

Cordelia Williams

Tuesday 10 October 8pm

Beethoven Six Bagatelles, Op 126

Brahms Intermezzi, Op 117

Schubert Impromptu in F minor, D935 No 1

Schumann Fantasie, Op 17



Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Six Bagatelles, Op 126

- 1 Andante con moto
- 2 Allegro
- 3 Andante
- 4 Presto
- 5 Quasi allegretto
- 6 Presto – Andante amabile e con moto
– Tempo 1

Beethoven's three sets of Bagatelles are amongst his most overlooked piano works, often dismissed as slight and enigmatic, their neglect compounded when he called them *Kleinigkeiten*, or trifles. But under their deceptive surface there lies a Beethovenian profundity and strength, their wide-ranging moods traversing deep solace to an almost elemental force. In what has been called their 'lyricism and horseplay', the composer surely recognised that brevity is the soul of wit. Conceived between the years 1823 and 1824, Beethoven referred to his Op 126 group as 'a cycle of little pieces', a remark suggesting they were possibly intended to be performed as a single entity. Certainly, the pattern of keys

proceeding by descending thirds adds weight to this notion. The Six Bagatelles stand apart from the earlier sets with their unexpected shifts of mood and tempo, cadenza-like passages and expressive variety.

The song-like first occupies a delicate, interior world and progresses, after a brief cadenza, with accumulating interest towards a wider exploration of keyboard sonorities. A toccata-like impetus propels the next, now notable for its abrupt juxtaposition of terse and lyrical events, its impulsiveness suggesting Beethoven dashing down his ideas in feverish haste. The third is tamed by a restraint and a hymnlike manner, its chordal progressions traded for delicate tracery. Decorum is swept aside in the pugnacious fourth where the driving rhythms of a march-like idea eventually yield to the first of two calming passages anchored by a drone bass. In its gentle perambulations, the affable fifth (with its harmonious chains of thirds) brings temporary reprieve from earlier truculence, but the volcanic bookends of the sixth suggest Beethoven has yet to abandon his dramatic instincts.

Johannes Brahms (1833-97)

Intermezzi, Op 117

- 1 Andante moderato
- 2 Andante non troppo e con molto espressione
- 3 Andante con moto

In his later years Brahms cultivated the aura of a gruff old man and his persona became the stuff of legend. Whilst writing his Second Quintet for Strings during the summer of 1890 when he was fifty-seven, he contemplated retirement, sorted through his manuscripts, and drew up a will. To his publisher he declared 'I have worked enough, now let the young people take over'. Old before his time, he seemed to be obsessed with his mortality and that of his friends. Indeed, the music of his final years is permeated with forebodings of death. During his penultimate year he had written a group of Choral Preludes for organ concluding with 'O Welt, ich muss dich lassen' ('O world, I must leave you') and amongst his *Vier letzte Lieder* (Four Serious Songs) he set the words 'O death, how bitter art thou'. The latter employs a chain of descending thirds: a melodic interval already a hallmark of several of his late piano pieces, including those of his Op 117 of 1892, three works hauntingly suffused with an Autumnal glow.

At the head of the first, Brahms quotes lines from Johann Gottfried Harder's translation of an old Scottish poem known as Lady Anne Bothwell's Lament: 'Sleep gently, my child, sleep gently and well. It grieves me much to see thee weep'. Both the elegiac mood and tender middle voice melody fit the words perfectly. Comforting thirds warm the ruminations of the central minor key passage, and with the return of the home key, earlier poignancy is restored. An implied melodic line allied to descending arpeggios shape the outer regions of the second Intermezzo, its transformation from B flat minor to D flat major bringing a new richness of expression. Bare octaves set in motion the third Intermezzo in C sharp minor, its bleak outline drawing inspiration from another of Herder's poetic translations beginning with the words 'O Woe! O Woe! Deep in the Valley'. Only in the central A major passage do ominous shadows briefly disperse. Little wonder its sense of grief prompted Brahms to call this leave-taking a 'lullaby of my sorrows.'

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Schubert Impromptu in F minor, D935, No 1

No doubt frustrated by the indifference of Viennese publishers to print his piano sonatas (only three were issued during his lifetime), Schubert turned to dances, moments musicaux and impromptus in the hope of attracting a more positive response. But of his two sets of Impromptus, both completed in 1827, only the first two from D899 were published before his death the following year. The four belonging to the second set, D935, were not issued until 1839, while the third and fourth pieces of the first only secured publication in 1857.

Schubert probably borrowed the title Impromptu from the Czech composer Jan Václav Voříšek (1791-1825) whose Six Impromptus had found their way into Viennese musical circles following their publication in 1822. Perhaps its success prompted the rising publisher Tobias Haslinger to issue the first two of Schubert's D899 group with the heading Impromptu when they were printed in December 1827. Despite the misleading title, there is little that can be considered 'impromptu' or casual about these works which, whilst contemporary with the desolation of *Winterreise*, reveal an equable mood and, at times, a serenity of spirit. The melodically rich Impromptu in F minor is built on three principal ideas: the first is resolute with a lyrical tag, the second an expressive melody of repeated chords while the third brings consolation in its gentle hand-crossing.

Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Fantasie in C major, Op 17

- 1 Durchaus phantastisch und leidenschaftlich vorzutragen (to be played with fantasy and passion throughout).
- 2 Massig; Durchaus energisch (Moderate; Energetic throughout).
- 3 Langsam getragen (Slow and quietly sustained).

Between the appearance of his Op 1 Variations and the Op 17 Fantasie, Schumann's creative energies produced a series of poetic character pieces including Papillons and the much-loved Kinderszenen. Distinctive for their poetic half-lights and rapid mood changes, the occasional brevity of works such as Carnival prompted bewilderment from his contemporaries. However, his three-movement Fantasie, completed in 1838 - a culmination of

passion, soul-bearing and virtuosity - represented a significant step in the mastery of its extended canvas yet bore both personal and purely musical associations.

The work began life in 1836 when Schumann had been much distressed with his beloved Clara Wieck. Clara's father refused to countenance their engagement and banned all communication between them believing the composer to have no suitable prospects. After their eventual marriage he confessed to her 'You can understand the *Fantasie* only if you go back to the unhappy summer of 1836 when we were separated'. Referring to their estrangement, he later considered the first movement of the work to be the 'most passionate thing I have ever composed – a profound lament for you'.

In the light of their relationship Clara would have understood the import of the first movement's main theme and recognised its opening phrase - five descending octaves - as a melodic symbol for herself. She would probably have been familiar too with the last lines of Friedrich Schlegel's poem *Die Gebüsch* heading Schumann's score: 'Through all the sounds/In life's colourful dream/Runs one soft sound/For him who quietly listens'. Further references to their liaison might have been heard in the first movement where a fragment from Beethoven's song cycle *An die ferne Geliebte* (To the distant

beloved) is incorporated and later revealed more clearly in its *Adagio* closing bars.

Dedicated to Franz Liszt, the *Fantasie* is cast in three movements. Ironically, the first is a more naturally evolving example of sonata form than any found in his earlier piano sonatas. Its initial five note idea (the Clara motto) is set against a turbulent backdrop and variously encompasses grandeur and intimacy. A tender secondary theme seamlessly emerges and is later strikingly transformed in a slower central passage marked 'Im legendenton' (As a legend) that soon brings more passionate stirrings. Thereafter, ideas flow freely with one tempo following another, culminating in the warm glow of the coda.

There follows a triumphant march in E flat which makes formidable demands on the performer. Its wide leaps leave no room for error while the closing bars, to be played even faster, are not for the faint-hearted. The finale must rank as one of Schumann's most magical inspirations. It is based on simple arpeggio figuration from which emerges the five-note motto heard at the work's outset and, after some arresting harmonic diversions, leads to an ecstatic coda. This wonderfully heart-easing movement concludes a work of extraordinary structural and expressive coherence.

David Truslove, 2023



Piotr Anderszewski / Tue 31 Oct 8pm

Bach Partita No 6 BWV 830

Szymanowski Mazurkas Op 50, Nos 3, 7, 8, 5, & 4

Bartók Bagatelles Op 6

Bach Partita No 1 BWV 825

From Bach to Bartók, pianist Piotr Anderszewski finds fascinating connections between composers whose visionary ideas would change keyboard music forever.

The peerless music of J S Bach bookends this concert. Anderszewski is renowned for his interpretations of Bach. He brings that special affinity to pieces which, unusually for the time, boast dramatic dynamic contrasts. This is music that reveals Bach's awe-inspiring ability to weave whole worlds of sound from the simplest ideas.

Cordelia Williams

Polish-Welsh-English pianist Cordelia Williams is recognised for the poetry, conviction and inner strength of her playing and the depth of her interpretations. She has performed all over the world, including concertos with the English Chamber Orchestra (in Mexico City), City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra and Royal Philharmonic Orchestra (at Barbican Hall, London), as well as recitals at Wigmore Hall, Royal Festival Hall and Beijing Concert Hall. She broadcasts regularly for BBC Radio 3.

Cordelia has become particularly known for her remarkable understanding of the music of Schubert and Schumann. Her recordings to date have focused on both these composers, as well as a 2018 album interweaving the music of Bach and Arvo Pärt: 'a superb concept... brilliantly realised' (International Piano, 2019). Her 2021 album *Nightlight* received rave reviews across the board and was awarded Critics' Choice by International Piano and Recording of the Year by MusicWeb International. 'Williams finds astonishing beauty in these pieces that had me shaking my head in wonder. Consummate artistry... touching real greatness.' (MusicWeb International, 2021). *Cascade* was released in September 2023: 'defiantly original, boldly expressive, a myriad of colours' (All About the Arts, 2023). She enjoys introducing the music she plays, as well as using imaginative programming to shed new light on well-known works and to tell new stories.

Cordelia is dedicated to forming unusual collaborations and creating innovative projects with other musicians and across disciplines. Alongside her performing career she gained a First in Theology from Clare College,

Cambridge; her curiosity towards humanity and faith led to her year-long project, *Between Heaven and the Clouds: Messiaen 2015*. In partnership with award-winning poet Michael Symmons Roberts, former Archbishop of Canterbury Lord Rowan Williams and artist Sophie Hacker, this ambitious series of events and performances explored the music and context of Messiaen's *Vingt Regards sur l'Enfant-Jésus*. She is currently developing two unique cross-discipline collaborations which will reach the stage in 2024, and also enjoys a flourishing duo partnership with violinist Tamsin Waley-Cohen.

A former Piano Winner of BBC Young Musician of the Year, Cordelia welcomed her first son in 2017, who has accompanied her on several concert tours and was joined by a brother in 2019. Her first book, *The Happy Music Play Book*, was published in 2021 and received Book of the Year at the Presto Music Awards. It is written for parents of young children who, like her, want to make music a joyful part of everyday family life. In 2021 Cordelia spent time performing, teaching and filming in Kenya. Her documentary-film *On Being a Pianist in Kenya* (available on YouTube) explores the challenges facing young aspiring classical musicians in Nairobi; one of the pianists Cordelia mentors has since taken up a scholarship at the Royal Birmingham Conservatoire (the first Kenyan to study piano at European conservatoire). Together they feature on a Radio 4 series this October, called *How to Spot Potential*. Cordelia can be found on YouTube at [youtube.com/CordeliaWilliams](https://www.youtube.com/CordeliaWilliams) where she shares practice insights and videos about performing life.

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