



Friday 26 February 2010 7.30pm
Barbican Hall

Emanuel Ax & Yo-Yo Ma in recital

Yo-Yo Ma *cello*
Emanuel Ax *piano*

Schumann Adagio and Allegro, Op. 70

Fünf Stücke im Volkston, Op. 102

Peter Lieberson Remembering Schumann

UK premiere

Chopin Introduction and Polonaise brillante, Op. 3

Interval

Schumann Fantasiestücke, Op. 73

Chopin Cello Sonata, Op. 65

Robert Schumann (1810–56)

Adagio and Allegro, Op. 70 (1849)

Fünf Stücke im Volkston, Op. 102 (1849)

- 1 Mit Humor
- 2 Langsam
- 3 Nicht schnell, mit viel Ton zu spielen
- 4 Nicht zu rasch
- 5 Stark und markiert

Robert Schumann's youthful but short-lived experience as a cellist fuelled his lifelong affinity for the instrument, notwithstanding his ambitions as a piano virtuoso. After he injured his right hand with a device designed to improve finger strength, he toyed with the idea of taking up the cello again, writing to his mother that the instrument would be 'very useful to me in composing symphonies'. Indeed, the cello writing throughout Schumann's orchestral and chamber output is never less than idiomatic, and often takes full advantage of the instrument's rich expressive scope in both high and low registers, while the A minor Cello Concerto, Op. 129, has taken its place within the core repertoire.

That said, one wonders why Schumann wrote so little chamber music for cello. Of all the works featured in tonight's concert (all dating from 1849, one of Schumann's most fruitful years), only the *Five Pieces in Folk Style*, Op. 102 were originally conceived for the instrument. These are not literally based on folk songs, yet their strong melodic substance and contrasting moods convey a communicative immediacy that is palpable to both performers and audiences alike. Note, for example, No. 1's humorous, almost Haydnesque repeated phrases, or the subtle asymmetry of No. 2's expansive cello cantilena. Schumann's dark side takes agitated wing as No. 3 gets underway, its

lyrical opening cello lines punctuated by ominous, detached piano chords that recall the dark second movement of the Piano Quintet. However, Schumann saves his most impassioned thoughts, and his most elaborate interplay between cello and piano for the final two pieces of the set.

Schumann's *Adagio and Allegro*, Op. 70, followed hot on the heels of his Op. 73 triptych (which had taken him just two days) that we'll hear later this evening. This work was completed between 14 and 17 February 1849. It was designed to showcase the valved horn, which had begun to appear in orchestras in the 1830s, and was intended for amateurs to play at home, although the music's technical demands are enough to give skilled professionals pause. With the marketplace in mind, Schumann also sanctioned alternative printed versions for violin and cello. The *Adagio* stands out as an inspired example of Schumann's penchant for spinning and sustaining long lines at slow tempos, and for the leisurely yet increasingly intense repartee between the cello and piano. While the *Allegro's* persistent triplets carry a stronger 'hunting horn' impact in the original scoring, they have the potential to soar with more lightness and agility via bow and strings, provided that the anchoring, fluent piano support does not overpower its partner.

Peter Lieberson (born 1946)

Remembering Schumann (2009) UK premiere

- 1 Variations on Simple Chords
- 2 Variations on a Simple Melody
- 3 Fantasy Variations on A-S-C-H

American composer Peter Lieberson's collaborations with Emanuel Ax and Yo-Yo Ma have resulted in several major works, including the Piano Variations, *King Gesar* and the cello concerto *The Six Realms*. *Remembering Schumann* was also written specifically for the Ma/Ax duo, and was co-commissioned by Carnegie Hall, the San Francisco Symphony, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Amsterdam Concertgebouw and the Barbican Centre, and premiered last month in San Francisco.

'I have always had a special feeling for Schumann', writes Lieberson. 'Even as a young man I loved the sensibility of his piano music, but I was also somewhat scared by how unhinged his music could be. When I was trying to compose this work a Schumann piece kept going through my head. I had trouble placing it but eventually realised it was the third variation of his *Études symphoniques* – some funny march music that is evoked in my first movement, "Variations on Simple Chords". Yet there's nothing really funny about Lieberson's grim, metrically shifting block chords, which would not be out of place in Kurt Weill's *The Threepenny Opera*.

Lieberson accurately connects the second movement, 'Variations on a Simple Melody' to a song style, replete with an intense, achingly expressive unaccompanied cello cadenza. The composer utilises the A-S-C-H motif from Schumann's *Carnaval* as the basis for the third movement variations, 'but for some reason the motif insisted on coming out as S-A-C-H in my piece', Lieberson explains. 'Although all three movements involve variations, the variations aren't as clearly demarcated as they would be in a classical variation form. But of course my goal was to write an original piece rather than to specifically evoke the sound of Schumann.'

Perhaps one can link Schumann's soundworld to the first movement's obsessive dotted motifs and the second movement's quirky accelerations, although a definite 21st-century composing personality is responsible for the last movement's jagged rhythms and stinging, dissonant strokes. If anything, Lieberson's rich, subtly wrought chord voicings in the second movement's solo piano passages evoke the harmonic conceptions of jazz pianist Bill Evans, who strongly influenced the composer in his youth.

About the composer

Peter Lieberson came to prominence in the mid-1980s with the Piano Concerto and *Drala*, two major commissions from the Boston Symphony, with whom he still enjoys a fruitful relationship. Of profound influence on his music has been his practice of Tibetan Buddhism. Since 1980 many of his works have been inspired by Buddhist themes, including *King Gesar* (1991) and the opera *Ashoka's Dream* (1997), both from a series of works based on the lives of enlightened rulers. Lyricism and vocal writing dominate his works of the last decade, reflecting the rich collaborations with Lorraine Hunt Lieberson, for whom he composed *Neruda Songs* (winner of the 2008 Grawemeyer Award for music).

In addition to his associations with major orchestras such as the Boston and Chicago Symphony orchestras, the Los Angeles and New York Philharmonic orchestras and the Cleveland Orchestra, Peter Lieberson enjoys longstanding artistic relationships with Peter Serkin, Yo-Yo Ma, Emanuel Ax and Oliver Knussen. Recent commissions include *The World in Flower* for the New York Philharmonic, tonight's work, *Remembering Schumann*, *The Coming of Light* – a new song-cycle for baritone, oboe, and string quartet – the orchestral suite from *Ashoka's Dream*, and *Songs of Love and Sorrow* for Gerald Finley and the Boston Symphony Orchestra.

Fryderyk Chopin (1810–49)

Introduction and Polonaise brillante in C major, Op. 3 (1830)

Chopin's two principal works for cello and piano that we hear this evening represent his budding youth and mature mastery, respectively. Following his debut in Vienna in 1829, the 19-year-old composer/pianist returned to Warsaw to stay at Prince Antonin Radziwill's mountain hunting lodge, where he was to give the Prince's daughters piano lessons. One by-product of the visit was Chopin's *Introduction and Polonaise brillante*. The composer dismissed the work in a

letter, writing that 'there is nothing in it but glitter; a salon piece ...', yet what glitter!

In addition to the main theme's extrovert swagger and the second, lyrical theme's *bel canto*-like charm lie mounds of sparkling, perfectly proportioned filigree for both instruments and more than a few passages packed with striking harmonic gestures that can take audiences by surprise even today.

INTERVAL

Robert Schumann

Fantasiestücke, Op. 73 (1849)

- 1 Zart und mit Ausdruck –
- 2 Lebhaft, leicht –
- 3 Rasch und mit Feuer

Like his Op. 70, Schumann's Op. 73 *Fantasiestücke* weren't originally conceived specifically for cello, being designated 'for clarinet or violin or cello and piano'. They were composed at white heat in just two days, on 11 and 12 February 1849, just after the composer and his wife Clara had fled Dresden for the countryside during the political uprising. Although a clear-cut preference for one setting over

another is difficult to determine, there's much to be said for the way that Schumann's ideas naturally lend themselves to the cello's wide registral compass and immense flexibility. Each of the three adheres to a loose A–B–A form, as well as interrelating harmonically to its fellows. The composer plays up this unity by directing that each piece should follow on from the previous one without a pause.

Fryderyk Chopin

Sonata for Cello and Piano in G minor, Op. 65 (1845–6)

- 1 Allegro moderato
- 2 Scherzo: Allegro con brio
- 3 Largo
- 4 Finale: Allegro

If Chopin didn't take his Op. 3 seriously, he fought tooth and nail over his G minor Cello Sonata, written between 1845 and 1846, with numerous sketches, drafts and revisions in between. Chopin wrote it for his close cellist friend Auguste-Joseph Franchomme, with whom he premiered it at a private concert in Paris. The first movement bustles with the kind of terse, contrapuntal density and concentration typical of the composer's late style (the first movement of the Third Piano Sonata, the fourth *Ballade*, the *Barcarolle* and the *Polonaise-fantasia* all spring to mind), while the cello's opening three-note phrase provides a key unifying element that appears throughout the sonata in varied manifestations.

Although there's the hint of a mazurka rhythm underlying the Scherzo's basic pulse, Chopin's frequently full textures, cross-rhythmic accentuation and asymmetrically lyrical Trio theme seem to foreshadow Brahms. By contrast, the brief Largo's melodic trajectory would not be out of place in a Mendelssohn *Song without words*. Imagine the angular qualities of Chopin's fourth *Scherzo* ambitiously cross-fertilised with a tarantella, and you'll see where the tumultuous Finale is coming from. Astute listeners might also discern traces of the composer's piano concertos in both outer movements.

Programme notes © Jed Distler

About tonight's performers



J. Henry Fair

Emanuel Ax piano

Emanuel Ax is renowned for his poetic temperament and unsurpassed virtuosity, as well as the breadth of his performing activity. Each season sees appearances with major orchestras worldwide, recitals in leading concert halls, chamber music collaborations, the commissioning and performance of new music, and additions to his acclaimed discography.

Born in Lvov, Poland, Emanuel Ax moved to Winnipeg, Canada, as a young boy. He studied at the Juilliard School, subsequently winning the Young Concert Artists Award, and also attended Columbia University. He first

captured public attention in 1974 when, aged 25, he won the first Arthur Rubinstein International Piano Competition, five years later taking the Avery Fisher Prize in New York.

Recent highlights include a season-long 'Perspectives' series at Carnegie Hall, New York, focusing on Debussy and featuring Ax in orchestral performances, chamber concerts and a solo recital; his appointment as Pianist in Residence at the Berlin Philharmonic, performing under Sir Simon Rattle and in chamber concerts with members of the orchestra; and a collaboration with the Mark Morris Dance Group, playing Mozart concertos in New York, London and Vienna.

His current series of concerts at the Barbican Centre is part of a recital series marking the 200th anniversaries of Schumann and Chopin, which he is also giving at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Carnegie Hall, New York, Davies Symphony Hall in San Francisco and Walt Disney Hall in Los Angeles. Other highlights include a

tour of Asia with the New York Philharmonic and Chopin concertos with the Chamber Orchestra of Europe.

He has been an exclusive Sony Classical artist since 1987, and his recent releases include a two-piano programme (with Yefim Bronfman) of works by Brahms, period-instrument performances of Chopin's works for piano and orchestra with the OAE under Sir Charles Mackerras, and Brahms's Piano Concerto No. 2 with Bernard Haitink and the Boston Symphony. Other notable recordings include a collection of Chopin's scherzos and mazurkas, a Grammy award-winning album of Haydn sonatas, the two Liszt concertos paired with the Schoenberg Concerto, three solo Brahms albums, a disc of tangos by Astor Piazzolla and John Adams's *Century Rolls* with the Cleveland Orchestra for Nonesuch.

In 2007 he was made an Honorary Doctor of Music at Yale University and in 2008 an Honorary Doctor at Columbia.



Yo-Yo Ma cello

The many-faceted career of cellist Yo-Yo Ma is testament to his continual search for new ways to communicate with audiences, and to his personal desire for artistic growth and renewal. Whether performing a new concerto, revisiting a familiar work from the cello repertoire, coming together with colleagues for chamber music or exploring musical forms outside the Western classical tradition, he strives to find connections that stimulate the imagination.

Yo-Yo Ma maintains a balance between his concerto engagements and his recital and chamber-music activities. He draws inspiration from a

wide circle of artists, including Emanuel Ax, Daniel Barenboim, Christophe Eschenbach, Kayhan Kalhor, Ton Koopman, Bobby McFerrin, Edgar Meyer, Mark Morris, Mark O'Connor, Kathryn Stott, Wu Man, Wu Tong and David Zinman. One of his goals is the exploration of music as a means of communication, and as a vehicle for the migrations of ideas, across a range of cultures throughout the world.

Expanding on this interest, he established the Silk Road Project to promote the study of the cultural, artistic and intellectual traditions along the ancient Silk Road trade route that stretched from the Mediterranean Sea to the Pacific Ocean. By examining the flow of ideas throughout this vast area, the project seeks to illuminate the heritages of the Silk Road countries and identify the voices that represent these traditions today.

Yo-Yo Ma is an exclusive Sony Classical artist and has recorded over 75 discs (including more than 15 Grammy award-winners), which reflect his wide-ranging interests. In addition to the

standard concerto repertoire, he has recorded many of the large body of works that he has commissioned or premiered, and several successful recordings that defy categorisation, including *Hush* with McFerrin, *Appalachia Waltz* and *Appalachian Journey* with O'Connor and Meyer and two Grammy-winning tributes to the music of Brazil. His most recent recordings include *Songs of Joy & Peace*, *Paris: La Belle Époque* and *New Impossibilities*.

Yo-Yo Ma is committed to educational programmes that not only bring young audiences into contact with music but also allow them to participate in its creation. These range from masterclasses to more informal programmes for students, musicians and non-musicians alike. He also continues to develop new concert programmes for family audiences.

In November he was appointed to the President's Committee on the Arts and the Humanities.