Robert Schumann (1810-1856)

Timing – 13:00

Theme and Variations in E flat, “Ghost Variations”, WoO24

Parting and death are the two key words in this recital, and we bring them both together at the very start with a poignant recollection of the final parting before death. Some years after the event, Clara Schumann described to Carmen Sylva, the Queen of Romania, the final meeting she had with her husband just hours before he died.

For two Robert and Clara had not seen each other. On 27th February 1854 Robert Schumann had suddenly rushed out of the house, ran on to a bridge over the River Rhine and thrown himself in. He was rescued by a bargeman, returned home, but shortly afterwards, for his own protection, sent to an asylum for the insane at Endenich, near Bonn where he refused to see Clara. Two years later, as she was about to set off for a concert in London, news reached her that he was on the point of death, so she went straight to the asylum. “When I entered I hardly knew him, so much had he changed. His eyes alone recalled him to me. He turned suddenly toward me, and his glance brightened strangely. ‘Ah! My well beloved one,’ he cried, and he clasped me in his arms. He was unwilling to take nourishment on account of his delusion that someone was seeking to poison him. He consented, however, to take some food from my hand. While I remained in the room he followed every movement of mine with his eyes. I felt myself almost happy in spite of my affliction to have had again a token of his great affection and love”. He died shortly afterwards, at which point she discovered he had written absolutely no music during those two years other than finish a set of piano variations he had begun in the 10 days before his failed suicide attempt and which he had kept close to him bearing his hand-written dedication of the work to her. Those Variations, published posthumously in 1939, have ever since been known as the “Ghost” Variations.

Schumann’s suicide attempt was the result of a severe and rapidly deteriorating mental condition brought on by the mercury he was being administered to off-set the effects of a very different disease from which he had been suffering for many years. By 1854 he was almost totally insane and suffered from regular and disturbing hallucinations. One such occurred on the evening of 17th February 1854 when, as he explained to Clara, he had been visited both by angels, who had sung to him “a celestial melody”, and by “the spirits of Mendelssohn and Schubert”, who had instructed him to write a set of variations on it. He had completed four variations before his in-depth encounter with the Rhine, and wrote the fifth shortly after his incarceration at Endenich.

If angels did sing a “celestial melody” melody to Schumann, they most certainly had not composed it themselves, for he had already used in as the basis for one of his Fantasiestücke of 1851 as well as in the slow movement of his Violin concerto of 1853. The theme itself, stated simply in chordal fashion at the outset,
has a certain hymn-like quality, and the following four variations (the ones completed before the suicide attempt) in various ways, promote the melody above a range of accompanying devices. The final variation is an outpouring of emotion which is both warm and disturbed.
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

3 Intermezzi, Op.117
No.1 – Andante moderato
No.2 - Andante non troppo e con molto espressione
No.3 – Andante con molto

Ghosts and suicidal thoughts are to be found in the set of three Intermezzi by Brahms published as his Op.117 in 1892 and given their first performances separately and in different cities (London, Vienna and Hamburg) the following year. In all, Brahms composed 18 pieces for piano solo called Intermezzo, a title he made almost his own over the course of the 14 years during which he wrote them. The title itself came about almost by accident when, submitting some pieces to his publisher in 1878, Brahms had been unable to think of a suitable title and asked for suggestions; Intermezzo being chosen since the pieces in question on that occasion did indeed serve as interludes between rather more substantial pieces. However, by the time he composed his final Intermezzi he had invested the genre with great emotional depth and even suggested to a friend that the three which constitute his Op.117 were “lullabies to my sorrow”; although he did not elaborate further on what the causes of those sorrows were. It may be that Brahms was effectively bidding farewell to an instrument which had been his constant companion throughout his life (these were among his very last piano compositions) although all three also appear to have a literary inspiration.

That literary inspiration is explicit, however, only with the first. At the head of the score Brahms included a quotation from a German translation by Johann Gottfried Herder of “Lady Anne Bothwell’s Lament”, an anonymous Scottish folk ballad;

“Sleep softly, my child, Oh gently sleep!
It grieves me so to see thee weep.”

The melodic line is encased in the middle of the texture surrounded by chords of real pathos and profound sorrow. It is interesting to note that the central section is in the rare (for Brahms) key of E flat minor, a tonality described in 1806 by Christian Schubart, a German writer who pondered long over the specific “colours” and qualities of different tonalities, as possessing “a sense of anxiety felt by the soul in its deepest distress, brooding despair and the blackest depression. If ghosts could speak, their speech would approximate this horrible key”.

It seems likely that the second, more animated and with a restless movement which always seems to be running downwards like the cascading of tears, was also inspired by “Lady Anne Bothwell’s Lament”. The story goes that Bothwell’s lover (and cousin), Sir Alexander Erskine, had been killed in battle in 1640, and her father, the Bishop of Orkney, had dissuaded her from suicidal thoughts; although history seems to indicate that the ballad dates back to the 16th century. This Intermezzo is also cast in a remote key – B flat minor - which Schubart describes as “discontented with itself and with everything; preparation for suicide sounds in this key”.

The third (C sharp minor, which according to Schubart suggests “penitential lamentation, intimate conversation with God, sighs of disappointed friendship and love”) presents a sombre march-like theme in stark octaves which could be seen as
portraying the story of a soldier about to face the firing squad as recounted in this poem by Henry Wadsworth Longfellow:

Under the walls of Monterey
At daybreak the bugles began to play,
Victor Galbraith!
In the mist of the morning damp and grey,
These were the words they seemed to say:
"Come forth to thy death,
Victor Galbraith!"
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Rondo in A minor, K511

Timing – 11:00

Beyond the famous story of a ghostly figure clad all in black mysteriously appearing at Mozart's door and directing him to write a work to commemorate the dead, Mozart's musical relationship with death and with ghostly apparitions was most famously depicted in his opera, *Don Giovanni*. But did Mozart ever contemplate his own death, or even ponder suicide? Everything about his personality suggests that it is highly likely that he did, and the year 1787 was sufficiently full of set-backs and disappointments that one can imagine that, if he did have suicidal thoughts, they were as likely as not to have hit him then.

Dated Vienna, 11th March 1787, the *Rondo* in A minor may have been written in the wake of a hugely successful performance of his opera *The Marriage of Figaro* in Prague, but also under the shadow of the death of his third son, Johann Thomas Leopold, and of his own severe financial and health worries. He was obliged to move into cheaper lodgings in a less salubrious neighbourhood of Vienna, he was constantly having to borrow money to settle his growing debts and, shortly after having taken Beethoven on as a pupil, he fell ill and had to abandon work for several weeks. The final straw was probably the death of his own father, Leopold. He confided some of his feelings in his letters to close friends, writing that he was in a state of “constant sadness...an emptiness that is always there and even grows from day to day”.

Some have described the *Rondo* as “Mozart’s saddest work”, and certainly it opens with a profoundly sad theme above an accompaniment which seems almost to echo the sound of gentle sobbing. The theme is constantly struggling to pull itself up and out of a mood of desolation, but is invariably pulled back down. The subdued ending is almost unbearably sad.
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Six Piano Pieces, Op. 118
1. Intermezzo in A minor
2. Intermezzo in A
3. Ballade in G minor
4. Intermezzo in F minor
5. Romanze in F
6. Intermezzo in E flat minor

There is death to be found in these six pieces too. However, when the German critic Philipp Spitta received an early copy of them shortly after their publication in 1893, he wrote to Brahms describing them as “the most varied of all your piano pieces and perhaps the most rich in content and depth of meaning. Ideally they are to be absorbed slowly and in silence and solitude, and they are appropriate not only for meditative afterthought but also for contemplative forethought. I believe that I have understood you correctly when I suggest this is what you meant by the term Intermezzo”.

Contemplation and meditation seem to be at the very heart of these six pieces - Malcolm MacDonald has described them as “the most personal piano music ever written” – but somewhat perversely, the opening Intermezzo in A minor is stormy and passionate. Rolling arpeggios envelope a theme presented in octaves, rather as if it is a ship making heavy weather of turbulent seas.

The second piece – Intermezzo in A major – conforms much more closely to Spitta’s description of a Brahms Intermezzo, and for many this is possibly Brahms’s most heartfelt and endearing creation. A tender, introspective theme descends with great poise over an arpeggiated accompaniment which turns the turbulence of No.1 into profound and still reflection.

We credit Chopin with creating the piano Ballade in 1836, but Brahms wrote four of his own as early as 1854, returning just once to the genre with the Ballade in G minor. Heroic and proud at the start, built over powerfully surging chords, a more reflective and lyrical central passage seems to ponder lovingly over the piece’s main theme, returning to the opening material only reluctantly.

Intermezzo in F minor has an enigmatic quality about it, the simple repeating triplet figure moving back and forth between the hands driving the music onwards as a continual canon, abruptly interrupted by a more tranquil middle section which is largely made up of isolated chords and notes, plumbing the very depths of the piano keyboard.

It was Brahms’s friend and mentor, Robert Schumann, who effectively devised the piano Romanze and in his memory the fifth piece is titled Romanze in F. Expansive in character and rich in texture, this is an affectionate tribute either to Schumann himself or his widow, Clara, with whom Brahms had a close lifelong relationship (and to whom Brahms presented these six pieces before their publication).
It is with the final piece in the set - *Intermezzo in E flat minor* – that we eventually come across an unequivocal connection with death. The piece is built around a theme strongly reminiscent of the ancient plainchant *Dies Irae* associated with death. The music is dark and brooding at the start, and becomes increasingly introspective before snapping itself out of this depression with a burst of heroic posturing which dissolves to end with tranquil resignation.
Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)

Prelude and Fugue in B minor, BWV869

Bach’s so-called Well-Tempered Clavier (sometimes known as the 48 Preludes and Fugues) comprise two books, each containing 24 Preludes and Fugues, compiled over a period of time, the first between 1720 and 1722 (although some preludes go back even further) and the second between 1723 and 1742. Even after compiling the two books, Bach continued to revise what he had written, and amended manuscripts exist right up to the time of his death.

Johann Nikolaus Forkel (1749-1818) who wrote the first biography of Bach had access to many of Bach’s manuscripts and, while the Well-Tempered Clavier remained unpublished at the time of Forkel’s biography (it first appeared in print in Bonn in 1801), he was able to identify its genius; “The Second Part of this work consists from the beginning to the end, entirely of masterpieces. In the First Part, on the other hand, there are still some preludes and fugues which bear marks of the immaturity of early youth and have probably been retained by the author only to have the number of four-and-twenty complete. But even here the author corrected, in the course of time, whatever was capable of amendment. Whole passages are either thrown out, or differently turned, so that in the later copies there are very few pieces left which can still be reproached as imperfect. Even the Second Part, which was originally the more perfect, received in the course of time great improvements, as may be seen by comparing older and newer copies”.

Scholarly discussions abound as to the purpose of this work; did Bach write it to show off a new system of keyboard tuning, to demonstrate that it was possible to write in every major and minor key or merely to bring together a selection of unconnected keyboard pieces subsequently transposed to appeal to Bach’s known fascination with mathematical relationships. Even more discussion follows the instrument for which they were intended. Did Bach intend them all to be played on one instrument, or were some intended for clavichord, some for harpsichord, some for piano and some for organ? In his own preface to the first book, he wrote that the intention was “For the use and profit of the musical youth desirous of learning, and for the pastime of those already skilled in this study”. Many of the Preludes and Fugues from this book were originally presented to his son, Wilhelm Friedemann, as instructional exercises.

In listening to the final Prelude and Fugue from book 1, we might take note of Schubart’s description of B minor as “the key of patience, of calm waiting ones’ fate and of submission to divine dispensation”. The prelude finds the right hand calmly expounding interweaving ideas above a walking bass, while the Fugue is built on a plaintive, almost desolate subject which covers all 12 notes of the chromatic scale. Bach himself marked this Fugue to be played “Largo”, and at the end, after what is one of the longest Fugues in the entire collection, there is a definite sense of “submission to divine dispensation”.
Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Four Piano Pieces, Op.119
1. Intermezzo in B minor (Adagio)
2. Intermezzo in E minor (Andantino un poco agitato)
3. Intermezzo in C major (Grazioso e giocoso)
4. Rhapsody in Eb major (Allegro risoluto)

Here we have the very final published music that Brahms produced for the piano, and it is immediately clear that Brahms’s leave-taking of an instrument which had been a true life-long companion, was tinged with extreme sorrow and nostalgia. Throughout these four Pieces, published in 1893, we find references to earlier works and especially to his very first published works for the instrument.

The Intermezzo in B minor is an intensely introspective work which, as Brahms pointed out in a letter to Clara Schumann, “teems with discords. It is exceptionally melancholy, and to say ‘to be played very slowly’ is not sufficient. Every bar and every note must be played as if ritardando were indicated, and one wished to draw the melancholy out of each one of them, and voluptuous joy and comfort out of the discords”. Clara responded, saying that she revelled in the discords, and describing the piece as “a grey pearl”, something which she suggested looked as if it “were veiled” but was "very precious".

Initially the Intermezzo in E minor seems more lively, with its stuttering repeated notes, displaced left hand and right hand movement, and sense always of straining at the leash. But, in the words of Misha Donat, it “undergoes a sea-change in the middle…allowing it to assume the guise of a tender melody”. More than anything else, this melody is a gentle and reflective Waltz, an almost nostalgic return to a musical form Brahms had much favoured in his piano music of 30 years earlier; his 16 Waltzes Op.39 of 1865 had been one of his most enduring successes.

Taking its cue from the end of the previous piece, the Intermezzo in C opens in the major key and has something of a dancing character to it, the rhythm derived from the staccato repeated chords of the very opening. Almost playful in its character, this, Brahms’s final Intermezzo, seems to sweep away any lingering sense of melancholy, paving the way for the ebullient and almost forceful Rhapsody in Eb which not only concludes the Op.119 set but represents Brahms’s final published utterance for the piano. The implications of the key of E flat major, associated with the heroic since Beethoven’s Third Symphony, but defined by Schubart as “the key of love, of devotion, of intimate conversation”, are not lost on Brahms. Again to quote Donat, “the music appears to spiral out of control” as it approaches its final unequivocal cadence in the key of E flat minor. We should note that this is the same key with which Brahms began his career as a composer of the piano with his Scherzo Op.4 of 1851.
It will have escaped nobody’s notice that the notion of a farewell has been running through this entire programme. A farewell to a wife, a farewell to life, a farewell to the piano. So András Schiff bids us his farewell with the most famous farewell in piano literature, Beethoven’s eponymous sonata. This quite literally has “Farewell” written into it; the opening three chords expound the three syllables “Le-be-wohl”, the German for “Farewell”, and it was the only one of Beethoven’s 35 piano sonatas to be given a detailed and specific programme.

In 1809, for the second time in four years, Vienna came under siege from Napoleon. Emperor Franz I had declared war on Bavaria in February and sent his troops off to do battle there, leaving Vienna virtually undefended. Napoleon seized his opportunity, and on 10th May the French arrived on the outskirts of the city. He sent a message to Archduke Maximilian, whom the Emperor, having fled the city a week earlier, had put in charge of the defence of Vienna, promising leniency if he surrendered but threatening a merciless bombardment if he did not. Maximilian chose the latter option and for three days Vienna came under a constant barrage from the French guns. This apparently did little damage but created havoc amongst the population; Beethoven reputedly took refuge in his brother’s cellar and covered his head with pillows to block out the noise of the French bombardment. It all ended on 13th May when Vienna surrendered and Napoleon entered the city triumphant.

On 4th May, following the flight from the city of the Emperor and his entourage, Beethoven had written the first movement of his Piano Sonata in E flat, vividly portraying his feelings at their departure. It was not so much the departure of the Emperor which upset Beethoven, as that of the Emperor’s brother, Archduke Rudolph (1788-1831) who was not just a friend and a pupil, but a generous and loyal sponsor and supporter. The previous year, Napoleon’s brother, the King of Westphalia, had offered employment to Beethoven and Rudolph had countered this with a promise to furnish Beethoven with an income for life provided he remain in Vienna. Mourning the absence of Rudolph and anticipating his eventual return, Beethoven worked on the other two movements over the next few months, completing them shortly after Rudolph did, indeed, return to Vienna on 30th January 1810.

He gave each of the movements a programmatic title and submitted it to his publisher, Breitkopf und Härtel, in Leipzig. One can only imagine his disgust when Breitkopf insisted the work appear with these titles in French and the Sonata as a whole appearing under the French title, “Les Adieux”. Beethoven may have lost the argument over that, but when he submitted his next Sonata
to Breitkopf, he abandoned Italian tempo markings and allowed only German ones; the Italian language having itself been associated with Napoleon.

All three movements convey Beethoven’s feelings at the time. The 1st movement (“The Farewell”) exudes feelings of sadness and sorrow, and is dominated by the three-note “farewell” motiv given out in quiet, solitary chords at the very outset. The 2nd movement (“The Absence”), written largely before the Archduke’s return, recalls the loneliness and melancholy Beethoven felt at the absence of his greatest supporter and patron. Just as the music seems to be descending into the inner reaches of Beethoven’s mind, it suddenly erupts into an explosion of unfettered joy as, with the 3rd movement (“The Return”) he celebrates the restoration of the Archduke to the city.