

WIGMORE



HALL

LIVE

Jonathan Biss

Schumann
Janáček
Berg



JONATHAN BISS PLAYS SCHUMANN AND JANÁČEK

As Jonathan Biss wrote at the time of this recital in May 2013, ‘Schumann, known and beloved as he is, is known and beloved in a very narrow, restricted way ... rarely given the credit for his crucial and wide-ranging impact on a century and a half’s worth of music’. The idea behind this programme, then, is to place Schumann alongside composers ‘from a future which would have been impossible without him’. In his youth, Schumann was destined to become a pianist of phenomenal distinction, but he began to suffer weakness in some of his fingers. Whether this was caused by the adverse effects of a device intended to strengthen them or by mercury treatment applied to counteract syphilis, the impact on Schumann’s technique was ruinous. But it did not stop him tapping the piano’s potential. Schumann was born into an age when the piano was coming into its own as a solo instrument; its structure was being strengthened, its tonal spectrum expanded; and the piano was being harnessed to all sorts of new expressive challenges, in the works of Schumann and also in those of his contemporaries including Chopin and Liszt. Like them, Schumann champed at the bit, yearning for even greater expressive scope. ‘I could smash the piano’, he wrote in 1839, ‘it limits my thinking’.

As an extraordinary example of mind over matter, the fiendish C major Toccata Op. 7 (1829–33) was written just at the time when Schumann’s own failing technique meant that he could scarcely be expected to execute a performance of it. But he went on to compose a sizeable corpus of

piano music, with such sets as *Carnaval* (1834–5), *Kinderszenen* (‘Scenes from Childhood’, 1838), *Kreisleriana* (1838) *Faschingsschwank aus Wien* (‘Viennese Carnival Pranks’, 1839–40) and the two works in this programme – *Fantasiestücke* (‘Fantasy Pieces’, 1837) and *Davidsbündlertänze* (‘Dances of the League of David’, 1837) – all combining a passionate temperament with a profound insight into the piano’s expressive world. At the same time, these works give voice to the poetic, fanciful side of Schumann’s nature, the *Davidsbündlertänze* in particular enshrining the extroverted and introverted facets of his personality that also colour his critical writings on music. His imaginary Davidsbund – or League of David – set itself determinedly against artistic philistinism and facile, shallow cultural phenomena of the day. Its two main protagonists, Eusebius the dreamer and Florestan the more volatile, find a place in much of Schumann’s music, manifesting themselves in the contrastingly introspective and outgoing character pieces not only of the *Davidsbündlertänze* but also of the *Fantasiestücke*.

This music was also inextricably bound up with Schumann’s burning love for Clara Wieck: given the antagonism of Clara’s father to any idea of marriage, theirs was by no means an easy courtship, but, as Schumann readily confessed, it was Clara who was a potent source of inspiration. They were finally able to marry in 1840, and thereafter, bearing in mind Schumann’s own constraints as a performer, much of his music was



LEOŠ JANÁČEK

introduced to the public by Clara, a pianist spoken of in the same breath as Liszt, Anton Rubinstein and other internationally acclaimed virtuosos of the day.

The first two pieces in the *Fantasiestücke* – *Des Abends* ('In the evening') and *Aufschwung* ('Soaring') – immediately illustrate the different Eusebius/Florestan characteristics that fired Schumann's imagination: whereas *Des Abends* is quietly pensive, *Aufschwung* is dynamic and



ROBERT SCHUMANN

propulsive. Similarly, the next pair, *Warum?* ('Why?') and *Grillen* ('Whims'), create a distinct contrast of mood and idea, while the terrors of *In der Nacht* ('In the night') and the narrative of *Fabel* ('Fable') knit together Eusebius's musing and Florestan's confidence.

The tapestry that Schumann weaves together in the *Fantasiestücke*, interspersed here with complementary images from Janáček's *On the overgrown path*, is further elaborated in the 18

pieces of the *Davidsbündlertänze*, the score of which is headed with a quotation from an old German saying: 'In all und jeder Zeit verknüpft sich Lust und Leid: bleibt fromm in Lust und seid dem Leid mit Mut bereit.' ('In each and every age joy and sorrow are mingled: remain pious in joy, and be ready for sorrow with courage.') With Florestan and Eusebius as his mouthpieces, the *Davidsbündlertänze* testify both to Schumann's passion for Clara and to his anxieties about the hurdles that impeded their happiness.

The amount of music that Janáček wrote for solo piano is not large, but, as with Schumann, it harboured great emotional significance for him. For example, the *Sonata 1.X.1905* was triggered by an incident in Brno in 1905, when a young worker was killed during a demonstration supporting the creation of a Czech university in the city. The impact on Janáček was immediate and intense, and the sonata expresses his anguish in its two surviving movements ominously entitled 'Presentiment' and 'Death'. The miniatures comprising *Po zarostlém chodníčku* ('On the overgrown path'), which were written over a number of years and completed in 1911, were similarly sparked by internal anxiety and despondency. The music seems to embody a sense of brooding, wistfulness and doubt that could well have been occasioned by some knockbacks that Janáček had experienced in his own creative life. His opera *Jenůfa* had not been accepted for production in Prague after its successful première in Brno in 1904, and he was in general experiencing problems of recognition

outside his native Moravia. As the landmark age of 60 loomed ever nearer, his path to success seemed to be tangled with weeds rather than smoothly paved. That fact, coupled with the tragic death of his daughter, Olga, infused *On the overgrown path* with deeply reflective intimacy. Like Schumann, Janáček here found in the piano a vehicle for his most personal thoughts, mining its seams of expressive potential in a highly individual way, imbued, as in so much of his music, with the piquant inflections of Moravian folk music and the contours and patterns of Moravian speech.

Berg's Piano Sonata, completed in 1908, highlights a fascinating aspect of 20th-century radicalism, in the sense that, however much Berg's musical language or that of Schoenberg and Webern might be typical of their progressive age, they could not afford to jettison completely the givens of form and gesture from earlier times. Listening to even the knottiest works of Schoenberg and Webern, for example, the ear picks up on certain emotional norms that are familiar: Schoenberg's opera *Moses und Aron* (1930–32), for all its observance of 12-note organisation and the resultant dissolution of appreciable harmonic direction, follows – even if it also stretches – convention in its treatment of the voice and of human feeling; his Piano Concerto (1942), if it tugs against the harmonic gravity that, for example, the Schumann concerto might exert, generates a similar – dare one say – Romantic thrust. Berg's Sonata is another case in point. He, like Webern, studied with Schoenberg, but the

Sonata, in a single movement, follows – while amplifying – the sonata form principles that Schumann would have recognised. There is an exposition of the thematic material, a development and a recapitulation – all components of the classic sonata principle. Equally the lyrical mode of expression can readily be linked to the Romantic era, for all the new liquidity of the

harmonic vocabulary and the use of intervals that blur the tonal centres. Berg's music does not, of course, sound like that of Schumann, but, for all the elasticity of harmony that it reveals, the Sonata can be heard as an extension of a long Austro-German line rather than a decisive break from it.

Notes by Geoffrey Norris © 2014

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Jonathan Biss

SCHUBERT

Piano Sonata in C major, D. 840 'Reliquie'
Piano Sonata in A major, D. 959

KURTÁG

Birthday elegy for Judit
Hommage a Schubert

WHLive0030

'Not only is his playing expressively subtle and technically impeccable, he clearly has plenty to say about everything he touches – Schubert very much included' (*BBC Music Magazine*)

'He plays all three pieces with an exquisite sense of colour and line. Biss delivers the kind of intensely thoughtful playing that seems to gain an extra degree of profundity when heard on disc' (*The Guardian*)

'He plays with a cool intelligence and directness that ... glows with an agreeable warmth in the huge edifice of the A major sonata' (*The Observer*)



JONATHAN BISS

Jonathan Biss is established as an artist at the highest level in the USA and in Europe and appears on a regular basis with orchestras such as the Boston Symphony, Chicago Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, National Symphony, New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia Orchestra, Pittsburgh Symphony and San Francisco Symphony. In Europe, he has appeared with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, London Symphony Orchestra, London Philharmonic Orchestra, BBC Symphony Orchestra, NDR Hamburg and NDR Hannover, Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra, Swedish Radio Symphony, Budapest Festival Orchestra, Berlin Staatskapelle, Dresden Staatskapelle and Leipzig Gewandhaus Orchestra.

Jonathan Biss is a committed recitalist and chamber musician. He is a regular guest at Carnegie Hall and also plays in the major recital series in the USA and Europe – he twice opened the Master Piano Series at Het Concertgebouw, Amsterdam, and has given recitals at the Salzburg, Lucerne, and Edinburgh festivals, the Beethovenfest, Bonn and the Mariinsky Concert Hall in St Petersburg. In 2013 he made a highly successful debut recital in the Berlin Philharmonic piano series. For the 2012–13 season, Jonathan Biss devised a four-part chamber music series entitled ‘Schumann: Under the Influence’, with partners Mark Padmore, Miah Persson, Kim Kashkashian and the Elias String Quartet. The series was presented at Wigmore Hall, Het Concertgebouw, Amsterdam and in San Francisco,



with Carnegie Hall taking three of the programmes.

Jonathan Biss has begun recording the complete Beethoven Piano Sonatas for Onyx Classics. The first two volumes of his nine-disc recording cycle were both received with great warmth and the third volume was released in January 2014. He has also recorded Schumann and Dvorák piano quintets with the Elias String Quartet, again for Onyx Classics, described by Classical Music magazine as: 'A delightful coupling that brings heart-on-sleeve joy to the Schumann and bold, quicksilver energy to the Dvorák. Both performances fizzle with ideas and unabashed exuberance.' For Wigmore Hall Live, Jonathan has released a recital disc of Schubert sonatas with fragments of Kurtág. Jonathan Biss has previously recorded for EMI Classics and his fine discography includes four acclaimed recordings on this label.

An alumni of the Curtis Institute, Jonathan Biss

joined the faculty there in 2012. Together with the Curtis Institute, he has partnered with Coursera, the provider of online teaching courses, and created a free, online course which he taught. Running from September to October 2013, the course was entitled 'Exploring Beethoven's Piano Sonatas' and attracted more than 30,000 people.

Jonathan Biss represents the third generation in a family of musicians. His grandmother, Raya Garbousova, was the cellist for whom Samuel Barber composed his Cello Concerto, and his mother, Miriam Fried, is a distinguished violinist and teacher. He has been recognised with numerous awards, including the 2002 Gilmore Young Artist Award, Lincoln Center's Martin E. Segal Award, an Avery Fisher Career Grant and is a laureate of the Borletti-Buitoni Trust. He was the first American chosen to participate in the BBC's New Generation Artist programme.

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Recorded live at Wigmore Hall, London, on 22 May 2013

ROBERT SCHUMANN

(1810–1856)

Fantasiestücke Op. 12 (1837)*Interspersed with movements from***LEOŠ JANÁČEK**

(1854–1928)

Po zarostlém chodníčku JW VIII/17

(On the overgrown path, Book 1, 1900–11)

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|----|------------------------------|-------|
| 01 | SCHUMANN Des Abends | 03.23 |
| 02 | JANÁČEK Naše večery | 02.51 |
| 03 | SCHUMANN Aufschwung | 03.12 |
| 04 | SCHUMANN Warum? | 02.42 |
| 05 | JANÁČEK Lístek odvanutý | 02.57 |
| 06 | SCHUMANN Grillen | 03.20 |
| 07 | JANÁČEK Dobrou noc! | 02.43 |
| 08 | SCHUMANN In der Nacht | 03.51 |
| 09 | JANÁČEK Frýdecká Panna Maria | 03.11 |
| 10 | SCHUMANN Fabel | 02.20 |
| 11 | JANÁČEK Pojd'te s namí! | 01.11 |
| 12 | SCHUMANN Traumes Wirren | 02.31 |
| 13 | SCHUMANN Ende vom Lied | 06.00 |

ALBAN BERG

(1885–1935)

- | | | |
|----|------------------------------------|-------|
| 14 | Piano Sonata Op. 1 (1907–8) | 11.14 |
|----|------------------------------------|-------|

ROBERT SCHUMANN**Dauidsbündlertänze** Op. 6 (1837)

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|----|----------------------------|-------|
| 15 | Lebhaft | 01.31 |
| 16 | Innig | 01.26 |
| 17 | Mit Humor | 01.19 |
| 18 | Ungeduldig | 00.48 |
| 19 | Einfach | 02.00 |
| 20 | Sehr rasch | 01.51 |
| 21 | Nicht schnell | 03.34 |
| 22 | Frisch | 00.39 |
| 23 | Lebhaft | 01.29 |
| 24 | Balladenmässig. Sehr rasch | 01.33 |
| 25 | Einfach | 01.41 |
| 26 | Mit Humor | 00.43 |
| 27 | Wild und lustig | 02.57 |
| 28 | Zart und singend | 02.03 |
| 29 | Frisch | 01.46 |
| 30 | Mit gutem Humor | 01.17 |
| 31 | Wie aus der Ferne | 03.44 |
| 32 | Nicht schnell | 03.23 |

encore

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|----|---------------------|-------|
| 33 | Spoken introduction | 00.15 |
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ROBERT SCHUMANN**Gesänge der Frühe** Op. 133 (1853)

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| 34 | No. 5. Im Anfange ruhiges,
im Verlauf bewegtes Tempo | 03.42 |
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Total time: 90.17