

UNIVERSITY OF EDINBURGH
CHAMBER CONCERTS

SEASON 1961-62

Seventh Concert

PIANOFORTE RECITAL

JOHN OGDON

REID SCHOOL OF MUSIC
THURSDAY, 8TH FEBRUARY, 1962

AT 7.30 P.M.

PROGRAMME ONE SHILLING

PROGRAMME

1. PRELUDE AND FUGUE IN F MINOR (Book 1)

J. S. Bach
(1685-1750)

This lyrical Prelude is followed by a Fugue with a slow-moving chromatic subject which combines with three countersubjects; but Bach only chooses to exhibit two positions of the quadruple counterpoint, and indeed much of the writing is in three parts, and is less formidable as multiple counterpoint than is the triple counterpoint of the three part Invention in the same key. The first countersubject gives rise to most of the material of the episode. All three countersubjects share similar figures, and so the listener is absolved from trying to disentangle one from the other and is set free to enjoy the lively counterpoint and the harmonic variety which results from the inversion of three or four parts.

2. SONATA IN B FLAT, Op. 106

Beethoven
(1770-1827)

Allegro

Scherzo (Assai vivace)

Adagio sostenuto (Appassionato e con molto sentimento)

Largo, *leading to*

Allegro risoluto (Fuga a re voci, con alcune licenze)

Op. 106, "the largest and most symphonic pianoforte work extant," was written in 1819 when Beethoven had already begun to make sketches both for the Ninth Symphony and for the Missa Solemnis. It is known as the "Hammerklavier" sonata, but the title has no musical significance and merely perpetuates the temporary unpopularity of the Italian language in Vienna at that time. In 1819, Beethoven was already beginning to feel that the pianoforte was inadequate to give full expression to his ideas. Be that as it may, Op. 106 and the last three sonatas which followed contain some of the most wonderful pianoforte music ever written—music which could not find expression in any other medium. Op. 106 constantly suggests orchestral sonorities (the pianoforte is, of course, an instrument of suggestion), and yet the most skilful orchestrator could not represent the initial idea of this sonata on the orchestra with the dramatic force with which it is presented by the pianoforte. Despite the colossal demands made on the performer this remains the greatest sonata ever written for the instrument.

In some ways the late works of Beethoven can be deceptively easy to listen to, and, although the listener may occasionally be puzzled in the first three movements of this work, it is only in the Fugue that the going gets really tough. Growing familiarity with the style reveals that every single note bears significance, as witness the transition in the first movement where a B flat chord is dissolved inside an octave D and replaced without explanation by the new dominant of the key of the second group; as witness also the beguiling way in which the childlike first theme of this group slides out of the coiling quavers in the bass.

Tovey points out that in this sonata the main opening themes of each movement show a connection with each other in their prominent use of rising and falling thirds. "Such subtleties ought not to be imputed to classical sonatas without very cogent evidence; when people see *more* than there is there, they will be very unlikely to

see *all* that is there. But the evidence, both internal and external, is quite adequate here." The Scherzo has two strains—the second becoming epigrammatic—and it alternates with a Trio which "melts down the first figure of the scherzo into the opening of a grotesque eight-bar melody" and involves the subtle use of tonalities which come and go.

The slow movement is in an unexpectedly remote key, linked to that of the Scherzo by an introductory bar which Beethoven added after the sonata had reached the publishers, and its stark simplicity bears great significance. This enormous and touching slow movement moves in sonata form, and the recapitulation exhibits the themes in variation, vibrant in swifter movement.

The introduction to the last movement leads thereto in a long series of descending thirds, pausing four times en route to soliloquise. Eventually four bars on the dominant lead to the great Fugue of the finale—the pianoforte equivalent of the "Grosse Fuge", (originally the last movement of Op. 130, replaced later by Beethoven with the amazing new finale which was his last composition). The strong character of this fugue subject makes it possible for Beethoven to exploit almost every conceivable contrapuntal device. In its course it attracts two new subjects, the first combining with the famous reversed (cancrizans) version of the fugue subject, and the second (a short lyrical theme) emerging after a cataract of trills and a rhetorical pause, and being given its own exposition before combining with the original subject. The power and force of this great movement cannot but be felt at a first hearing despite the fact that only long familiarity will enable one to follow all the threads of the argument. None of the wonders or horrors of present day developments can falsify the profound thoughts and emotions expressed in this monumental music.

(All the above quotations are from articles by Sir Donald Tovey).

M.G.

INTERVAL

3. APRÈS UNE LECTURE DU DANTE

Liszt
(1811-1886)

"Après une Lecture du Dante" precedes Liszt's much more ambitiously planned and executed "Symphony to Dante's Divina Commedia" by approximately ten years. This "Fantasia quasi Sonata"—stimulated by Dante's poem and reflecting the anguish of the "Inferno" as much as the angelic promises of the "Purgatorio"—was sketched as early as 1837 and publicly performed by the composer for the first time in 1839 in Vienna. It was thoroughly revised ten years later and published (as part of "Années de pèlerinage" Deuxième Année) in 1858, that is, only one year before the publication of the "Dante Symphony" to which it stands in an intimate ideological, but not in a thematic relationship. In contrast to the dualistically conceived symphony, the "Fantasia quasi Sonata" is in one single movement like the Piano Sonata in B minor, with which it shares excessive length and technical difficulty.

The interval of a falling augmented Fourth (or of a diminished Fifth) becomes in a way the integral of the whole composition. It is expanded melodically or congealed chordally in downward sweeping sequences. A fleeting vision of "Paradiso" is confined to a brief chorale-like passage shortly before the thundering Coda which once again underlines the horrors of "Inferno" with demonic ferocity.

H.F.R.

Ondine
Le Gibet
Scarbo

This work, composed in 1908 when the composer was at the height of his powers, is not only one of Ravel's greatest achievements but also stands out in the history of piano music as one of the supreme examples of virtuosity used to a purely poetic end. Ravel said that it was his aim "to write piano pieces of transcendental virtuosity, which are even more complicated than *Islamey*." It is characteristic of this Latin composer that out of a seemingly technical problem should have come one of the most imaginative works in the repertoire.

The music is inspired by the romantic and fantastic poetry of Bertrand, but the fantasy here is not concerned with the fairy-tale magic which pervades other works of Ravel; instead it contains adult visions of the sinister and the supernatural.

The first piece, *Ondine*, portrays a beautiful spirit which seduces young men to a watery death by the spell of her beauty and singing. Melody reigns supreme here as in so much of Ravel's music; a smooth extended modal tune is accompanied by a crystalline repeated-chord figure, which later breaks in to more complex figurations. Here are the sounds of streams and waterfalls accompanying *Ondine* as she sits and sings on her rock.

In the second piece we have a picture of a gibbet swinging in the wind on a desolate moor. Inner pedals are common in Ravel's music; and here the syncopated B flats which continue right through the piece have a pictorial as well as a thematic significance. Again a basically technical problem (a one-note *Fantasia*) is resolved into one of the composer's finest inspirations. Parallel block chords are used (as well as Bartókian superimposed fifths) in a perfectly individual fashion to paint the surrounding scene of desolation; while through it all runs a melodic line, restricted in range, yet strangely moving.

Scarbo is a creature of nightmare fantasy—"the times I have heard his laugh sounding in the shadows of my alcove and his claws grating on the silk of my bed curtains!" To portray this creature from the infernal regions, Ravel produces one of the most "advanced" and fascinating of his works. The harmony is extremely chromatic, and his use of parallel seconds brings to mind features of Bartók's later style. Melody is fragmentary, the opening three notes in the bass providing the basic material, and the percussive possibilities of the piano are exploited more than in any other work of Ravel. It is therefore a remarkably prophetic piece as well as being a vivid example of realism in music.

K.L.