



Yuja Wang

Tuesday 5 June 2018 7.30pm, Hall

Rachmaninov

Prelude in G minor, Op 23 No 5
Étude-tableau in C minor, Op 39 No 1
Étude-tableau in C minor, Op 33 No 3
Étude-tableau in B minor, Op 39 No 4
Prelude in B minor, Op 32 No 10
Étude-tableau in E flat minor, Op 33 No 6
Étude-tableau in E flat minor, Op 39 No 5
Scriabin Piano Sonata No 10, Op 70
Ligeti Études for piano Nos 3, 9 & 1

interval 20 minutes

Prokofiev Piano Sonata No 8, Op 84

Yuja Wang piano

Part of Barbican Presents 2017–18

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Welcome

Tonight we welcome back to the Barbican Hall Yuja Wang, one of the most prodigiously gifted artists alive today.

With her combination of world-beating pianism and compelling stage presence, she could confine herself to standard repertoire and still fill halls. But that is not how she works, and this evening's programme is a good example of her inquiring mind.

Yuja begins with a group of pieces by Rachmaninov, a composer with whose music she has long been closely associated. From here we move into the

spectral world of late Scriabin in the form of his 10th Sonata. To follow, three of Ligeti's outlandishly taxing études.

Scriabin's 10th Sonata was written on the eve of the First World War; Prokofiev's Eighth, with which Yuja concludes her programme, dates from the Second World War, a fact reflected in brutal motoric writing and an abiding sense of unease.

I hope you enjoy the concert.

Huw Humphreys, Head of Music, Barbican

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Sergey Rachmaninov (1873–1943)

Prelude in G minor, Op 23 No 5 (1901–3)

Étude-tableau in C minor, Op 39 No 1 (1916–17)

Étude-tableau in C minor, Op 33 No 3 (1911)

Étude-tableau in B minor, Op 39 No 4

Prelude in B minor, Op 32 No 10 (1910)

Étude-tableau in E flat minor, Op 33 No 6

Étude-tableau in E flat minor, Op 39 No 5

Alexander Scriabin (1872–1915)

Piano Sonata No 10, Op 70 (1912–13)

Moderato – Allegro

György Ligeti (1923–2006)

Études –

No 3: Touches bloquées (1985)

No 9: Vertige (1990)

No 1: Désordre (1985)

Yuja Wang opens her recital with a group of Rachmaninov pieces put together to form partnerships between keys, creating the sequence G minor – C minor – B minor – E flat minor. Rachmaninov was following in a grand tradition when he composed his Preludes – one that stretched back to Bach and earlier and which also encompassed jewels by Chopin, Scriabin and Alkan. But whereas those of Chopin and Scriabin are relatively compact, Rachmaninov frequently

thinks on an altogether larger scale. That said, the fifth of Op 23 – arguably the best known of the opus – actually lasts under four minutes, but it nevertheless has a sense of the epic about it, set up by a purposeful marching rhythm, gruffly accented. This is alleviated in the inner section by a beguilingly beautiful melody, which is all too quickly banished as the march rhythm steals back in and quickly gathers momentum and power. But the composer has a surprise up his sleeve and

the piece ends with a quicksilver gesture that is positively Mendelssohnian.

By the time of Op 32 Preludes, Rachmaninov was at the peak of his powers as a performer, and in such demand that composition tended to be limited to short bursts, as and when time permitted. He wrote this set in a mere 19 days in 1910. No 10 is a rarity among the collection in beginning almost with a sense of stasis. Gradually, a languid *siciliano* rhythm, luxuriantly harmonised, rouses itself into writing hewn from great slabs of repeated chords, creating a great wall of sound (the melody line in the tenor) before subsiding once more. There's a final, aching poignancy curlicue of a phrase and then a descent into silence.

Common to both sets of *Études-tableaux* is a daunting array of physical demands, combined with energy, dexterity and an interpretative complexity that at times exceeds even the *études* of Chopin and Debussy. The third of Op 33 has an essentially chordal texture, prefaced by surly upbeats. But as the music slows and turns from C minor to C major, Rachmaninov envelops his listener in a profoundly consoling melody set against a simple arpeggiated accompaniment. By contrast, frenetic energy characterises the dizzying No 6, which abounds in chromatic scales and octave doublings.

The Op 39 *Études-tableaux* were the last works Rachmaninov wrote in Russia but already his musical language was becoming more cosmopolitan, less clearly echt-Russian, though traces of the *Dies irae* plainchant that so obsessed him are to be found in every study in this set. No 1 in C minor has a billowing quality, apparently inspired by a painting entitled *Playing in the Waves* by Arnold Böcklin (the same artist who inspired *The isle of the dead*). There are hints of the sound-world of Rachmaninov's friend Medtner in the opening of No 4, with its obsessive reiteration of a strongly defined rhythmic motif. The piano becomes a veritable symphony orchestra in the demanding No 5: here, the climaxes are intense and full-blooded and the mood of blatant tragedy is only ameliorated at the very end.

Scriabin famously claimed that his music had been influenced by no-one, but his early works, including the Piano Concerto, are palpably Chopinesque. The fact that he adopted various genres in which Chopin had excelled – *études*, mazurkas, preludes, nocturnes, waltzes and

of course piano sonatas – is also surely no coincidence. Chopin's sonatas were largely misunderstood in his own time, breaking as they did with formal convention and leading his publisher to protest that the 'Funeral March' Sonata was too gloomy ever to catch on; even Schumann (usually so perceptive) said of the same work that Chopin had 'bound together a few of his wildest children'.

Perhaps worth remembering too is that Scriabin's graduation recital at the Moscow Conservatoire had included Beethoven's Op 109 Sonata, a relatively unorthodox choice but a piece whose use of trills, particularly in the finale, was to play a more and more important role in the Russian composer's own sonatas, not least the 10th.

Like Chopin's sonatas, Scriabin's were prone to misunderstanding in his own time, which is perhaps not surprising given that he was the first Russian composer truly to embrace the genre. Over the course of a little over two decades he took the sonata from High Romanticism to something altogether more mysterious and disturbing. By the time of the 10th Sonata, written on the eve of the First World War, we're in a world of concision, pushing at the bounds of tonality, with music that sometimes sounds ungrounded but which is always memorable. What might have come next, had the composer not succumbed to septicaemia just two years later?

The 10th's sinuous *Moderato* opens with a striking little phrase that buries itself in your brain. Some of the harmonies of this first section are positively Schoenbergian, but always infused with a gentleness that softens the effect. As we come to the *Allegro*, Scriabin writes *Avec émotion* – as if there were any other way of interpreting his music! Trills give it a glinting, ethereal quality that suggests something no longer quite of this world, and indeed the instructions – *joyeuse, avec ravissement, avec une volupté douloureuse, radieux* and so on – underline that sensation. The composer himself wrote: 'My 10th Sonata is a sonata of insects. Insects are born from the sun, they are the kisses of the sun.' For Scriabin insects were also manifestations of human emotion. But no matter how heady the effect, underpinning everything is Scriabin the master builder – the main ideas appear and reappear, not only the striking first motif but an equally characteristic upward-leaping second theme, ensuring the listener never gets lost, no matter how much the

time signature, rhythm or harmony may fluctuate. As we dance towards the final barline the music returns to a Moderato tempo and the sonata ends with a brief echo of that opening motif, bringing to an end what could be argued to be the most iconoclastic contribution to the piano sonata genre since Beethoven himself.

From a Russian mystic to a subversive Hungarian. György Ligeti was one of music's great survivors, losing most of his family in Hitler's concentration camps and then living under the privations of a Hungary oppressed by Stalinism. He reacted with music that was frequently rooted in a kind of raucous wit, of which the études are superb examples.

As Jeremy Denk has written, 'There's nothing more perverse than piano études. Roaming scales, thirds, sixths, octaves, every possible finger contortion visited in every possible key – it's the stuff of nightmares.' Ligeti was not unique in sending up the genre – you could argue that Chopin was the first truly to subvert it, by taking it out of the practice room and into the concert hall, turning something workaday into great music. Debussy could not have written his études without the example of Chopin. And then along came Ligeti. His first book (of three) was composed in 1985, and he relishes the very building blocks that in the wrong hands can become boredom

personified, and turns them into something entirely life-affirming in their wit and brilliance.

No 3, with which Yuja Wang begins, literally translates as 'Blocked keys'. It's one of those pieces that is even trickier to play than it sounds, for Ligeti demands that the player hold down clusters of notes around which he threads chromatic scale figures; in the middle section all hell is let loose with octave writing that is deliberately off kilter. Ligeti himself described the result as being akin to circus clowns 'who pretend to be unable to execute some feat they can really perform wonderfully'. No. 9, from Book 2 – the aptly named 'Vertigo' – is built on crazy chromatic scales, which come at the listener in ever-changing intervals, discombobulating the ear. Ligeti makes matters even more difficult by demanding that it be played prestissimo, legato and without pedal, leaving the pianist nowhere to hide. Yuja Wang ends with the first étude, 'Disorder', which is dedicated, like No 3, to Pierre Boulez. It's a fiendish reimagining of one of the key aims of the étude – that each hand should be able to operate independently of the other. Ligeti does this here by restricting the right hand to the white keys and the left hand to the black keys. But that is not all, for the hands operate in different metres too, resulting in a rhythmic tumult that is infectious in its energy.

interval 20 minutes

Sergey Prokofiev (1891–1953)

Piano Sonata No 8 in B flat major, Op 84 (1939–44)

1 Andante dolce – Allegro moderato (inquieto) – Andante dolce, come prima – Allegro

2 Andante sognando

3 Vivace – Allegro ben marcato – Andantino – Vivace, come prima

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 Eighth Sonata we can only speculate! It's the last of Prokofiev's so-called 'war sonatas', as compelling and revealing a triptych as the last three sonatas of Beethoven, and it's no coincidence that in both cases the three works bear sequential opus numbers, for their composition is closely linked. Also striking is the way Prokofiev's demonstrate a definite leap forward from his earlier piano sonatas, from which they're separated by some 15 years.

Though the Eighth was begun the same year as the Sixth and Seventh, it wasn't completed until 1944, receiving its first public outing in December that year, in the hands of the great Emil Gilels. Even his advocacy wasn't enough to convince the audience, however, who were perplexed by the seemingly incongruous combination of large-scale lyricism and violent interjections. It's the most symphonic of Prokofiev's nine piano sonatas, and less readily assimilable than its companion 'war' pieces. And though its demands are immense, it's also the least blatantly virtuoso of the three. Vladimir Ashkenazy, himself a great interpreter of the work, has this to say:

'If in the Seventh Sonata we are confronted with an objective picture of war, in the Eighth Sonata

the composer looks at it as a not-too-distant (but not an immediate) experience – and, what is important, an intimate experience. The presence of war became part of his life and everything was influenced by it and connected with it.'

The spacious first movement, *Andante dolce*, opens as a symphony of euphony, with bell-like left-hand sonorities, yet from the start the mood is unsettled and, as the movement progresses (and picks up speed, as the note values become smaller and smaller, a device also beloved of Beethoven), the landscape becomes increasingly stark, the harmonies darken and any semblance of peace is shattered. The violence spills over as the main ideas are developed, with the dreamscape returning in an extensive reprise. Prokofiev has one more shock up his sleeve: the sudden appearance of a fiercely energetic coda, which is just as abruptly quelled into silence.

The compact minuet-like second movement, marked *Andante sognando* (dreamily), is often dismissed as a brief intermission of light relief. But its role is every bit as important as Beethoven's comparably sized movements in his late sonatas and quartets. Its air of introspective regret also reveals a gnawing disquiet in the way Prokofiev obsessively works his opening idea until it becomes all-pervasive.

The finale spews out handfuls of notes in the composer's familiar motoric style. On the surface it's the most straightforward of the three movements, but there's more to it than simply energy and brutality: a central idea returns us to the unsettled mood of the first movement, while Prokofiev's quasi-triumphant ricocheting coda is surely as mocking and emotionally ambiguous as anything to be found in Shostakovich.

Programme notes © Harriet Smith

About the performer



Norbert Kniat/DG

Yuja Wang

Yuja Wang piano

Yuja Wang's blend of technical prowess, keen musical insight and emotional depth have established her as one of the world's finest performers. The power of her interpretations emerges from a combination of exceptional stage presence and a natural affinity for and inquisitive approach to the repertoire, which ranges from Mozart to Gershwin and beyond.

This season features recitals, concert series and extensive tours with some of the world's leading ensembles and conductors. She began the season with a tour of Brahms's Piano Concerto No 2 with the London Symphony Orchestra under Michael Tilson Thomas, followed by a performance of Brahms's First Concerto at the Ravinia Festival with the Chicago Symphony Orchestra under the baton of Lionel Bringuier. Subsequent engagements include concerts with the Munich Philharmonic under Valery Gergiev, a series of performances at the Verbier Festival and a three-city German tour with the St Petersburg Philharmonic. She has also undertaken play-conduct tours with the Mahler Chamber Orchestra and Chamber Orchestra of Europe, as well as joining the inaugural tour of Jaap van Zweden with the New York Philharmonic and Yannick Nézet-Séguin's final tour as Chief Conductor of the Rotterdam Philharmonic. Other notable appearances include concerts in Hong Kong, Miami, Washington DC, Prague, Tel Aviv and Berlin. She has also toured Europe with violinist and frequent collaborator Leonidas Kavakos. Tonight's recital is part of an extensive

solo tour taking in major venues in the USA and Europe.

As part of its commitment to the arts, Rolex selected Yuja Wang as one of its cultural ambassadors in 2009, a distinction she holds to this day.

A combination of critical acclaim, audience ovations, return engagements at leading international venues, and an exclusive recording relationship with DG, which she has had since 2009, have contributed to Yuja Wang's status as one of this century's most compelling and engaging artists. Her award-winning discography includes concertos by Rachmaninov, Mendelssohn, Prokofiev and Ravel, and solo and chamber works by composers ranging from Bach to Ligeti.

Her way of making music connects with a strikingly broad demographic, ranging from newcomers to devoted pianophiles, and has attracted an exceptionally youthful following. Her love for fashion, recognised by her induction into Giorgio Armani's Si Women's Circle, has also contributed to the popular appeal of an artist who is armed with the ability to challenge the status quo and to welcome fresh converts to the concert hall.

Yuja Wang was born in Beijing and encouraged to make music at a young age by her parents. She initially studied in Beijing, before moving to Canada and subsequently to the Curtis Institute in Philadelphia, where where she studied with Gary Graffman.

She attracted widespread international attention in 2007 when she replaced Martha Argerich at short notice in Tchaikovsky's First Piano Concerto with the Boston Symphony Orchestra, and within just a few seasons she was working with conductors of the highest calibre. Over the past decade of her career, she has worked with such pre-eminent conductors as Claudio Abbado, Daniel Barenboim, Gustavo Dudamel, Valery Gergiev, Michael Tilson Thomas, Sir Antonio Pappano, Charles Dutoit and Zubin Mehta.

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