

MISHKA RUSHDIE MOMEN
TUESDAY 17 MAY 2022

Beethoven Piano Sonata No 6 in F, Op 10 No 2
Prokofiev *Visions fugitives*, Op 22 (selection)
Mendelssohn Variations Sérieuses, Op 54

INTERVAL

Byrd Fantasia in A minor MB13
Ligeti Étude No 10 *Der Zauberlehrling*
Schubert Fantasie in C, D760 *Wanderer-Fantasy*

Piano Sonata in F major, Op 10/2
Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

- 1 Allegro
- 2 Allegretto
- 3 Presto

The three sonatas comprising Beethoven's Op 10 group were all conceived in Vienna around 1796 during a period when he was beginning to establish himself as a composer. He was also steadily building a network of friends within Viennese society, cultivating members of its social elite who would become patrons of his works. It was to the Countess Anna Margarete von Browne, the wife of a wealthy officer in Vienna's Imperial Service, that he dedicated his Op 10 piano sonatas. Progress on the works was interrupted and they were not published until 1798.

The second of the Op 10 sonatas, like the first, is cast in three movements and occupies what might be termed a fun-infused interlude between the brooding first sonata and the brilliance of the third. Beethoven's humour is readily apparent in the F major work, evident in the puckish opening bars and the rejection of

this material in the central development, an absence considered a private joke in the late 18th century. Instead, Beethoven employs the last three detached notes of the exposition and parades them for all they're worth, showing off his skill in a look-what-I-can-do gesture that transforms something utterly prosaic into a passage of remarkable resourcefulness. One further tongue-in cheek stroke is his return of the opening material in the 'wrong' key – deliberately hoodwinking listeners with an unconventional D major rather than the anticipated F major.

By contrast the minor key 'Allegretto', set in motion by plain octaves, is a more sober affair. Written in the form of a minuet and trio, the central panel is of great expressive beauty with the reprise of the opening section expanded to accommodate a syncopated version of the minuet. Humour returns for the brief sonata form finale, launched by a playful fanfare figure of accumulating voices. Its manner shares something of a fugato for wind ensemble beginning with a bassoon, but Beethoven nose-thumbs academic procedure and places the three entries in the wrong order. The revelry continues and builds towards the climatic reprise, where the fugal entries resume, from which point the music hurtles towards the finishing line with no small measure of impish glee.

Visions fugitives, Op 22 (selection)
Sergei Prokofiev (1891-1953)

- 1 Lentamente
- 2 Andante
- 4 Allegretto
- 7 Animato Più sostenuto
- 9 Allegretto tranquillo
- 11 Con vivacità
- 14 Feroce
- 17 Poetico
- 18 Con una dolce lentezza
- 19 Presto agitatissimo e molto accentuato
- 20 Lento irrealmente

As a student at the St Petersburg Conservatory Prokofiev won notoriety as an *enfant terrible* and acclaim as a formidably gifted pianist whose muscular style was to characterise many of his early compositions. The twenty miniatures that comprise *Visions Fugitives* (1917-1919) were finished shortly after completing his studies and are amongst his most popular and accessible works. Gone are the abrasive, discordant harmonies and driving motor rhythms found in his Piano Concerto No 2 and *Scythian Suite*, now mostly replaced with a restraint seemingly at odds with the turbulent times in which he lived. It is almost as if the composer was untouched by the Great War and the overthrow of the Tsar and wished to seek refuge in writing pure music, much of which is atmospheric and intimate.

The title, *Visions Fugitives*, is taken from a couplet within a short stanza by the Russian Symbolist poet Konstantin Balmont. His lines 'In every fleeting glimpse I see worlds / Full of the changing play of rainbow hues' prompted a series of evocative images: impressionistic and dream-like (1, 17 and 20), bell-like (2), harp-like (7), playful (3 and 11), grotesque (4 and 9) and languorous (18). It is only in the thirty seconds of number 19 (*Presto agitatissimo e molto accentuato*) where Prokofiev offers a musical response to the February revolution of 1917. Of its nervous energy and insistent rhythms, the composer later apologetically offered that 'It was more a reflection of the crowd's excitement than of the inner essence of revolution'.

Variations sérieuses in D minor, Op 54
Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847)

Positioned midway between 'Lobgesang' and his 'Scottish' symphony, Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses* of 1841 was conceived as part of an anthology of piano works by several composers, including Chopin and Liszt, who had been invited to contribute to a publication intended to raise funds for a Beethoven monument. Mendelssohn's title, *Dix morceaux brillants*, was aimed at distancing himself from the superficial collections of variations he could anticipate from his near contemporaries Czerny and Moscheles. And in its earnest theme, combining beauty and pathos, Mendelssohn pays respect to a composer who had been a clear influence some years earlier on his String Quartet in A minor, Op 13.

From a composer who declared 'The essence of beauty is unity in variety', Mendelssohn's *Variations sérieuses* more than adequately fulfil that maxim. With one exception, his seventeen variations remain within the home key, yet there is much harmonic variety, and the main elements of the theme can be identified throughout. Following the sombre 16-bar theme, the first four variations steadily increase in tempo and rhythmic activity, the fourth presented as a two-part canon in unceasing staccato semi-quavers. Restless syncopations shape the fifth variation, while the leaping chords of the sixth explore the far reaches of the keyboard. The animated chords and ascending flourishes of the seventh lead directly to a display of technical brilliance in the next pair of variations. Tensions dissolve in the fugato of the tenth variation (surely something Beethoven would have appreciated), while warmth of expression inhabits the poignant eleventh, its melancholy swept aside in the percussive agitation of the twelfth. Its neighbour introduces the opening theme in the middle voice beneath right hand scintillation, and the fourteenth variation, carries a more consolatory tone, its chorale-like manner now bathed in a glowing D major. The home key returns for another gently syncopated variation, before tensions build towards a magnificent *Allegro vivace*. This ends with an exhilarating *Presto* prefaced by a brief reminder of the opening theme over a tremolo left hand that precedes a toccata-like conclusion.

Fantasia in A minor, MB13 William Byrd (1537-1623)

Unlike the relatively short-lived Mendelssohn, William Byrd enjoyed a ripe old age that extended well into his eighties. Known by his peers as 'Britanniae Musica Parens' (the father of British music), he held prominent church positions during a period of religious turmoil (organist at Lincoln Cathedral and the Chapel Royal) and wrote sacred music for both the Catholic and Anglican Rite. His keyboard music is no less significant, and his fantasies are sublime creations of colourful, complex and often humorous subjects. Indeed, Byrd singlehandedly created an English keyboard 'school' in the second half of the sixteenth century whose influence continued to exert itself well after his own death. Whilst one cannot date with any certainty his fantasies, most of them were collated in a 1591 collection of keyboard manuscripts known as *My Ladye Nevells Booke*. Within these works Byrd would exercise his prodigious talent in a form considered a 'kinde of musicke which is made without a dittie...and the composer is tide to nothing, but that he may adde or diminish and alter at his pleasure'.

Étude No 10 'Der Zauberlehrling' (*The Sorcerer's Apprentice*) György Ligeti (1923-2006)

One of the most anarchic composers of the 20th century, György Ligeti caused consternation in 1962 with his experimental *Poème symphonique* for 100 metronomes. Earlier, his capacity for turning convention upside down had been presaged in his Op 1 *Musica Ricercata* – a set of short pedagogical piano pieces completed in 1953. They are based on the progressive addition and incorporation of different pitches from the chromatic scale. No less maverick or instructive are his 18 Études begun in the 1980s which are amongst the most important additions to the solo-piano repertoire in the last half-century. They continue the great tradition of Études stretching back beyond Debussy to Liszt and, in their polyrhythmic and polymetric challenges, test pianistic technique to the limit.

Ligeti spoke of his Études as 'music of high contrapuntal and metric complexity with labyrinthine branches and perceptible melodic

forms but without any 'back to' gesture, not tonal but not atonal either'. To the staggering difficulty of the Études, Danny Driver has commented that it's more a case of 'brain splitting than finger breaking'. Étude No 10, '*Der Zauberlehrling*' is no exception. Its rapid repeated notes (to be played *Prestissimo*, *staccatissimo*, *leggierissimo*) give no pause for breath as hands traverse the keyboard to create an impish luminescence (at times like breaking glass), snuffed out at the close with a single resolute gesture.

Fantasia in C, D760 '*Wanderer-Fantasy*' Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

- 1 Allegro con fuoco ma non troppo
- 2 Adagio
- 3 Presto
- 4 Allegro

It is well known Franz Schubert was no virtuoso, implied in the absence of any concertos or bravura piano works. The '*Wanderer*', however, is an exception and its virtuosic writing would have seriously tested its dedicatee - the businessman and amateur pianist Karl Emanuel von Liebenberg de Zsittin. Its challenges certainly confounded the composer who is reported to have given up in the middle of a performance exclaiming 'The devil may play this, I can't'.

Written in the autumn of 1822 when Schubert was working on what would be his 'Unfinished' Symphony, the Fantasy belongs to a period of great confidence and productivity. Perhaps no other piano work better expresses his self-assurance than in this extrovert Fantasy whose four movements, similar in design to a sonata, are compressed into a single continuum. The first section begins with an assertive rhythm that serves to unify the entire work. From this first idea Schubert generates two more themes both of which are subtle transformations of the initial statement. The prevailing bravura mood is eventually becalmed and its gentle tones (still bearing the opening rhythm) merge into the 'Adagio'. This section, which provides the work's title, is based on the song '*Der Wanderer*' about a lonely wayfarer whom fate has treated unkindly and who now sees himself 'a stranger everywhere'.

The subdued opening bars, reflecting the poem's mood, lead to three variations. The third section, 'Scherzo', incorporates an adaptation of the first's main theme and a dream-like central episode. Insistent rhythms now reappear in the finale's fugue subject, but it is the heroic element that triumphs in this remarkably unified Fantasy.

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Mishka Rushdie Momen was *The Times Arts* critics' chosen nominee in the field of classical music for their 2021 Breakthrough Award, given by Sky Arts and The South Bank Show who profiled her for an episode of the programme broadcast in July 2021. She appears in recitals and concerto performances worldwide, and Sir Andrés Schiff has presented her in recitals in Zurich Tonhalle, 92Y in New York City, deSingel, Antwerp, and other venues across Europe.

Highlights of recent and future performances include two solo recitals at Wigmore Hall, concertos with BBC NOW, Lucerne Symphony Orchestra, Mozarteum Orchester Salzburg, Deutsche Kammerakademie Neuss, tours with Orchestre National d'île de France and Britten Sinfonia, and solo and duo recitals at the Lucerne Festival, Carnegie Hall, Philadelphia Chamber Music Society, the 92nd Street Y in New York City, the Phillips Collection in Washington, D.C., and the Vancouver Recital Society. Four recitals with Steven Isserlis were

streamed and broadcast live from Wigmore Hall during the 2020-2021 season, a partnership described as 'compelling' (*The Times* ****), 'delicately matched' (*The Guardian* *****) and 'altogether wonderful' (*The Telegraph* *****).

Her debut solo recital, *Variations*, was recorded here at Turner Sims and released in October 2019 by SOMM Recordings. Its programme centres around linked works by Robert and Clara Schumann, Mendelssohn and Brahms. She also appears on the same label as one of the soloists in Mozart's Triple Concerto with the Royal Philharmonic Orchestra. Her playing has been broadcast on BBC Radio and Television, Classic FM, Sky Arts, PBS television in the United States, France Musique, New York's WQXR, and Canada's CBC, which featured *Variations* as a Record of the Week.

Committed to performing new music, Mishka Rushdie Momen has commissioned works by Nico Muhly and Vijay Iyer (both for *Variations*), and Heloise Werner for the Lucerne Festival, kindly supported by the I&I Foundation.

Mishka Rushdie Momen studied with Joan Havill and Imogen Cooper at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. She also studied periodically with Richard Goode, and at the Kronberg Academy with Sir Andrés Schiff. This study was generously funded by the Henle Foundation.

info@turnersims.co.uk

turnersims.co.uk

Box Office

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