted rhythms, its unsettled quality emphasised by shifts between short statements and longer phrases. The lyrical slow movement combines long-breathed melody with a gentle accompaniment of tenderness and serenity. Both Beethoven and Mozart accentuated the inherent drama of C minor with pieces that begin in octaves, and the finale is a fine example. Composer and teacher Carl Czerny wrote of the movement's 'fantastical humour', and even at this early stage in his career Beethoven deals in surprise, ending the work rather abruptly.

For **Mozart**, G minor was 'the saddest of all keys', but he tended to use C major for works at the opposite end of the emotional spectrum. The Sonata K.330 in C begins a set of three, K.330–332, the exact composition date of which is uncertain. It has been suggested that these works were written in the wake of the premiere of his opera *Idomeneo* early in 1781, or during his arrival in Vienna in the spring of the same year, but it is now thought most likely that they were composed slightly later, in 1783, possibly while visiting his family back in Salzburg; publication followed in 1784. The Sonata K.330 exudes something of the refinement of JC Bach combined with Mozart's more characteristic warmth.

The unhurried opening movement brims with melodic charm; even the central section is an excuse for yet more melodic material rather than any substantial development. The singing slow movement includes an enigmatic contrasting section in F minor that is recalled in the coda – a late addition by Mozart, this unifying device does not appear in the manuscript but is in the first edition. The finale creates the impression of solo and ensemble in its contrasting textures, and like the opening movement is one of great melodic richness.

Brahms was acutely aware of the precedents set by his hero Beethoven, and his choice of the key of C minor for his First Symphony is telling. Yet his own approach to key and key relationships was highly individual, and he was adept at creating nuanced connections between key areas and thematic elements – so much so that Arnold Schoenberg later hailed him as a musical pioneer in his essay 'Brahms the Progressive'. Brahms wrote his Three Intermezzi Op.117 in Bad Ischl during 1892, near the end of his life, describing them to a friend as 'Wiegenlieder meiner Schmerzen' (Lullabies of my sorrow). He was at least partly referring to the recent loss of his friend, the pianist and composer Elisabeth von Herzogenberg.

The first piece, in noble E flat major, is prefaced by words from the Scottish ballad 'Lady Anne Bothwell's Lament': 'Schlaf sanft mein Kind' (Sleep softly, my child), Brahms creating the atmosphere of a lullaby via a delicate texture and gently rocking 6/8 metre. The second Intermezzo, in dark-hued B flat minor, is a fine example of the combination of structural tautness and harmonic freedom found in Brahms' late piano music. The third, in C sharp minor (the key of Beethoven's *Moonlight* Sonata), is thought to be linked to another Scottish ballad, beginning 'Oh woe! Oh woe, deep in the valley'. This is one of Brahms' most broodingly beautiful late piano pieces, opening in creeping bare octaves – a figure that later returns within a richly-harmonised texture – while his love of syncopation is to the fore in the mysterious, subterranean central section.

Schubert's sensitivity to key and key relationships was exceptional; he possessed an extraordinarily imaginative gift for modulation. Like Brahms, he was profoundly influenced by Beethoven – Beethoven's C minor Variations directly influenced Schubert's late C minor Sonata, D.958. But it is the sonata that precedes this, the Sonata in G, D.894 of 1826, that concludes this recital, and its first movement is almost a homage to its home key, the sublime opening and closing sections lingering on and exploring G major's sonic properties. This is Paul Lewis' favourite of all Schubert's sonatas; as Lewis said in an interview with *The Guardian*: 'He wrote a great deal of dark music, particularly during the last two years of his life, and although there's always some hope and light, this is unusual: it's more optimistic, lighter than the other works written in that period. The first time I heard it was in 1989 at the Royal Festival Hall; I came down from Manchester to hear Sviatoslav Richter play. The first movement took 35 minutes, the tempo was so slow. Schubert always has a real intimacy and tenderness, but there is something very personal about this – even that first chord. If I could have only one note, I'd pick that first chord.'

This opening G major chord – which resembles that which opens Beethoven's Piano Concerto No.4 in G – heralds music of self-contained stillness, unfolding not as clear melody but as an atmosphere; music writer Alfred Einstein described it as 'shot through with the radiance of an eternally melancholy beauty.' It was this dream-like, expansive nature that led to the first movement being labelled 'fantasie' when the work was published in 1827 (the last of only three of Schubert's sonatas to be published during his lifetime); the piece has sometimes been called 'Fantasie Sonata' as a result.

The initial introspection is balanced by a dancing secondary theme, developed into contrapuntal complexity in the central section. The Andante extends the magical atmosphere with music of gentle grace, contrasted with more robust interludes. The Menuet's arresting opening chords are juxtaposed with a trio section of otherworldly wistfulness, and repeated chords also feature in the theme of the light rondo finale, which features some characteristically deft shifts between keys before the coda rounds things off in a spirit of deep contentment. This was Richter's favourite Schubert sonata, too, and it is powerful to imagine him playing it here in the Southbank Centre while Paul Lewis sat transfixed in the audience. As Robert Schumann put it, this is 'the most perfect sonata in form and spirit'.

Find out more

- Paul Lewis
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