

**Nicholas Ashton Piano Recital, The Old Kirk, Rannoch, Sunday, 21<sup>st</sup> July 2024 at 3pm**

**Programme**

**Johann Sebastian Bach (1685-1750)**

Partita No 1, Bb major, BWV 825 (1731) 17'

**Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)**

Adagio, F major, Hob.XVII: 9 (1793) 4'

Sonata, E major Hob.XVI: 31 (1774-76) 10'

**Interval**

**Frederic Chopin (1810-1849)**

Etude op 25 no 7 C sharp minor (1837) 5'

**Robert Schumann (1810-1854)**

“Ahnung”, D major, (1838) 3'

**Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)**

Piano Fragment, A minor (after the Horn Trio op 40) (1853) 3'

**Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)**

Sonata, A major, op 101 (1816) 21'

## **Programme Notes by Nicholas Ashton**

### **Johann Sebastian Bach: Partita No 1, Bb major, BWV 825**

*Praeludium - Allemande - Courante - Sarabande - Menuetti 1 and 2 - Gigue*

The six Partitas were Bach's first works for keyboard - in this case the harpsichord - that he chose for publication in 1731. They constitute one of three sets of dance suites, the other two groups comprising six suites after the French style and six English suites - English because they were apparently composed for a gifted aristocratic English amateur musician. All three sets were composed in the 1720s.

The Partitas display perhaps the greatest range and variety of style. The dance suite is the closest the German High Baroque came to public, secular music for a solo keyboard; although keyboard recitals did not yet exist, the popular dance forms permitted the suite to bridge the gap between private performance of serious, "learned" music and larger, concerted forms and they were indispensable at semi-private music functions. As always with Bach, the suites transcend the medium. The suites are as richly and fully worked out as the Preludes and Fugues of the Well-Tempered Keyboard, yet they simultaneously attain the variety and even the orchestral effects of the Concerto Grosso.

The basic outline of the suite is the alternation of slow-fast movements corresponding to the tempo layout of the Baroque Sonata. In this Partita, the layout is the presentation of a slow, lyrical Prelude; a smooth, quick Allemande and Courante, an elaborate and highly expressive Sarabande, two graceful minuets and a swift, virtuosic gigue. The brilliance of the keyboard writing and possibilities of variety of interpretation have resulted in the Partitas becoming an essential part of the modern pianist's repertoire; it is possible to experiment with dynamic, tempo, texture and phrasing which are not possible on a harpsichord. The aim is to retain a certain artistic taste, while departing from the essential basic premise of authenticity. There are exceptional performances of this beautiful work by Dinu Lipatti, Richard Goode, Murray Perahia and Maria Joao Pires.

### **Joseph Haydn**

Adagio, F major, Hob.XVII: 9 (1793)

This beautiful short work was composed in 1793 at around the same time as the celebrated Variations in F minor (considered to be one Haydn's finest keyboard works). It must presumably have been intended to form the slow movement of a larger work – almost certainly a sonata, but there is unfortunately no evidence of this. In it, Haydn's ability to create stillness and concentrated intensity employing apparently simple means is greatly in evidence; a delicate melodic cantilena is spun over a simple chordal accompaniment in the left hand and features Haydn's unique signature – metrically controlled silence – as a defining feature.

Sonata, E major Hob.XVI: 31 (1774-76)

*Moderato – Minuet – Presto – Theme and Variations*

This work, by contrast, is a product of an earlier period in the composer's extensive series of over 53 keyboard sonatas. The composer's attitude to the keyboard is very like that of his predecessor, Domenico Scarlatti; he was obviously fond of writing for the instrument and using the form of the sonata as a kind of ideas laboratory. Apart from being an immensely rich and still often undeservedly neglected body of work, they are more representative of the development of the keyboard in the 18<sup>th</sup> century than any other composer. In this example, an adroit manipulation of the first movement sonata-form principle involves delicately ornamented first and second subjects, contrasted with linking sections of brilliant scales and arpeggio figures. The subsequent melancholy E minor minuet and exhilarating Finale theme and three variations give the performer an opportunity to present an expressive tonal palette and variety of touch.

### **Frederic Chopin**

Etude op 25 no 7 C sharp minor (1837)

This work, a masterpiece of form, harmonic richness and expressive depth, was composed as part of the second series of twelve studies op. 25 following the earlier first set, op.10. In both sets, Chopin revolutionised the potential - both expressively and technically - of the capabilities of both the instrument and the demands of the pianist; they remain the cornerstone of modern pianistic technique for all serious students and professionals. In this study, Chopin concentrates on exploiting the subtleties of tonal projection, of controlling a singing line in both hands and of layering complex harmonies, rather than experimenting with more purely virtuosic material.

### **Robert Schumann**

"Ahnung", D major, (1838)

In 2009, a previously unknown manuscript of an album leaf for piano by Robert Schumann was found in the Leopold Sophien Library of Überlingen. This little piano piece, entitled 'Ahnung' (idea, or thought) had been given and dedicated by Clara Schumann to a friend of hers, the lithographer and writer Julius Allgeyer. The work was written in 1838 (and finally published in 2010), which was around the time Schuman was composing his famous Kinderszenen (Scenes from Childhood) series, op 15. It is therefore possible that this work may have been considered by the composer for inclusion, as it shares the same delicate melancholy, brevity and (relative) technical simplicity.

## **Johannes Brahms**

Piano Fragment (*Albumblatt*), A minor (after the Horn Trio op 40) (1853)

In 2012 there was some exciting news of the discovery of an unknown piece of music by Johannes Brahms. The three-minute piece, *Albumblatt*, for solo piano, was written by Brahms in a visitor book once owned by the director of music at Goettingen University in Germany. It is thought that Brahms wrote the piece in the visitor book to thank his host for dinner. The title is a very common title for pieces of solo piano music in the 19th century, traditionally given to short pieces intended for friends and not intended for publication – which perhaps explains why this particular *Albumblatt* remained undiscovered for so long.

*Albumblatt* was written in 1853, when Brahms was 20 years old. The piece is not just remarkable for having never been heard before, but also because very little of Brahms' early music survives. Brahms was a perfectionist and had a habit of destroying almost all of his early work. *Albumblatt* gives us an opportunity, therefore, to find out something about how Brahms' music developed over his life. This "new" piece features a very beautiful melody, that might sound familiar: Brahms later featured the melody in his much later masterpiece, the celebrated Horn Trio, op 40.

## **Ludwig van Beethoven**

Sonata, A major, op 101 (1816)

*Allegretto, ma non troppo - Vivace alla Marcia - Adagio, ma non troppo - Allegro*

This work is one of the first commonly described as being a product of the composer's "late" style/period, in which he further experimented with form and structure, harmony, melody and rhythm, and made extensive use of pre-Classical forms, such as fugue, canon and variation.

In fact, Beethoven was constantly experimental in all of his 32 piano sonatas; in the op 13 *Pathetique* sonata of 1798, the opening sonata-form movement is heralded by a free, improvisatory Introduction and in 1802, he adopted a theme and variations as an opening movement of the Sonata op 26 and a Fantasia-like approach in the Sonatas op 27 nos 1 and 2). Added to this, the transition between the so-called Early, Middle and Late styles was not abrupt, but gradual; in the case of op. 101, there are stylistic and expressive precursors in the previous two sonatas, op 78 in F sharp and most particularly in op 90, in E minor.

Despite these caveats, op 101 marks a radical change of style and range in Beethoven's development. It is also one of the most technically demanding in the entire repertoire -

especially the final fugue in the 4<sup>th</sup> movement, which, although shorter than the massive final movement fugue of the subsequent *Hammerklavier* Sonata op 106 of 1818, is pianistically much less generous and with a more densely concentrated contrapuntal argument.

The work opens with one of the most serene and expressively lyrical movements in all Beethoven's sonatas. A gently lilting 6/8 pulse recalls the sense of the pastoral, exploited in the wonderful 6<sup>th</sup> Symphony and the earlier D major Sonata, op 28 (Beethoven being at his happiest in his long walks in the Austrian countryside). Harmonically, the movement - despite being set in a very condensed sonata-form - is very unusual, in that it commences with an extended interrupted cadence in the dominant, and modulates away even further, to F sharp minor and then C sharp minor before finally settling in A. This brings an atmosphere of improvisation and freedom, despite the tightly controlled structure and immaculate polyphony.

The second movement is a vigorous march, but with many extraordinarily inventive and subversive rhythmic games – it appealed greatly to Robert Schumann, who almost certainly modelled the second movement of his own Fantasy op 17, on it. The movement is framed by an extremely precise, graceful Canon (at the octave) in place of the more usual Trio. A brief, but intensely expressive slow third movement gives way to a magical recollection of the opening bars of the first movement, before diving headlong into the final fourth movement, joyously indulging in expertly realised counterpoint and making full use of the newly added instrumental feature of a low E on the keyboard.

### **Nicholas Ashton Biography**

Nicholas Ashton was born in Preston, Lancashire. He was educated at Chetham's School, RNCM, on postgraduate scholarships at the Conservatoire de Musique Geneva, Musikhochschule Frankfurt-am Main and at the University of Edinburgh.

His main teachers were Renna Kellaway and Joachim Volkmann, and he also received valuable coaching from Jorge Bolet, Joaquin Achucarro, David Wilde, Vlado Perlemuter and Nikita Magaloff, among others.

Nicholas performed widely throughout Europe in an early career as a soloist, establishing a comprehensive repertoire of over 20 concertos and recital programmes. Nicholas subsequently worked as a teacher, translator and assistant music agent for four years in Germany and one year in London.

Nicholas resumed his musical career through a full-time academic role at Edinburgh Napier University, where he worked as a Lecturer and Senior Lecturer for the widely-respected B.Mus Honours in Classical Music for nearly 30 years, combining this with increasingly extensive solo and chamber music performance as a result of encouragement from Murray Perahia (at the Snape Centre for Advanced Studies) and Menahem Pressler (at the Banff Centre for the Arts, Canada).

Nicholas has performed seven times in solo recital at the Queen's Hall, Edinburgh, with one recital being released as a CD in 1997 and has appeared many times as a soloist in Scotland, with several recordings and interviews given for the BBC at the former Queen Street Studios, Edinburgh and Studio 1, Glasgow.

Nicholas has been a regular collaborative (accompaniment/chamber music) partner, including with the Edinburgh Quartet, at the Hamburg Arts Association, the Cantilena Festival, Paxton House Summer Music Festival. He has appeared as a soloist throughout the UK, Germany, USA and Italy and Lithuania and has recorded many times for the BBC, on German, Swiss and Lithuanian and US Radio as well as commercially. A recording of the complete piano music and the piano quintet by the distinguished Scottish composer, Robert Crawford, was released to high critical praise on the Delphian Record label in 2008.

Nicholas is currently Principal Study Tutor for piano at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland (RCS) and Examiner for Doctoral Programmes in performance; he also teaches at the University of Edinburgh and privately.

Nicholas has a strong interest in contemporary music for two pianos, enjoying a partnership in this area with the Lithuanian pianist, Lauryna Sableviciute, giving many premieres of new works in the medium. They have performed and recorded extensively in the UK and in Lithuania, with projected CD commercial release in 2025-26.

Nicholas is also in demand for masterclasses and adjudication, including at RCS, St Mary's Music School, Birmingham Conservatoire, the High School of Dundee and Eton College.

Nicholas is a colleague of the distinguished Slovenian pianist, Sasa Gerzelj Donaldson at RCS in the Keyboard Faculty and they have begun plans to collaborate as a piano duo, exploring the rich mainstream repertoire for two pianos and piano duet, as well as reviving rare, undiscovered music in these media. Nicholas has also begun collaborating with the cellist Mark Bailey, with concerts planned for the forthcoming season.