

SOUTHBANK CENTRE

Igor Levit: Bach, Brahms & Beethoven

Friday 27 September 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.

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Toks Dada, Head of Classical Music, Southbank Centre

Repertoire

Bach Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D minor, BWV.903	12'
Brahms 4 Ballades, Op.10	23'
Beethoven Symphony No.7 arr. Liszt for piano	42'

The three-voiced fugue's subject is unusually long, involving several motivic cells which Bach mines for development potential as the piece's rich and colourful complexity unfolds. It eventually builds to a full-textured climax before a triumphant conclusion.

Performers

Igor Levit *piano*

This performance lasts approximately 1 hour and 25 minutes without an interval.

Johann Sebastian Bach (1685–1750)

Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue in D minor, BWV.903 (c. 1723)

JS Bach's first biographer, Johann Nikolaus Forkel, was astounded by the *Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue*, and for a good reason. 'I have taken infinite pains to discover another piece of this kind by Bach, but in vain,' he wrote. 'This fantasia is unique, and never had its like.'

Chromatic Fantasia and Fugue probably dates from before 1723; possibly from Bach's time as Kapellmeister at Cöthen, in which capacity he went to Berlin to purchase a new two-manual harpsichord for the court. Its many manuscripts – 37 of them – attest to its origins in improvisation plus continual revisions. The powerful personality that it displays helped to make it a favourite for musicians, from Bach's sons Wilhelm Friedemann and Carl Philipp Emanuel to Franz Liszt.

A brilliant, toccata-like opening gradually fills out to encompass daring, utterly unpredictable harmonies. An episode imitating recitative may have provided a vital model for Beethoven in his sonatas Op.31 No.2 and Op.110.

Johannes Brahms (1833–97)

4 Ballades, Op.10 (1854)

'Here is one who comes as if sent from God!' the pianist and composer Clara Schumann wrote upon encountering the 20-year-old Brahms for the first time, in October 1853. 'He played us sonatas and scherzos of his own, all of them rich in fantasy, depth of feeling and mastery of form...! Her husband, Robert Schumann, equally bowled over, trumpeted Brahms' talent in the magazine he had founded, the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*: 'a young blood by whose cradle graces and heroes kept watch...!'

Brahms' three piano sonatas marked the arrival of a fiery young virtuoso; but the *Ballades* Op.10, composed about a year later in 1854, occupy a different world. That February, Robert Schumann suffered a cataclysmic mental collapse and attempted suicide. He subsequently went into a mental hospital at Eendenich, near Bonn. Clara, bereft, found herself bringing up seven children alone. Brahms became her right-hand man, helping to manage the household and look after the little ones. On the one hand, the youthful composer had to see his mentor in catastrophic decline; on the other hand, he himself had developed a desperate passion for Clara. The experience profoundly affected the rest of his life and his music.

In the early 1890s, Brahms created his late piano works especially for the ageing Clara to play. The *4 Ballades*, Op.10, his first venture into shorter genres, foreshadows the late pieces both in form – mostly three-part 'A-B-A' – and in introspective atmosphere. They fall into two pairs: the first two respectively in D minor and major, the second two B minor and major.

No.1 is – unusually for Brahms – based on a 'programme': the anonymous ballad 'Edward, Edward'. A mother questions

her son about the blood on his sword. After various evasions, Edward admits he has slain his father – and finally curses his mother for making him do so. Brahms reflects the first lines, with the repeated name, in the opening melody. The central section builds dramatically as the narrative intensifies.

No.2 contrasts a nocturnal atmosphere with a second idea, taut and rhythmically obsessive. No.3 is a terse, sparse and quick-witted scherzo. The final piece hovers between major and minor, over descending arpeggiated figures – a pattern that Brahms used often in his late pieces. Its central section, in D sharp minor (quite similar to the slow movement, in the enharmonic equivalent, E flat minor, of Brahms' 1865 Horn Trio) plumbs unsettling depths, with two-against-three rhythm and dark, ambiguous harmonies. This idea returns to end the work, a hinted reminiscence of the first melody drifting above.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827)

Symphony No.7 arr. Liszt for piano (1811)

Franz Liszt met Beethoven – or so he said – when he was about 11. A child prodigy pianist, he was a pupil of Carl Czerny, Beethoven's disciple, who persuaded the great man to accept a visit, despite his aversion to prodigies.

Liszt wrote, years later, that he had played Beethoven a piece by Ries; next Beethoven asked him to perform a Bach fugue, then transpose it into another key. 'The Master's darkly glowing gaze was fixed upon me penetratingly. Yet suddenly a benevolent smile broke up his gloomy features, Beethoven became quite close, bent over me, laid his hand on my head and repeatedly stroked my hair. "Devil of a fellow," he whispered, "such a young rascal!"' Emboldened, Liszt played the first movement of his host's Piano Concerto No.1. 'When I had ended, Beethoven seized both my hands, kissed me on the forehead and said gently "Off with you! You are a happy fellow, for you will give happiness and joy to many other people. There is nothing better or greater than that."'

Liszt's vast output included numerous transcriptions, from Bach organ works to extracts of Wagner, besides virtuoso 'paraphrases' of popular operas. The latter were liberally embellished to impress audiences; but the transcriptions are different, faithful to the score and minutely attentive to instrumental timbre and suitable pianistic renderings of orchestral textures. He described himself in this context as 'a conscientious translator, who grasps the spirit of the work along with the letter and who thus helps to spread the understanding of the masters and the appreciation of the beautiful.'

It was in 1850, well after his retirement from performing, that Liszt suggested the arrangement of all nine Beethoven symphonies to the publishers Breitkopf. He had tackled the Symphony No.5 as early as 1835–37; Nos.6 and 7 followed in the late 1830s and the slow movement of the *Eroica* in 1841. Eventually the complete set was published in 1865.

In the preface, Liszt wrote: '...there is no meditation upon them nor study of them too profound. Consequently, any and every mode of propagating and popularising them has its place.' Moreover, galloping progress in piano manufacture had improved the instrument's potential: 'With the vast development of its harmonic power, the piano tends to take to itself the whole orchestral repertoire ... the only advantages it leaves to the orchestra ... are the variety of timbre and the effect of numbers.'

Beethoven had begun the Symphony No.7 in summer 1811 in the spa town of Tiplitz (Teplice) and considered it 'one of my most excellent works.' It was first heard at the hall of Vienna University on 8 December 1813, during a concert Beethoven organised and conducted to raise funds for soldiers wounded at the Battle of Hanau. Some of Vienna's leading musicians played in the orchestra, including the leader Ignaz Schuppanzigh, whose quartet premiered much of Beethoven's chamber music, the composer and violinist Louis Spohr and the composers Johann Nepomuk Hummel and Giacomo Meyerbeer. The symphony was rapturously received and history was made.

Wagner once termed the first movement 'the apotheosis of the dance'; its near-Bacchanalian quality calls to mind Schiller's *Ode to Joy*, which Beethoven had longed to set to music since his youth (finally doing so in his Symphony No.9 over a decade later). Next, the celebrated Allegretto mingles the idea of a passacaglia – the opening bars on the low strings underpin most of what follows – with a second theme forming a contrasting, radiant anthem of hope. The scherzo is rumbunctious and its trio section rustic; and the finale, composed allegedly in a 'frenzy', propels this irrepressible symphony towards a joyous close.

Programme notes © Jessica Duchon, 2024

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