

Piotr Anderszewski

Start time: 7.30pm

Approximate end time: 9.30pm, including a 20-minute interval

Please note all timings are approximate and subject to change.

Programme

Johann Sebastian Bach Partita No 6 in E minor

1. Toccata
2. Allemande
3. Corrente
4. Air
5. Sarabande
6. Tempo di Gavotta
7. Gigue

Karol Szymanowski Mazurkas, Op 50

- No 3 Moderato
- No 7 Poco vivace
- No 8 Moderato
- No 5 Moderato
- No 4 Allegramente, risoluto

Anton Webern Variations, Op 27

Ludwig van Beethoven Piano Sonata No 31

1. Moderato cantabile, molto espressivo
2. Allegro molto
3. Adagio, ma non troppo – Arioso dolente – Fuga: Allegro, ma non troppo – L'istesso tempo di Arioso – L'inversione della Fuga

The great Polish pianist Piotr Anderszewski makes a welcome return to the Barbican with a recital contrasting masterpieces by Bach and Beethoven with the heady world of Szymanowski and the extreme concision of Webern.

Piotr Anderszewski is an artist who has long embraced the unexpected, whether in his repertoire choices or his interpretations. Bach has long been central to his art, but always with a fresh slant – as in his most recent recording of the composer's music, where he boldly took selected preludes and fugues from the Second Book of the *48* and presented them in his own re-ordering.

Tonight opens with Bach's E minor Partita, BWV830 – the final one in a set of six that the composer proudly published as his 'opus 1' in 1731. Although it's actually one of the earlier partitas to have been written, it's easy to see why Bach placed it last, with its striking combination of sweeping brilliance and profundity. The sense of scale is evident from the opening Toccata, which marries grandeur and a sense of improvisation and has at its centrepiece a large-scale fugue full of aching chromaticisms. Throughout this partita (which simply means suite) Bach relishes the opportunities for contrast: the Allemande's limpid dotted rhythms and easy grace are followed by a Corrente whose witty dialogue between the hands challenges the player with its syncopations, while the Air's unassuming lines cry out for ornamentation. Bach's Sarabandes are invariably the emotional heart of the partitas, but this one is exceptional even by his standards, moving from rhetorical declamation to writing of great pathos. The playful jerkiness of a Tempo di Gavotta breaks the seriousness and the partita closes, as is usual, with a gigue – but Bach outdoes himself with a movement that is so much more than just a fast-paced dance, demanding mental as well as physical virtuosity from the player, its counterpoint as defiantly angular as a Paolozzi sculpture.

From a master of the Baroque, Piotr Anderszewski turns to his Polish compatriot, one of the greatest colourists of the 20th century, Karol Szymanowski. The piano functioned as both inspiration and musical laboratory throughout his composing life. The 20 Mazurkas of Op 50 (1924–5), from which we hear Nos 3, 7, 8, 5 and 4, are from the final phase of Szymanowski's style, one in which his own musical language became inextricably suffused with Polish nationalism.

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The impulse came from a visit a few years earlier to the town of Zakopane, in the Tatra mountains. It had become a melting-pot for artistic endeavour of all kinds, as well as having a folk music tradition that was quite distinct from the rest of Poland. Szymanowski was enraptured by the Tatra folk-style, with its emphatic two-time rhythms and acerbic timbres. But how was he to translate a style consisting of two beats in a bar to a mazurka, which has three? Szymanowski offers a cunning solution by obscuring the barline itself, avoiding the accentuation that you'd expect in this dance form and often using dotted rhythms and unconventional phrase lengths to scintillating effect.

A decade later Anton Webern was taking piano writing to a new level of concision in his Variations, Op 27 (1936). The title is deceptive, though, for it's in fact nothing less than a sonata, albeit on a miniature scale. Webern was a member of the Second Viennese School, the movement founded by Arnold Schoenberg whose founding principle was that of 'serialism' (in which, unlike in time-honoured system of traditional tonality, all 12 notes of the chromatic scale are used to create a 'row' or 'series', determining not only the melodic lines of a piece but also its harmonies). Of Schoenberg's disciples, Webern was the most stringent, but what's remarkable is the way that the results are anything but formulaic (a quality he shared with Bach in his fugues in being able to create rapturous music from extremely strict rules). Webern's three brief movements are all built from the same tone row, but how remarkably he varies the mood: from the yearning opening phrases of the first movement, via the skittishness of the second, to the contrasts within the last, from introspection to buoyancy, and softness to muscularity.

There's a mastery of concision to Beethoven's A flat major Sonata, Op 110, if not quite to the extent of Webern's! It was his penultimate sonata, written in 1821, and, though there's plenty of emotional contrast between the movements, they are interconnected by related ideas that reappear throughout the piece.

The outward gentleness of the opening movement belies its tautness of form, and the contrast with the brief second, a scherzo marked Allegro molto – capricious, gruffly humorous, even violent – is extreme. Beethoven subversively sneaks in references to two street songs popular at the time: *Unsa Kätz häd Katzln ghabt* ('Our cat has had kittens') and *Ich bin lüderlich, du bist lüderlich* ('I'm dissolute, you're dissolute')!

But it's in the finale that the weight of the sonata lies, and it begins with a declamatory, recitative-like passage that starts in the minor, moving via a shadowy sequence of harmonies to an emotionally pained aria-like section. The mood switches again as Beethoven introduces a quietly authoritative fugue, based on a theme reminiscent of the one that opened the sonata. It builds to what we anticipate will be a majestic close, only to have its progress interrupted by the aria once more, its line now disjunct and almost sobbing for breath. The way in which the composer ducks into the major via a sequence of G major chords is a passage of pure radiance, one that the great pianist Edwin Fischer described as 'like a reawakening heartbeat'. This leads to a second appearance of the fugue, upside down this time but now unstoppable, and the sonata culminates in a magnificent and ultimately triumphant conclusion.

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Performers

Piotr Anderszewski piano

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