



Khatia Buniatishvili in recital

Monday 1 April 2019 7.30pm, Hall

Schubert Piano Sonata in B flat major, D960

interval 20 minutes

Schubert/Liszt Ständchen; Gretchen am Spinnrade; Erlkönig

Liszt Étude d'exécution transcendante No 4 in D minor, 'Mazeppa'

Liszt Hungarian Rhapsody No 6 in D flat major

Khatia Buniatishvili piano

Part of Barbican Presents 2018–19

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Welcome

A warm welcome to this evening's concert, given by one of the most exciting artists of the younger generation: Georgian pianist Khatia Buniatishvili. Though only just into her thirties, she is already a seasoned artist, having given her first concert at the age of just 6.

She begins with Schubert's extraordinary last sonata, written shortly before his premature death. It's a work that unfolds on a vast scale, by turns resigned, flighty and desperate. And it's one particularly close to Khatia Buniatishvili's heart as she recently recorded it.

For the second half of the concert, she turns her attention to Liszt, beginning with three of his exquisite arrangements of Schubert songs. From here she moves to more overtly virtuoso territory, with the visceral 'Mazeppa' – the fourth of Liszt's *Études d'exécution transcendante* – before ending with the brilliantly barnstorming *Sixth Hungarian Rhapsody*.

It promises to be a very memorable concert. I hope you enjoy it.

Huw Humphreys, Head of Music, Barbican

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

Piano Sonata in B flat major, D960 (1828)

1 **Molto moderato**

2 **Andante sostenuto**

3 **Scherzo: Allegro vivace con delicatezza**

4 **Rondo: Allegro, ma non troppo**

Schubert's last three piano sonatas crown what had been a period of extraordinary fecundity. The previous year (1827) had yielded among other works *Winterreise*, the two piano trios, the C major String Quintet and the second set of piano Impromptus – a mind-boggling assortment of masterpieces whose achievement is all the more striking when you consider their innovative quality. Common to many of these 'late' pieces (if such an appellation can be applied to the career of a man of barely 30) – and the last three sonatas in particular – is a greater sense of cyclic organisation, of subtly linking movements through shared motifs, rhythms or harmonies.

So what can we as listeners take from this journey? After all, it's one fraught with risk, and as the distinguished musical commentator Donald Francis Tovey once wrote, 'Nothing is more false than the doctrine that great music cannot be ruined in performance'. Schubert is particularly susceptible to this, and nowhere more so than in the bigger sonata spans. Whereas in Beethoven, form and structure are used as a means of expression, in Schubert this is palpably not the case (though that is not to suggest that there is any laxness in his structural thinking). As Alfred Brendel encapsulated it: 'Compared to Beethoven the architect, Schubert composed like a sleepwalker. In Beethoven's sonatas we never lose our bearings; they justify themselves at all times. Schubert's sonatas happen. There is something disarmingly naïve in the way they happen.'

The B flat major shares with Beethoven's final sonatas an air of transcendence, though wrought over a typically Schubertian time-scale. But despite being a big work it's not epic in the sense of a piece such as the 'Hammerklavier' Sonata. The drama tends to be inward rather than extrovert, as is manifested in several ways. For a start, it's not a work with extremes of tempo, and whereas in a Beethoven scherzo there's usually a degree of vehemence, that's not the case in Schubert's third movement. Striking, too, is how much of this sonata is *piano* or *pianissimo*: the first three movements all begin and end quietly. But it's not just a question of dynamics – the themes themselves tend to be calm, almost resigned-sounding; except that it's never quite that straightforward with this composer.

Take the hymn-like opening theme, for example. It is disturbed only by a trill deep in the piano's bass but, though this doesn't lead to a dramatic Beethovenian development, it does lose its temper just once: before the exposition is repeated. That's why this repeat, seen as optional by some artists, is in fact crucial to the discourse, for it demonstrates to the listener that all is not as it seems. And once we know that, we start to question other aspects of the work.

The slow movement's resignation is perhaps more akin to alienation, with the dragging lament set against a left hand which sounds mechanical, emotionally detached. And when we reach the middle section, in the sunny key

of A major, we might recall that Schubert used this in *Winterreise* for the songs expressing false hope, last and most heartbreakingly in the penultimate number, 'Die Nebensonnen'. And so it seems here: it's a fake smile, a passage of enforced jollity. Even in the Scherzo, the will-o'-the-wisp delicacy doesn't have the high spirits of Mendelssohn, but instead a certain fragility, as if the illusion might crumble at the slightest pressure.

And what of the finale, which opens with that ambiguous G octave and then vacillates between major and minor, violence spilling over at two points? It's only right at the last moment, after yet more harmonic sleights of hand, that Schubert suddenly launches into a Presto coda that emphatically states the key of B flat once and for all. But its very brevity gives it a kind of desperate edge that is deeply discomfiting.

interval 20 minutes

Franz Schubert (1797–1828)

arr Franz Liszt (1811–86)

Ständchen (1828, arr 1838–9)

Gretchen am Spinnrade (1814, arr 1860)

Erlkönig (1815, arr 1860)

Franz Liszt

Étude d'exécution transcendante in

D minor, S139 No 4, 'Mazeppa' (1851)

Hungarian Rhapsody No 6 in D flat

major, S244 No 6 (publ 1853)

Khatia Buniatishvili unites the two Franzes – Schubert and Liszt – in three of the latter's extraordinarily sensitive and effective arrangements of Schubert Lieder. Liszt was a huge admirer of Schubert's music, much of which suffered complete neglect in the decades

following his premature death. 'Ständchen', by Ludwig Rellstab, comes from Schubert's last song-cycle *Schwanengesang*, posthumously put together by his publisher; Liszt transcribed it complete, though he re-ordered the publisher's original version, arguably improving on it by

ending not with the almost flippantly upbeat 'Die Taubenpost' but instead with the much darker 'Kriegers Ahnung'.

In 'Ständchen' Liszt shows his mastery of the transcriber's art by having the song and its gently trotting accompaniment virtually verbatim for the first verse, then with the voice part in the tenor line for the second; while for the remainder of the song he combines the original vocal line and the right hand of the accompaniment in canon (close imitation) high in the treble. The genius of it is that the effect is entirely natural-sounding.

There's a similar mastery to the two following songs, both of which have an obsessive bent and are tragic in tone. In 'Gretchen am Spinnrade' the hypnotic accompaniment conjures the spinning wheel while in Goethe's poem the young girl talks of the crazed effect that love has on her. In Liszt's reworking, the passionate tumult is made absolutely apparent as the piece builds to a climax.

The genius of Schubert's best-known song, *Erlkönig* (also to a poem by Goethe), is in the way that the desperation is completely built into the pounding accompaniment so that no words are needed for this music-drama in miniature; and how powerfully Liszt captures this, the stark tragedy laid bare as the father realises that his child is dead in his arms.

Liszt may have been a great champion of composers he admired, but his own music has suffered over the decades from being entirely misunderstood. The London-based *Musical World* had this to say in 1855: 'Turn your eyes to any one composition that bears the name of Liszt, if you are unlucky enough to have such a thing on your pianoforte, and answer frankly, if it contains one bar of genuine music. Composition indeed! – decomposition is the proper word for such hateful fungi, which choke up and poison the fertile plains of harmony, threatening the world with drought.'

Liszt was and remains one of the most misunderstood geniuses in music history. Robert Schumann proved exceptionally perceptive when he compared, in 1839, two sets of Liszt

studies: those published as Op. 1 and the *Grandes Études*: 'The new edition also provides a gauge of Liszt's present greatly matured manner of thought and feeling and even a look into his more intimate spiritual life. The latter, admittedly, leaves us wondering whether we should not envy rather the boy than the man, who seems incapable of finding peace.' He goes on to write, 'I firmly believe that so eminently musical a nature as Liszt would have been a significant composer had he devoted as much time to composition and to himself as he, in fact, devoted to his instrument and to other masters.'

If only Schumann had lived long enough to see what was to develop into the *Études d'exécution transcendante*. But first, a summary of their history for, as so often with Liszt, their gestation wasn't entirely straightforward. When he was not quite 15, in 1826, Liszt published a set of 12 (out of an intended 48) studies that are striking for their technical aplomb without necessarily being hugely sophisticated. He'd certainly learnt from his teacher Czerny – famed for his studies. Then 11 years later he took them as the basis for what appeared as *Douze Grandes Études*, which are a considerable advance both musically and technically, as Schumann noted.

Liszt returned to them again, in 1851, and reworked them one more time. To say that he simplifies their almost superhuman demands gives little idea of the sophistication and musical imagination at work, or of the subtlety with which he presents the material. Essentially he makes them more Classical in the way he clarifies their textures. He also, intriguingly, gives all but two of them titles, and how well they fit even though the musical essence already existed. Fittingly, the dedicatee was Czerny. They begin where Chopin left off (and how delectable is the pianist's choice of *études* – Chopin, Liszt, Alkan, Busoni, Rachmaninov, Lyapunov, Sorabji, Scriabin, Debussy, Prokofiev, to name but the most obvious) and while Chopin's Opp 10 and 25 tend to focus each one on a particular technical challenge, Liszt's almost invariably combine several in their more extended spans. There is no technical stone left unturned and the miracle of them is how this is buried into tone-poems of magical variety and subtlety.

In the fourth of them, one of the most extended in the set, Liszt's subject is the Ukrainian Ivan Mazeppa, whose superhuman antics were made famous by Byron's epic poem of 1819. After being found *in flagrante* with a Polish countess by her husband, the young Mazeppa is – so the legend goes – tied naked to a wild horse and set loose; his ordeal only comes to an end when the horse drops dead of exhaustion. Liszt's considerable powers of transformation during the *étude* can be heard in his reworking of the main theme into one of luxuriant beauty in the middle section.

Liszt's connection with his Hungarian roots may have been more romantic than anything else (Hungarian was his third language, after German and French, and he had left his birthplace at the age of 9). But in spirit, certainly, he regarded himself as Hungarian and his efforts to popularise the folk music of his homeland were done for the best of reasons, even if we have tended to judge the results through the blinkered view of modern

ethnomusicology. So what if the origins of Hungarian music could not – as Liszt supposed – be ascribed to the gypsies (they were interpreters rather than originators)?

Khatia Buniatishvili ends her recital with the sixth of Liszt's set of *Hungarian Rhapsodies*, a piece whose virtuoso flair and flights of imagination have made it intensely popular; it also exists in versions for piano duet and orchestra. Liszt borrows a number of melodies from mainly anonymous folk sources, setting the rhapsody in motion with a repeated D flat chord which leads, via a virtuoso flourish, to a rhythmically lively second section based on a melody that he took from a folk-song collection published in 1843. The mood switches for the dolorous third part of the rhapsody, which uses a song by Ádám Pálóczi Horváth; this leads, via another cadenza-like passage, to the final section, whose fast-repeated notes are a veritable minefield for the pianist. This gradually increases in tempo and thickens in texture, ending uproariously not in the expected D flat but in B flat major.

Programme notes © Harriet Smith

About the performer

Gavin Evans



Khatia Buniatishvili

Khatia Buniatishvili piano

Khatia Buniatishvili was born in Georgia and discovered the piano at the age of 3. She gave her first concert with the Tbilisi Chamber Orchestra when she was 6 and was subsequently invited to tour internationally with them.

She has performed at many prestigious venues, including Carnegie Hall, Walt Disney Concert Hall, Royal Festival Hall, Vienna's Musikverein and Konzerthaus, the Amsterdam Concertgebouw, Berlin Philharmonie, Paris Philharmonie, Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, La Scala, Milan, Teatro La Fenice in Venice, Palau de la Música Catalana in Barcelona, Victoria Hall in Geneva, Zurich Tonhalle, Prague Rudolfinum, Shanghai's Grand Theatre, the Beijing NCPA, Suntory Hall, Tokyo, and Singapore's Esplanade Theatre. She has also appeared at the Salzburg, Verbier, Gstaad Menuhin, La Roque d'Anthéron, and iTunes festivals, and as part of the BBC Proms, Klavier-Festival Ruhr and Progetto Martha Argerich.

She has played under the batons of Zubin Mehta, Kent Nagano, Neeme Järvi, Paavo Järvi, Mikhail Pletnev, Yannick Nézet-Séguin, Vladimir Ashkenazy, Plácido Domingo, Semyon Bychkov, Myung-Whun Chung and Philippe Jordan, and collaborated with the China, Israel, Los Angeles, Munich and Rotterdam Philharmonic orchestras,

the BBC, London, NHK, San Francisco, São Paulo State, Seattle, Toronto and Vienna Symphony orchestras, Philadelphia Orchestra, Orchestre de Paris, Orchestre National de France and Filarmonica della Scala.

Highlights of her 2018–19 season include performances with the Vienna Radio Symphony Orchestra, Seattle Symphony Orchestra and Hong Kong Philharmonic, a tour of Asia with the Zurich Tonhalle Orchestra and a tour of Germany with the Orchestre National de Lyon under Leonard Slatkin. She also gives solo recitals in Hamburg, Dresden, Berlin, Paris, Munich, Frankfurt and here at the Barbican Centre, as well as joining her sister Gvantsa Buniatishvili for performances of Poulenc's Double Piano Concerto.

Khatia Buniatishvili has been involved in numerous social rights projects, such as the DLDwomen13 Conference in Munich (2013), 'To Russia with Love' – a concert in Berlin to speak out against the violation of human rights in Russia (2013) – a charity concert in Kiev (2015) to support people wounded in Ukraine's Anti-Terrorist Operation Zone, and the United Nations' 70th-anniversary Humanitarian Concert (2015) in Geneva which benefited Syrian refugees. In 2017 she performed at the Global Citizen Festival at the start of the G20 Summit in Hamburg.

Her award-winning discography includes solo discs of Liszt and Chopin, Rachmaninov's Piano Concertos Nos 2 and 3, *Motherland* and *Kaleidoscope*, all for Sony Classical. She has recorded piano trios by Kissine and Tchaikovsky with Gidon Kremer and Giedre Dirvanauskaitė, and Franck, Grieg and Dvořák violin sonatas with Renaud Capuçon. She also collaborated with Coldplay on their latest album, *A Head Full of Dreams*. Her most recent disc, featuring Schubert's B flat Piano Sonata, D960, has just been released on Sony.

Thu 16 May

Benjamin Grosvenor in recital

The masterly young pianist
performs Schumann, Janáček,
Prokofiev and Liszt

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Image: Benjamin Grosvenor © Patrick Allen



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