



Arcadi Volodos in recital

Friday 6 December 2019 7.30pm, Hall

Liszt

Sonetto 123 del Petrarca
La lugubre gondola, S200/2
Légende, S175 No 1, 'St François d'Assise'
(La prédication aux oiseaux)
Ballade No 2 in B minor, S171

interval 20 minutes

Schumann

Bunte Blätter, Op 99 – Marsch; Abendmusik
Humoreske, Op 20

Arcadi Volodos piano

Part of Barbican Presents 2019–20

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Programme produced by Harriet Smith;
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Welcome

A warm welcome to this evening's recital, given by the great Russian pianist Arcadi Volodos, whose appearances here are always a highlight for piano lovers.

He is known particularly for the beauty of his sound and the sheer range of colours he conjures from the piano, allied to a questing spirit, as well as for always avoiding the obvious in his programming.

Tonight is dedicated to two composers close to his heart: Liszt and Schumann.

Arcadi Volodos begins with Liszt's famous Petrarch Sonnet 123 before delving into the darkness of the late *La lugubre*

gondola. Liszt as a story-teller is also represented with the highly evocative First *Légende* and Second Ballade.

For the second part of the concert Arcadi Volodos showcases two pieces from Schumann's still-underrated *Bunte Blätter*, a sequence of earlier pieces that the composer compiled late in life. He concludes with Schumann's *Humoreske*, a work in which the composer revels in a sense of the unpredictable.

It promises to be a very memorable concert. I hope you enjoy it.

Huw Humphreys, Head of Music, Barbican

Franz Liszt (1811–86)

Années de pèlerinage, Deuxième année,

S161 (pub 1858) — Sonetto 123 del Petrarca

La lugubre gondola, S200/2 (1882)

**Légende, S175 No 1, 'St François d'Assise'
(La prédication aux oiseaux) (c1860–63)**

Ballade No 2 in B minor, S171 (1853)

Liszt's three volumes of *Années de pèlerinage* ('Years of pilgrimage') constitute one of music's greatest travelogues. While the First and Second Books offer scintillating aural tours of Switzerland and Italy respectively, reflecting the travels undertaken by the composer and Marie d'Agoult, with whom he'd eloped in the early 1830s, the Third is essentially an inward, solitary journey, one of contemplation more than action. By the time of the Second, Liszt is transfixed less by the scenery and more by the art and literature of the country. This instalment began life in 1838–9 and was completed a decade later but only published, after further revision, in 1858. The great Italian Renaissance scholar and poet Petrarch was a natural choice for inclusion, though in fact Liszt's 'Petrarch Sonnets' started life as songs for high tenor, before being adapted for solo piano. And how unerringly Liszt achieves this.

Petrarch's sonnets famously came about when he encountered a woman in a church in Avignon. Her name was Laura and his magnificent, obsessive passion for her took the form of 366 poems, bought together in his *Rime sparse*. The opening verse of Sonnet 123 translates thus:

I beheld on earth angelic grace
And heavenly beauty unmatched in this world,
Such as rejoice and pain my memory,
Which is clouded with dreams, shadows, mists.
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How wonderfully Liszt captures its shifting moods, the sense of divine love and an abiding stillness, as if awestruck. No words are needed for the poem's meaning to be clear.

Liszt arguably rivals Beethoven in terms of 'late'-period creativity. As he turned increasingly inward, his music became not only sparer and more concentrated but ever more uninhibited in its harmonic experimentation, sounding at times almost Expressionistic.

Venice is surely the Romantic city *par excellence*, the transitoriness of existence reflected in a place where life and decay intermingle, water seeping through its very bones. It was while Liszt was staying with Wagner at the Palazzo Vendramin on the Grand Canal, towards the end of 1882, that he had a premonition of Wagner's death. When that came true six weeks later he responded with no fewer than four pieces. Two

versions of *La lugubre gondola* exist, the second being the more extended and more veiled of the two. Liszt takes the form of a barcarolle, a genre so often associated, thanks to its 6/8 rocking motion, with easeful repose. But not here: in its place we have desolation, the unsettling tritone combined with broken phrases whose recitative-like line is shredded, bare, devoid of colour. The grief is palpable and holds the listener mesmerisingly in its grip through its span of some 10 minutes.

We now move back a couple of decades and to a piece that relates overtly to the composer's Catholicism. Like the Petrarch Sonnets, Liszt's two *Légendes* show his remarkable gifts for word-painting, and in both his subject-matter was aptly chosen – the legends of St Francis of Assisi's sermon to the birds and St Francis of Paola walking on the water.

The first's effortless depiction of an avian flock serves as a reminder of Liszt's belief that music absolutely could express things other than itself (which famously put him in the opposing corner to Brahms). Even so, Liszt apologised for his lack of ingenuity in this piece, and his impoverishment in relation to the 'wonderful profusion of the text of the Sermon of the Birds'. What makes this work so powerful, though, is not the glory of the word-painting – though that in itself is miraculous enough – but the fact that Liszt adds a spiritual dimension, with the listener almost able to hear the blessing of St Francis as it emerges through the flurry of feathers. Liszt makes a further link to the sacred aspect of his persona in quoting a theme from his early choral work, also in celebration of his patron saint, *Cantico del Sol di Francesco d'Assisi*.

A ballade (with or without the 'e') was traditionally a literary form that told a story. It became a popular non-vocal form among composers in the 19th century, perhaps most

famously Chopin, whose own four ballades are, ironically, without specific narrative. Liszt's Second Ballade is a large-scale piece that shares not only its key with his recently completed B minor Sonata but also his preoccupation with the transformation of material to create a work at once emotionally wide-ranging and tautly constructed.

The Ballade's inspiration came from the poem *Lenore* by Gottfried August Bürger, published the previous century. With its story of lovers separated by war, mistaken identity, the arrival of a mysterious stranger, an ever-faster horseback ride by moonlight, a cemetery, jeering spirits and the transformation of the stranger into Death, it's hardly surprising that Romantic composers and artists were drawn to its subject matter. It certainly made an impact on Liszt, who also turned it into a melodrama just a handful of years after the Ballade.

Out of the swirling chromatic depths arises a ringingly ominous theme that leads to a serenely beautiful chordal idea. Everything shifts down a semitone, to the inky bleakness of B flat minor, for a reprise of these ideas. This gives way to a peremptory march, dazzlingly ornamented, with the ominous theme now arising out of this, though transformed into something more straightforwardly confident. Liszt continues to transform his material, so that even an apparently new idea almost inevitably grows from something previously heard. There is no more extraordinary example of this than the operatic melody that winds its way through the closing minutes of the piece, which is none other than the opening theme, utterly transformed by its simple eloquence and the answering filigree, building to a climax in Liszt's most grandiose manner. But such an extrovert ending would be inappropriate for this tragic tale: instead the music melts soulfully away.

interval 20 minutes

Robert Schumann (1810–56)

Bunte Blätter, Op 99 (pub 1852) – No 11, Marsch; No 12, Abendmusik

Humoreske, Op 20 (1839)

1 Einfach – Sehr rasch und leicht – Wie im Anfang

2 Hastig – Nach und nach immer lebhafter und starker – Adagio

3 Einfach und zart – Intermezzo

4 Innig – Sehr lebhaft – Mit einigem Pomp

5 Zum Beschluss

That we are familiar with Schumann's *Bunte Blätter* (which translates as 'Coloured Leaves') at all is as much due to Brahms and Clara Schumann as to Robert himself, for both wrote sets of variations on the fourth piece within it.

The opus number is deceptive, for this is not a late work but rather a compilation of earlier music, brought together while Schumann was living in Düsseldorf, where he'd ill-advisedly taken up the position of music director of the city's orchestra and chorus, despite being by all accounts a lacklustre conductor. There was little time for piano composition so he gathered together 14 pieces and originally intended to publish them in three smaller sets with different coloured wrappers (hence the work's title). They are glitteringly varied and divide into three sections – the first two of which (a total of eight pieces) are vividly characterful miniatures, passing by in mere moments. The last six pieces are a rather different proposition, generally unfolding on a bigger scale and ranging wide in mood. The structure of the *Bunte Blätter* makes them perfect fodder for a musical pick and mix, as Arcadi Volodos presents this evening.

He begins with the 'Marsch', the most extended piece in the set. As it sets off we're reminded of Chopin's Funeral March from his Second Sonata, with its ringing dotted rhythms and

a sense of pomp amidst the grief. Even when Schumann moves to the major there's little balm, however. And what is fascinating about this is the way he pushes the harmonies into completely new realms – this March is prescient in many respects of his late music in the way it reveals new harmonic vistas. But then he surprises us (as ever!) with a faster-moving Trio that, in its apparent guilelessness, could have come out of *Kinderszenen*. It's gone in moments, but even as the march theme returns is there a glimmer of hope despite the minor key? That ambiguity is part of Schumann's essential make-up and one of the reasons we find him so endlessly fascinating.

The 'Abendmusik' that follows is marked 'in minuet tempo' and it sets off with a dotted figure that sounds like a transformation of the March, before Schumann proceeds to mould his lines with great plasticity, repeating the dotted figure but constantly refreshing it with new harmonies and using the contrasting ranges of the piano to great effect. The overall effect is one of the greatest whimsy.

Schumann's *Humoreske* was written at white heat in 1839 and, as the composer confided to Clara, his wife-to-be: 'I have been all the week at the piano, composing, writing, laughing and crying, all at once. You will find this state of

affairs nicely described in my Op 20, the Grosse Humoreske ... 12 sheets composed in a week.' Certainly, the title – suggestive of something witty, even lighthearted – is as misleading as that of Beethoven's late Bagatelles or Schubert's Impromptus. Schumann's concept of 'Humor' came from a way of viewing emotions with a kind of wry detachment, and there is a sense of irony threaded through even the most passionate passages in this work. The composer rather unhelpfully described its structure as 'variations, but not upon a theme'. And that sense of Schumann deliberately discombobulating both pianist and listener is wonderfully apparent – this is a piece that delights in throwing away the rulebook in terms of preconceived structure and an ability to predict what will happen next. The only solution is to submit to Schumann's whims. Yet these are not whimsical, for there's an assurance as regards where he's taking you, and for all that ideas seem highly contrasted, there's an absolute inevitability about it all as one

follows another – and the result is never merely episodic.

There are also several cyphers within the work, devices of which the composer was very fond: the second number, for instance, has an extra 'inner voice' written out on a middle staff, for the performer's eyes only. A secret message to Clara? The jury's out.

What matters more than deciphering apparent codes is surely to appreciate the sheer originality and quality of the work. The opening draws us in with its songful beauty – remarkable even by Schumann's standards – while the third number dips poignantly into the minor, the mood brightened by an inner intermezzo in B flat major. The final number is again full of surprises – its churning momentum interrupted by a comically pompous march. This then fades into recitative-like writing before it picks itself up once more, driving energetically towards the final barline.

Programme note © Harriet Smith

About the performer

Marcus Borggreve/Sony Classical



Arcadi Volodos

Arcadi Volodos piano

Arcadi Volodos was born in St Petersburg in 1972 and first studied voice and conducting, only beginning serious training at the piano in 1987 at the St Petersburg Conservatoire. He pursued his studies further at the Moscow Conservatoire with Galina Egiazarova, then in Paris and Madrid.

Since his New York debut in 1996, Arcadi Volodos has performed throughout the world in recital and with many of the most eminent orchestras and conductors. He has worked with, among others, the Berlin, Israel, Munich and New York Philharmonic orchestras, the Philharmonia, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Dresden Staatskapelle, Orchestre de Paris, Leipzig Gewandhausorchester, Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra, and the Boston and Chicago Symphony orchestras, collaborating with conductors such as Myung-Whun Chung, Lorin Maazel, Valery Gergiev, James Levine, Zubin Mehta, Seiji Ozawa, Jukka-Pekka Saraste, Paavo Järvi, Christoph Eschenbach, Semyon Bychkov and Riccardo Chailly.

Piano recitals have played a central role in his artistic life since the start of his career. His repertoire includes major works by Schubert, Schumann, Brahms, Beethoven, Liszt, Rachmaninov, Scriabin, Prokofiev and Ravel, together with less often performed pieces by Mompou, Lecuona and Falla.

He is a regular guest of the most prestigious concert halls of Europe. This season he appears at the Konzerthaus in Vienna, Konserthuset in Stockholm, Meistersingerhall in Nuremberg, Zurich Tonhalle, Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Auditorium Parco della Musica in Rome, here at the Barbican Centre, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées in Paris, Müpa in Budapest, Munich Herkulesaal, Berlin Philharmonie and Auditório Gulbenkian in Lisbon.

Since his *Gramophone* Award-winning Carnegie Hall recital debut in 1998 Arcadi Volodos has recorded a series of acclaimed CDs, including Schubert sonatas, Rachmaninov solo pieces and transcriptions and live recordings with the Berlin Philharmonic of Rachmaninov's Third Piano Concerto under James Levine, and Tchaikovsky's First under Seiji Ozawa. His *Volodos plays Liszt* album gained numerous prizes. His Vienna Musikverein recital from 2010 was released on CD and DVD to enormous international critical acclaim, while his 2013 solo album of Mompou won a *Gramophone* Award and an ECHO prize.

Volodos plays Brahms was released in April 2017 – an album of 13 piano pieces by Brahms, including Opp 117 and 118 and a selection from Op 76. It won him an Edison Classical Award, a *Diapason d'Or* and *Gramophone's* prestigious Instrumental Award. In October this year Sony Classical released his new recording: *Volodos plays Schubert*, which includes the Sonata, D959 and Minuets, D334, D335 and D600.

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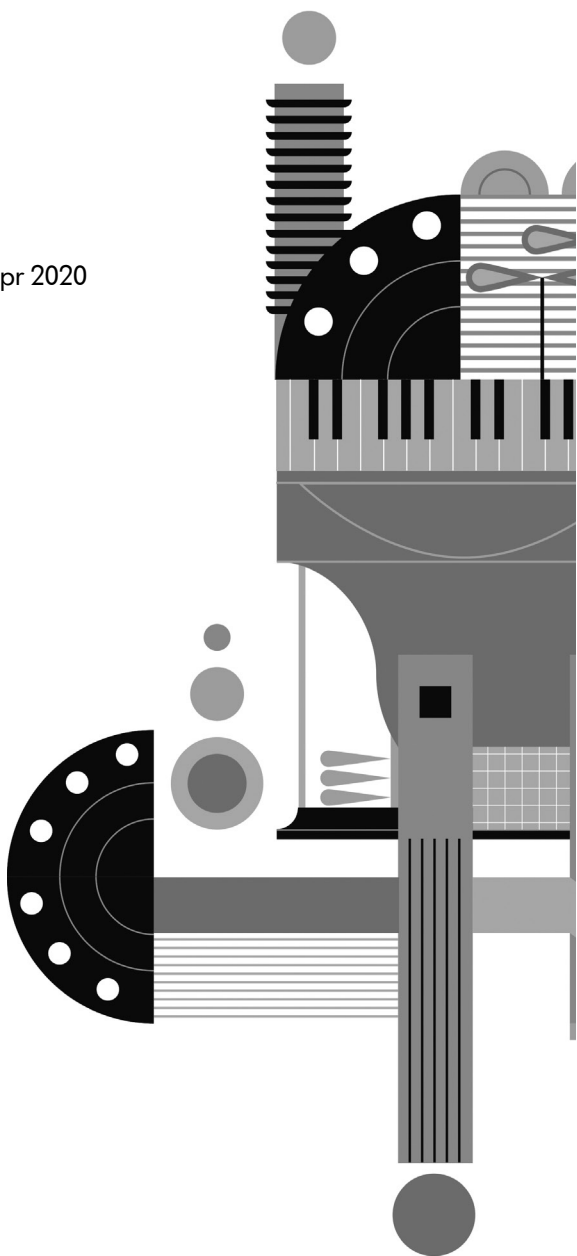
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