



# Benjamin Grosvenor in recital

Thursday 16 May 2019 7.30pm, Hall

**Schumann** Blumenstück; Kreisleriana

**interval** 20 minutes

**Janáček** Piano Sonata 1.X.1905

**Prokofiev** Visions fugitives

**Liszt/Bellini** Réminiscences de Norma

**Benjamin Grosvenor** piano

**Part of Barbican Presents 2018–19**

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# Welcome

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A warm welcome to this evening's concert given by one of the most gifted pianists on the circuit today. Benjamin Grosvenor is still only 26 years old yet has already established a considerable reputation in both the concert hall and the recording studio. He first came to attention aged just 11 when he won the Keyboard Final of the BBC Young Musician Competition in 2004. His combination of an easy virtuosity, a determination to explore the lesser-known areas of the repertoire as well as its classics and the most beautiful sound have proved an irresistible combination.

Benjamin Grosvenor begins with Schumann, prefacing the well-known *Kreisleriana*, a work influenced by the novels of E T A Hoffmann, with the much less-played *Blumenstück*, which the composer presented to his wife Clara on their wedding day.

From here we move to the grittier world of Janáček, and his sole Piano Sonata, which

was written in response to a shocking act of violence at a rally in Brno in 1905. From the following decade comes Prokofiev's *Visions fugitives*, brilliantly drawn character pieces that see him working as a master miniaturist. Benjamin Grosvenor ends his recital with Liszt's mighty *Réminiscences de Norma* paraphrase, a piece which takes the drama and passion of Bellini's opera and creates out of it a masterpiece for solo piano that combines virtuoso demands with a striking nobility.

Benjamin Grosvenor returns on 26 May for the second of two chamber concerts with the Doric Quartet and double-bassist Laurène Durantel, performing a programme of Janáček, Chopin and Dvořák.

Tonight's concert promises to be an amazing evening. I hope you enjoy it.

Huw Humphreys  
Head of Music, Barbican

# Robert Schumann (1810–56)

## Blumenstück, Op 19 (1839)

## Kreisleriana, Op 16 (1838, rev 1850)

**1 1 Äusserst bewegt · 2 Sehr innig (Intermezzo I: Sehr lebhaft; Intermezzo II: Etwas bewegt) · 3 Sehr aufgeregt · 4 Sehr langsam · 5 Sehr lebhaft · 6 Sehr langsam · 7 Sehr rasch · 8 Schnell und spielend**

Schumann's *Blumenstück* (Flower Piece) of 1839 has an unassuming beauty, in a similar vein to the near-contemporary *Arabeske*. Schumann composed it during a stay in Vienna, where he was exploring the possibilities of publishing his music periodical the *Neue Zeitschrift für Musik*. While this came to nothing, it was a fruitful trip in other ways, for it was while in the city that he discovered Schubert's Ninth Symphony, which had previously been unknown.

He described *Blumenstück* in a letter to Clara (originally it was to be named 'Guirlande' – Garland) as 'variations, but not upon any theme ... everything is interwoven in such a peculiar way'. And that is true – it's not a theme-and-variations in any conventional sense but is rather divided into nine sections, clearly marked in the score. They are as follows: I–II–III–II–IV–V (minore)–II–IV–II. These are followed by a coda, and the repetition of the second section three times and the fourth twice gives this little piece a structural coherence that belies its simple name. The charming opening idea turns out to be less important than the one that follows, marked a little slower and possessing a more questioning air. Although Schumann was later fairly dismissive of it, he presented the manuscript to Clara (along with that of the song-cycle *Myrthen*) as a wedding gift when he married her on 12 September 1840.

From a year earlier than *Blumenstück* comes *Kreisleriana* (which Schumann dedicated

to Chopin). In a letter to Clara, he wrote of its having 'a wild, unbridled love in places, together with your life and mine, and many of your glances.' Musical love-letters don't get any more high-voltage than this. Though it follows a favourite Schumann device – a string of contrasted pieces, juxtaposed against one another to create a larger structure – none is more emotionally heightened than this work. Its name comes from Johannes Kreisler, the much put-upon hero of several E T A Hoffmann novels, not least the eponymous *Kreisleriana* and, most poignantly, his incomplete final novel *The life and opinions of Tomcat Murr*. Here, this somewhat eccentric Kapellmeister who fights indifference and philistinism but ends up insane, is thwarted by a philistine cat, which writes its memoirs on the proof pages of Kreisler's biography, resulting in their being printed together by mistake (every publisher's nightmare!).

It's tempting to think that the jarring juxtapositions of the numbers that make up Schumann's *Kreisleriana* are directly influenced by Hoffmann's revolutionary form of novel, though this trait is found in many of the composer's other works, too. Where *Kreisleriana* differs, however, is in containing neither direct literary allusions nor ciphers. Schumann seemed to realise he was entering new territory, writing to his beloved: 'My music now seems even to me to be so wonderfully intricate in spite of all the simplicity, so eloquent and from the heart.'

The very opening seems to begin mid-phrase, as if we've opened the door to the music room and are plunged straight into Schumann's fervid vision. There's another influence at play here, that of Johann Sebastian Bach (whom Hoffmann's Kreisler reveres): 'Bach is my daily bread', Schumann wrote to Clara in 1838, and at that point he was in fact making a detailed study of the *Well-Tempered Clavier*, something that is perhaps directly reflected in the strict tonal scheme of *Kreisleriana* which, though it opens in D minor, then alternates between B flat major and G minor. The motoric rhythms of the minor-key numbers, with their strongly drawn bass-lines, may also derive from Bach.

After the turbulence of the opening piece, serenity and passion co-exist in the second, while the third begins almost playfully, and has as its centre one of the composer's most serenely easeful melodies. If No 4 is more introspective, it's counterbalanced by the twinkling energy of No 5. The serious No 6 begins as a gentle lullaby whose mood is

interrupted by an anguished recitative, from which it never quite recovers its poise. No 7 begins as wildly as the opening number, turning into a dramatic fugue, the notes almost tripping over one another in their efforts to be heard, only to be calmed by a coda in B flat major.

The final number begins innocently enough, with a gently lolloping theme, Schumann picking out a melody in the tenor register that grows in ardour before sinking back down once more, the accompaniment unruffled by the disturbance. It sounds less like the end of a piece than it does the quiet closing of that door, the illicit listener tiptoeing away. And despite the conflicting emotions displayed, *Kreisleriana* has more of a sense of a continuing narrative than many similarly formed pieces. Perhaps, like *Kater Murr*, it's two narratives, separate yet related. Or perhaps it's a reflection of E T A Hoffmann himself, judge in the Prussian civil service by day, writer and artist by night.

**interval** 20 minutes

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## Leoš Janáček (1854–1928)

### Piano Sonata, '1.X.1905' (Street Scene) (1905–6)

**1 Foreboding (Con moto)**

**2 Death (Adagio)**

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Janáček was born two years before Schumann's death and he lived through turbulent times. He found himself caught up in the rally in Brno on 1 October 1905 when Czech and German factions clashed over the setting up of a Czech university. During the demonstrations a 20-year-old joiner, František Pavlík, was wounded by a bayonet, dying later in hospital. Janáček responded with a three-movement piano sonata. However, when he heard the sonata in the context of other

pieces by Novák and Suk, at Brno's Friends of Art Club on 27 January 1906, he was evidently dissatisfied and, so the story goes, flung the last movement, said to be a 'gloomy funeral march', into the stove heating the room. After a second private performance in Prague, he threw the two remaining movements into the Vltava ('They did not want to sink. The paper bulged and gloated on the water like so many white swans'). Happily the pianist Ludmila Tučková still had a copy, and Janáček did eventually

relent and allow the two surviving movements to be published.

Even without the specific movement titles of 'Foreboding' and 'Elegy' (later starkly renamed 'Death') you'd sense catastrophe was in the air, despite the deceptively mild-sounding opening, whose mood is shattered as early as the fourth bar when a strident idea appears, derived from what has gone before, but with a new rhythmic purposefulness. This motif becomes something of an obsession, even appearing at one point in three different versions, heard almost simultaneously. The other striking aspect of this movement is its rhythmic profile: Janáček's music is fearsomely sophisticated and subtly notated: here it's the tumult of cross-rhythms that both confuse the ear and build considerable momentum, leading to desperate, clangorous climaxes.

The second movement, outwardly quite different in atmosphere, with resignation to the fore, does, however, relate back to the first thematically, its main theme also deriving from that hugely fruitful fourth bar of the first. The texture is very characteristic of this composer, doubling the melody two, even three octaves apart without any harmonic filling – something that appears particularly in the later operas. Janáček then develops the dotted rhythm of this theme which gradually gains in ascendancy during the central part of the movement, rekindling the fury of the first movement before inexorably leading back to the opening theme, transformed from sadness to strength but gradually subsiding in energy and dynamic. It's difficult to imagine what a third movement could have added to this poignant memento.

## Sergey Prokofiev (1891–1953)

### Visions fugitives, Op 22 (1915–17)

**1** *Lentamente* • **2** *Andante* • **3** *Allegretto* • **4** *Animato* • **5** *Molto giocoso*  
**6** *Con eleganza* • **7** *Pittoresco (Arpa)* • **8** *Comodo* • **9** *Allegro tranquillo*  
**10** *Ridicolosamente* • **11** *Con vivacità* • **12** *Assai moderato* • **13** *Allegretto*  
**14** *Feroce* • **15** *Inquieto* • **16** *Dolente* • **17** *Poetico* • **18** *Con una dolce lentezza*  
**19** *Presto agitatissimo e molto accentuato* • **20** *Lento*

In 1915 Prokofiev began to tease into shape fragments that became his *Visions fugitives* ('Fleeting visions', or, in a more literal translation of the original Russian 'Things flying by'). His starting-point was literary, in the form of a poem by the Russian Konstantin Balmont: 'In every fleeting vision I see worlds / full of the changing play of rainbow hues'. And it is worlds in miniature that Prokofiev conjures in these 20 pieces, each one as complete in itself as Beethoven's late Bagatelles or Schoenberg's Piano Pieces, Op 19. Whereas Schoenberg was unashamedly heading towards the break-up of tonality, Prokofiev was exploring the duality of his nature: his avant-garde and Classical sides,

his innate sense of melody and an equally potent rhythmic drive, his need to ingratiate and to annoy. The result is music made up of shards of clashing hues, extremes of register, energy and mood – just as the man himself liked to combine yellow shoes, a checked suit and an orange tie. Thus, we have the grave simplicity of No 1, the incessant energy of No 9, which gives way to a marching figure, the apparently aimless melodic wanderings of No 7, the insidiously catchy Nos 10 and 11, tormenting the memory like a splinter under the skin, and the high-octane antics of Nos 14 and 19 set against the intimacy of Nos 16 and 17.

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# Franz Liszt (1811–86)

## Réminiscences de Norma de Bellini, S394 (1841)

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Chopin once waspishly described Liszt as ‘an excellent binder who puts other people’s work between his covers ... a clever craftsman without a vestige of talent’. How he might have revised that opinion if he’d lived to hear what Liszt did in the remaining 37 years of his life is a moot point.

Liszt was a composer whose generosity was legendary, and that included his many paraphrases and transcriptions of pieces by others. In a pre-recording era these were an important way of disseminating new music, not least the hits in the opera house. Liszt’s contributions to this area basically divide into two types: transcriptions, which are relatively faithful to the original (just think of his arrangements of Beethoven’s symphonies), and paraphrases, which take key aspects from a work and reimagine them for the keyboard.

Bellini’s *Norma* was just 10 years old when Liszt wrote his remarkable paraphrase on it, at a time when he was taking Europe by storm with his ground-breaking piano recitals, events that reduced his audiences to near hysteria. It’s no surprise that Liszt frequently performed these *Réminiscences* himself. The work is built from seven key themes from *Norma*, which are presented in an order that creates maximum dramatic effect rather than slavishly following Bellini’s original. The paraphrase is dedicated to Camilla Pleyel, herself a considerable pianist, who had asked Liszt to challenge her. He certainly did!

The work begins in a mood combining portent, grandeur and a whiff of terror with the chorus ‘Norma viene’ (Norma is coming) as the eponymous heroine, High Priestess of the Druids, makes her entrance. We then go back in time for the aria ‘Ite sul colle’ (Go to the hills),

sung by Norma’s father, Chief of the Druids, the bass Oroveso. It’s a fittingly noble, major-key theme, which Liszt extends and decorates with great swathes of filigree, encompassing the entire keyboard without ever overloading Bellini’s original melody. In the chorus that follows, ‘Dell’aura tua profetica’ (Fill her with your prophetic spirit), Liszt arguably deepens the emotional effect by losing Bellini’s slightly crass use of percussion; the piano then proceeds to develop and illuminate this theme to dazzling effect.

There is then a linking section that takes us to the second part of the piece, now in B minor for Norma’s heartrending ‘Deh! Non volerli vittime’ (Oh, let them not be victims), which brings back memories of Maria Callas at her most tragic. Liszt here takes the texture right down, allowing Bellini’s melodic genius to shine through before building up the sonorities once more. This leads into the trio from the final scene, ‘Qual cor tradisti’ (The heart you betrayed), in which Norma addresses her followers and proposes to sacrifice herself to appease their wrath, complete with stunned interjections from her father and her lover Pollione. The sense of tragedy then deepens with ‘Padre, tu piangi?’ (Father, do you weep?), only to be interrupted by the chorus ‘Guerra, guerra’ (To battle, to battle), which in the opera is characterised by a flurry of brass fanfares before the singing begins; Liszt translates this to the keyboard effortlessly, with martial *marcato* chords and an accompaniment that gets ever more frenetic. We hear ‘Padre, tu piangi’ once more, which Liszt then combines with ‘Dell’aura tua profetica’ to thrilling effect. It is with a final utterance of ‘Guerra, guerra’ that the paraphrase ends, giving it a sense of triumph, albeit one that has been hard-won.

Programme notes © Harriet Smith

# About the performer

Patrick Allen/operaomnibus



Benjamin Grosvenor

## Benjamin Grosvenor piano

British pianist Benjamin Grosvenor is internationally recognised for his electrifying performances, distinctive sound and perceptive interpretations. His virtuosic command over the most arduous technical complexities underpins the depth and understanding of his music-making.

He first came to prominence when he won the Keyboard Final of the 2004 BBC Young Musician Competition at the age of 11. He performed at the First Night of the 2011 BBC Proms aged just 19. He was announced as the inaugural recipient of The Ronnie and Lawrence Ackman Classical Piano Prize with the New York Philharmonic in 2016.

Recent and forthcoming concerto highlights include engagements with the Boston, Chicago, Finnish Radio, London, Melbourne, San Francisco and Washington National Symphony orchestras, the Philadelphia Orchestra, the La Scala, London and New York Philharmonic orchestras, Gürzenich Orchestra Cologne, Hallé, Orchestre National de Lyon and the Orquesta Nacional de España. He has worked with esteemed conductors, including Vladimir Ashkenazy, Andrey Boreyko, Semyon Bychkov, Riccardo Chailly, Sir Mark Elder, Edward Gardner, Alan Gilbert, Manfred Honeck, Vladimir Jurowski, Emmanuel Krivine, Andrew Manze, Ludovic Morlot, Kent Nagano, Sir Roger Norrington, Gianandrea Noseda, François-

Xavier Roth, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Leonard Slatkin, Nathalie Stutzmann, Michael Tilson Thomas, Krzysztof Urbanski and Kazuki Yamada.

Highlights among this season's recitals are concerts at the Barbican, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, Paris, Munich's Herkulessaal, Palau de la Música Catalana Barcelona and in Madrid's Ciclo Grandes Intérpretes, San Francisco Performances, Sydney Symphony Orchestra's recital series and Milan's Società dei Concerti. Also a keen chamber musician, he joins Tabea Zimmermann and others for Schubert's 'Trout' Quintet at Bonn's Beethovenwoche 2019, and together with the Doric Quartet performs piano quintets by Fauré and Dvořák, as well as chamber settings of Chopin's piano concertos, at Milton Court.

In 2011 Benjamin Grosvenor signed to Decca Classics – the youngest British musician ever, and the first British pianist in almost 60 years, to sign to the label. His fourth Decca CD, *Homages* (2016), presents works in which great composers pay tribute to their predecessors, including the Bach/Busoni *Chaconne*, Franck's *Choral, Prélude et Fugue* and Liszt's tribute to Italian folk song, *Venezia e Napoli*. The disc was warmly received and won a *Diapason d'Or*.

During his career to date, he has received *Gramophone's* Young Artist of the Year and Instrumental Awards, a Classic BRITS Critics' Award, UK Critics' Circle Award and a *Diapason d'Or* Jeune Talent Award. He has been featured in two BBC television documentaries as well as in CNN's *Human to Hero* series.

The youngest of five brothers, Benjamin Grosvenor began playing the piano aged 6. He studied at the Royal Academy of Music with Christopher Elton and Daniel-Ben Pienaar, graduating in 2012 with the Queen's Commendation for Excellence. In 2016 he was awarded an RAM Fellowship. He has been supported since 2013 by EFG International, the global private banking group.

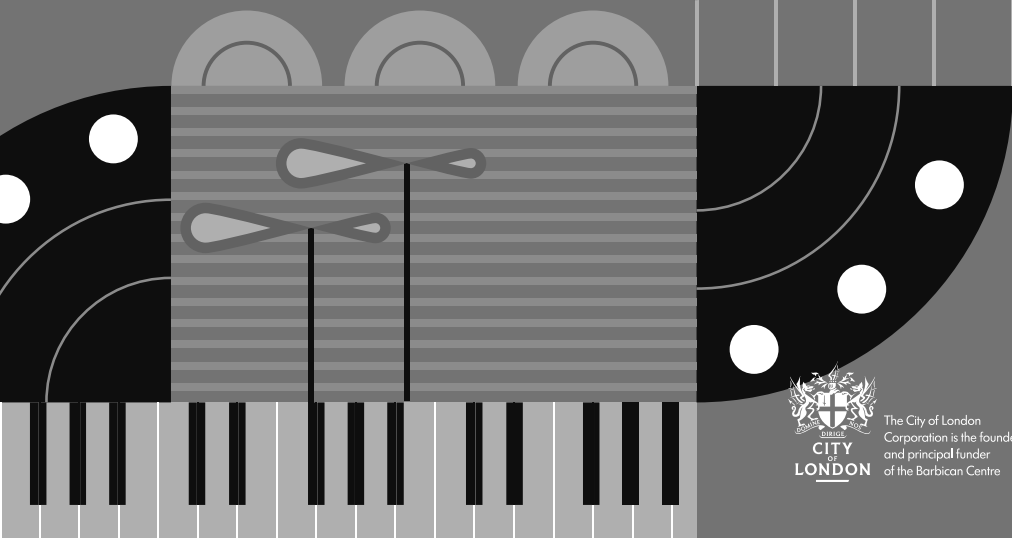
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