



Behzod Abduraimov

Thursday 18 January 2018 7.30pm, Hall

Wagner, arr Liszt Isolde's Liebestod, S447

Liszt Piano Sonata in B minor, S178

interval 20 minutes

Schubert Moment musical No 2, D780

Schubert, arr Liszt Valse caprice No 6

Prokofiev Piano Sonata No 6, Op 82

Behzod Abduraimov piano

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Welcome

Tonight we welcome the young Uzbek pianist Behzod Abduraimov to the Barbican. Still only 27, he has been making waves across the music world for his combination of thrilling pianism and probing musicality.

Liszt features heavily in the programme, with his mighty B minor Sonata a fitting centrepiece. We also hear Liszt as transcriber, from his extraordinary reworking of the Liebestod from Wagner's *Tristan und Isolde* to his paraphrase on simple waltzes by Schubert, which is

prefaced by another charming work – Schubert's second *Moment musical*.

Prokofiev is a composer close to Behzod's heart – he has already recorded the Third Concerto and the sonata we hear this evening, the Sixth. It certainly turned heads when it was premiered by the composer in a 1940 radio broadcast and it has long been a favourite with pianists and audiences alike.

I hope you enjoy the concert.

Huw Humphreys, Head of Music, Barbican

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Richard Wagner (1813–83), arr Franz Liszt

Isolde's Liebestod, S447 (c1867)

Franz Liszt (1811–86)

Piano Sonata in B minor, S178 (1852–3)

Behzod Abduraimov begins tonight's recital with an ending. The Liebestod that closes Wagner's music drama *Tristan und Isolde* is one of the most sensuous – and famous – depictions of erotic love in all music. It was Liszt who actually gave it this name (which translates literally as 'Love–Death'), Wagner having merely described it as Isolde's transfiguration.

Liszt's achievement here is to take this extraordinary passage, which in the theatre is reached only after nearly five hours of music, and not lose the intensity of the moment, as Isolde sings over the body of her beloved Tristan. It works because he does so little to Wagner's original, beyond minor emendations. His immense experience on the podium surely comes into play here (and he conducted the premiere of *Lohengrin*, no less, in Weimar in 1850). The genius of Liszt's Liebestod is that we realise that no voice or orchestra is needed, and as we reach the final transcendent chord of B major, how could we fail to be simultaneously moved and devastated?

While Liszt was unquestionably one of the greatest transcribers for the piano, among his own music the B minor Sonata is regarded by many as his ultimate masterpiece. It was not always so: Clara Schumann thought little of the work (it was dedicated to her husband, but he never got to hear it), while the famously vitriolic critic Eduard Hanslick pronounced, 'Anyone who has heard this and finds it beautiful is beyond help'. Wagner, perhaps not surprisingly, hurled superlatives at it, calling it 'beautiful beyond all conception; lovely, deep and noble, sublime even as thyself'. In more recent times, Alfred Brendel summed it up as 'the most original, powerful and intelligent sonata composed after Beethoven and Schubert'.

Liszt may well have got the idea of working the characteristics of several movements into a single, through-written entity from the finale of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony and Schubert's 'Wanderer' Fantasy, the latter a piece that he'd arranged for piano and orchestra shortly before writing the sonata, which dates from 1852–3.

If we divide Liszt's Sonata into four parts, the exposition is equivalent to the first movement, the recapitulation to the finale, while the extended and wide-ranging development section supplies both the slow movement and the scherzo. It is built from a few highly individual elements: the quietly stabbing Gs, with their dramatic pauses, answered by a slow-moving, tonally ambiguous descending scale; an energetic, upward-leaping octave figure with dotted rhythm; the answering sinister repeated-note figure; a D major theme, marked *Grandioso*, that functions as a second subject and adds a luminosity to the proceedings, as well as referring, through the motif of a rising tone then a minor third, to the plainsong *Vexilla regis prodeunt* (which has led some to give the work a religious subtext); another lyrical idea,

again in D major; and the 'slow'-movement theme, breathing the otherworldly air of F sharp major.

One of the many marvels of this piece is the way that Liszt can take a single motif and transform its mood completely by changing its context; no less astounding is his command of rhetorical drama and heart-melting beauty, of, ultimately, sound and silence. This is potently demonstrated in the closing bars. Originally he intended a vehemently triumphant ending; how much more effective are his second thoughts, with a rapt coda reprising the mysterious opening, which is finally resolved by seraphic floating chords.

interval 20 minutes

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

Moment musical No 2 in A flat major, D780 (c1827)

Franz Schubert, arr Franz Liszt

Valse caprice No 6 in A minor (1852)

Moments musicaux, along with dances and impromptus, were the bread-and-butter offerings of early Romantic composers, designed to charm the amateur market, while avoiding too many technical intricacies. But where Schubert is concerned, even at his most apparently *gemütlich*, matters are never entirely straightforward.

The six *Moments musicaux* date from the last five years of the composer's life and were gathered together to form a set in 1828. Despite their modest technical demands, they range widely in mood. The second was probably written in 1827, making it contemporary with such heavyweight masterpieces as the two piano trios and *Winterreise*. With a time signature of 9/8, it opens with a grounded chordal theme, gently dotted, that initially seems reassuring, though Schubert uses increasingly unexpected harmonies. This is followed by a hushed mournful section in F sharp minor; the main idea returns, but is taken in fresh directions and we then are interrupted by a blast of F minor, the motif that was initially mournful now impassioned and much more assertive; it is quickly quelled, however, and we return once more to the opening idea, again varied but coming to a gently rocking close that emphasises the home key of A flat.

As we've already heard this evening, Liszt was one of the most creative transcribers for the piano in music history – from Beethoven symphonies to Verdi's operatic tragedies, he could capture the essence of a work armed only with a pair of hands at a single keyboard.

But it wasn't all about mighty masterpieces – just as effective are his reworkings on a more modest scale. Liszt revered Schubert (and how tellingly that is revealed in the wondrously effective reworkings of his Lieder). He is in more virtuoso mode for the *Soirées de Vienne*, in which he took a whole host of Schubert dances and garlanded them, transforming them into brilliant paraphrases of the originals. His achievement is that we don't lose the spirit of Schubert in even the most dazzling passagework. No 6 is one of the more approachable in terms of technical difficulty and is based on three Schubert dances (*Valses nobles*, D969 Nos 9 and 10 and the *Valse sentimentale*, D779 No 13). The result is entirely felicitous, bringing deliciously idiomatic recolorings to Schubert's originals.

Sergey Prokofiev (1891–1953)

Piano Sonata No 6 in A major, Op 82 (1939)

1 **Allegro moderato**

2 **Allegretto**

3 **Tempo di valzer lentissimo**

4 **Vivace**

In his earlier works in particular, Prokofiev delighted in riling the more conservative members of his audience (even though, as we know from his own recordings, his playing was more about finesse than heft and pure velocity). This review of the Second Sonata by Richard Aldrich, which appeared in the *New York Times* on 21 November 1918, was typical of its time, and probably had the composer rubbing his hands in glee:

The Sonata, a second one, contains no sustained musical development. The finale of the work evoked visions of a charge of mammoths on some vast immemorial Asiatic plateau ... Prokofiev uses, like Arnold Schoenberg, the entire modern harmonies. The House of Bondage of normal key relations is discarded. He is a psychologist of the uglier emotions. Hatred, contempt, rage – above all, rage – disgust, despair, mockery and defiance legitimately serve as models for moods.

What Mr Aldrich would have made of the Sixth Sonata we can only speculate! Sviatoslav Richter, who became an early champion of all three ‘war’ sonatas (Nos 6–8), was quick to recognise the power of the this one: ‘With a barbaric boldness the composer breaks with romantic ideals and animates his music with the devastating pulsations of the 20th century’. It was introduced to the world by the composer himself, on 8 April 1940, via

a broadcast on Moscow Radio. As in the case of the Eighth, reviews were mixed, some finding the blatant brutality too much to bear; ironically (though perhaps understandably) it was rapidly denounced by Stalin’s regime.

It grabs the attention with such immediacy that it’s as if Prokofiev has declared war on the piano itself, with a terse, migraine-inducing motif of enormous energy which contrasts with a melancholic secondary idea. These are combined brilliantly in a development that is set alight by vigorous glissandos and clusters of notes given the indication *col pugno* (‘with the fist’).

The Allegretto that follows is classic Prokofiev, offering grimly light relief in a marching scherzo where buffoonery meets strength before melting into a gentler melody (where the incessant marching rhythm is to some extent pushed into the background).

Next, a plaintive waltz, in 9/8, undanceably slow, with one of those yearning melodies which seemed to come so easily to this composer.

The finale returns us (or rather the pianist) to superhuman demands with its acrobatic style *mécanique*, the only respite coming from a reminiscence of the main idea of the opening movement before manic energy resumes in some of Prokofiev’s most outlandishly virtuosic pages.

Programme notes © Harriet Smith

About the performer

Nisar Abduraimov



Behzod Abduraimov

Behzod Abduraimov piano

Behzod Abduraimov has worked with leading orchestras worldwide, including the Los Angeles Philharmonic, Boston and NHK Symphony orchestras and the Leipzig Gewandhausorchester, as well as with prestigious conductors such as Valery Gergiev, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Manfred Honeck, Vasily Petrenko, James Gaffigan, Jakub Hrůša and Vladimir Jurowski.

He made an acclaimed debut at the 2016 BBC Proms with the Munich Philharmonic Orchestra under Gergiev, returning there last year. He has also made notable debuts at the Baden-Baden Festspielhaus and Rheingau Festival.

Current and forthcoming European highlights include concerts with the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Czech and Munich Philharmonic orchestras, hr-Sinfonieorchester, Philharmonia Orchestra and the BBC Symphony Orchestra, as well as at the Lucerne Festival. Recent highlights include concerts with the NDR Elbphilharmonie

Orchester as part of the Elbphilharmonie opening, and with the London Symphony Orchestra.

As a recitalist he is one of the featured artists for the Junge Wilde series at the Dortmund Konzerthaus and performs at the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Louis Vuitton Fondation Paris, Prinzregententheater Munich and Tchaikovsky Hall Moscow. He also collaborates with the cellist Truls Mørk, touring in Europe and America.

In North America he appears at the Hollywood Bowl, Blossom and Ravinia festivals. He will make his debut with the San Francisco Symphony and returns to the Dallas and Atlanta Symphony orchestras. Last season he gave a recital in the Stern Auditorium, following his successful debut at Carnegie Hall in 2015; he has also given concerts with the Houston, Montréal and Pittsburgh Symphony orchestras and the Minnesota Orchestra.

His debut recital CD won both the Choc de Classica and the Diapason Découverte. In 2014 he released his first concerto disc (on Decca Classics), featuring Prokofiev's Piano Concerto No 3 and Tchaikovsky's Concerto No 1 with the RAI National Symphony Orchestra under Juraj Valčuha.

Behzod Abduraimov was born in Tashkent, Uzbekistan, in 1990, and began to study the piano at the age of 5 with Tamara Popovich at Uspensky State Central Lyceum in Tashkent. He is an alumnus of Park University's International Center for Music, where he studied with Stanislav Ioudenitch, and now serves as the ICM's Artist-in-Residence.

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