

Nicholas Ashton Piano Recital Rannoch Old Kirk Sunday, 21st September, 2025 at 3pm

Haydn Variations H.VII /6 F minor
Chopin Etude op 25 no 7 C sharp minor
Chopin Polonaise op 40 no 1 A major
Chopin Polonaise op 40 no 2 C minor

Schumann Warum? (Fantasiestucke op 12 no 3) Db major
Schumann Arabeske, op 18 C major
Schumann Kinderszenen (Scenes fr Childhood) op 15

Programme Notes

Joseph Haydn

Variations, F minor, Hob.XVII: 6

This work, composed in 1793 is possibly Haydn's most celebrated work for solo keyboard not a sonata, or using sonata form in the specific sense. The structure of the work is almost unique, in that it consists of two contrasting themes; the first a melancholy and rhythmically irregular figure in F minor and the second contrasting with a smoother and more lyrical second melodic theme in F major. Moreover, both themes are in two parts, ie. each a short binary form.

These are each varied three times in the same order, before returning to the opening first theme, which disappears -literally - into a dramatic coda. The relationship between the gently lilting accompaniment of the opening theme and the terse dotted rhythm of the melody – insistently present throughout the work – is one of the work's most fascinating elements. There is a balance - amongst the most perfectly realised in all Haydn's mature works - between a repetitive Classical symmetry and the positioning of silence as an importance constituent; this is most striking in the final return of the first theme and the coda, when the rhythm motif of the theme, modulating with increasing distance away from F minor, is dovetailed carefully with two controlled pauses - the disappearance mentioned earlier. The effect is extremely unsettling – it turns on its head the listener's expectations of what is to follow, rather in the manner of the sudden evaporation of the regular rhythm; famously the feature of the second movement of the Symphony No 101 ("The Clock").

Frederic Francois Chopin Etude op 25 no 7, C sharp minor

This beautiful work is the seventh in the composer's second book of Twelve Etudes, op 25, published in 1837, two years after the first book, also comprising twelve studies, op 10. These two collections have become the most widely admired and often-played works in the medium, as they represent an astonishing progression in the development of piano technique. Unlike all of the other studies, this example is in a slow tempo, and the technical approach differs, in that Chopin sets out to explore the possibilities of sustaining a prominent left-hand cantabile melody, with the right hand acting as an accompanist or duet partner. Sonority, voicing and expressive rubato, together with a richly chromatic harmonic framework and a wide dynamic palette of colour, are also exploited.

Frederic Francois Chopin Two Polonaises, op 40 nos 1 and 2

The Polonaise is a Polish dance in 3/4 time, which became appropriated from the early 17th century onwards by composers writing music for various royal courts - there are examples by Bach contained in his French Suites and Partitas. By the time of the Classical and early Romantic periods, the form had become increasingly more sophisticated, with its distinctive dotted rhythmic quality attracting composers such as Haydn and Beethoven. Naturally, as a Polish-born musician, Chopin took the form even further; during his lifetime, he composed 23 Polonaises, with the first written when he was only seven years old, and the final work (the crowning masterpiece that is the *Polonaise-Fantaisie* op 61) in 1846 at the age of 36.

The two Polonaises op 40 were composed in 1838. The first, in A major, has become famous by its moniker, the “Military” Polonaise. Martial bravado is indeed evoked from the start, contrasting a fanfare-like dotted rhythm with a triplet aside. Later in the work, Chopin even copies the sound of drum-rolls in a sequence of descending trills, making full use throughout of the rich resonance of chordal writing at the extremes of the keyboard.

The second Polonaise could not be more different in character; the pianist Artur Rubinstein remarked that the Polonaise in A major is the symbol of Polish glory, whilst the Polonaise in C minor is the symbol of Polish tragedy. The opening portentous minor chords in the accompanying right hand recall the tragic mood of the famous C minor prelude from op 28, with the left hand stating the melody in majestic octaves. A second episode continues with passionate and emotionally affecting melody in thirds, modulating to a brighter G major before the reiteration of the first section. Tranquility and lyricism are introduced in a beautiful, contrasting third episode in Ab major, briefly offering respite from the brooding, almost malevolent character of the overall work. As always with Chopin, his genius lies in introducing complexity and expressive range far beyond any original source material, displaying extraordinary command of chromatic harmony, pianistic experimentation and subverting simple forms into sophisticated structures.

Robert Schumann Warum? (Why?) No 3 from Fantasy Pieces op 12

Schumann composed the eight pieces that comprise *Fantasiestücke* op 12, in 1837, and they quickly become one of the most celebrated of his many works for the piano. Each of the pieces (as with *Scenes from Childhood* op 15) has been given titles.

Schumann was generally critical of audiences who expected to find concrete, programmatic depictions in his music, although he was not averse to supplying specific titles, particularly in sets of later works, such as the *Album für die Jugend* op 68, *Bilder aus Ostern* op 56 and *Waldszenen*, op 82 (1849). Concerning this latter set, Schumann wrote:

“The titles for pieces of music, since they again have come into favour in our day, have been censured here and there, and it has been said that ‘good music needs no sign-post.’”

Given this statement, combined with the fact that descriptive titles do offer the listener the potential to reflect on possible meanings behind the notes, there may be an undercurrent of subversive humour in Schumann awarding this short piece the title “Why?”; despite the general reputation of Schumann being an intensely Romantic and passionately serious composer, it is often

overlooked that there is frequently a sly sense of comedy at work. However, the actual mood of this work is far from the boisterous humour of Schumann's fictional character, Florestan; it is rather the embodiment of the alter-ego, the poetic lyricism and melancholy of Eusebius.

Robert Schumann Arabeske, op 18

Composed in Vienna in 1839, this is possibly one of Schumann's most beloved works for piano. It has a lesser-known companion, the *Blumenstück* (Flower Piece) in D♭ major, op 19. Both short works were composed for and dedicated to the imposingly-named Frau Majorin Friederike Serre auf Maxen. Schumann rather dismissively referred to these pieces - which are not nearly as technically difficult as most of his major works - as being "for ladies" and thus designed to appeal to the many aristocratic women of culture in Vienna who listed in their accomplishments the ability to play the piano (and who were often the source of income for ambitious but poor young professional musicians hoping to make their way). This sits extremely uncomfortably with the fact that Schumann's *inamorata* was Clara Wieck- the first woman to become globally famous as a career concert pianist.

Although very charming and yet with a characteristic undertow of depth, the *Blumenstück* can safely be described as such a salon piece; this is emphatically not the case with the *Arabeske*, which inhabits that very strange and almost hallucinatory poetic world of the very best of the composer's work. It is set in a series of short sections, returning always to the opening - but with two insertions. These feature a connecting, chromatically wandering 16-bar interlude at the centre of the *Arabeske*, and the 16-bar coda (marked "zum Schluss" - In Closing). Both can be compared to the rapt emotional intensity of the interlude and coda in Schumann's song-cycle *Dichterliebe*, written in the following year, 1840. There is probably nothing more beautiful than these bars in any piano music composed in that golden period of the early 1800s

Robert Schumann Kinderszenen (Scenes from Childhood) op 15

- 1 From Foreign Lands and People
- 2 Curious Tale
- 3 Blindman's Buff
- 4 Pleading Child
- 5 Reasonable Contentment
- 6 Important Event
- 7 Dreaming
- 8 By the Fireside
- 9 Ride-a-Cock-Horse
- 10 Almost Too Serious
- 11 A Frightening Story
- 12 Child Falling Asleep
- 13 The Poet Speaks

In 1838 (a very busy and fruitful composing year), Schumann wrote about 30 short pieces for his fiancée Clara Wieck, of which he selected thirteen and entitled them “Scenes of Childhood”. In writing to Clara, he said: “And so that I don’t forget what I have just composed - It was like an echo of the words you once wrote to me; that I often seemed to even to be like a child; in short, it was exactly as if I were in the heyday of my youth again... you will enjoy them”. He also refers to the pieces as having a “magic depth”.

In them, the imagination of the composer comes fully and freely to life. The essence of the improvisatory, but also the capacity for imitating the experiences of childhood, are imprinted inimitably - they are recollections of childhood as seen *in retrospect* by an adult; they are not, as such, pieces for children to play (unlike the later “Album for the Young” op 68). Moreover, the action of reminiscence and reflection on the past (and lost) innocence of childhood is imbued with a gentle but intense melancholy and, at times, sorrow.

Although the cycle is - on the surface - nowhere near as technically sophisticated and demanding to play as his larger piano works, such as the *Fantasie* op 17 or *Kreisleriana* op 16, the perfection of the writing and the ephemeral quality of lyricism make the short pieces exceptionally hard to realise successfully. In this respect - for pianists - they can be compared to Mozart, whose keyboard music all professionals commonly regard as the most challenging. Every note, harmony, phrase and dynamic marking has been considered with the utmost care; furthermore, even basic analysis reveals that the entire cycle is structurally grown from the falling melodic line (G- F sharp- E- D) of the first piece. Thus, despite its lack of obvious virtuosity, the work has become regarded with an especial respect and devotion by the community of pianists as well as the wider music audience.

Biography

Nicholas Ashton was educated at Chetham’s School, Manchester, RNCM, and in Geneva and Frankfurt-am-Main.

Following a formal debut at the 1980 Manchester International Festival, Nicholas performed widely throughout Europe for ten years as a concerto soloist and recitalist. He subsequently worked for three years as a teacher and translator in Frankfurt and for one year in London as an assistant opera agent at Anglo-Swiss Artists’ Management.

Nicholas resumed performing as a result of encouragement from Murray Perahia and Menahem Pressler. His first public recital in Scotland in 1995 was highly praised and resulted in regular offers to play. A live recording of a subsequent recital at the Queen’s Hall in Edinburgh was brought out on CD in 1996. Since then, he has given seven solo recitals at the venue and has performed to critical acclaim in over 400 concerts throughout the UK, in Germany, Finland, Italy, Canada and the USA. He has also contributed regularly as a performer and in interview for the BBC, NDR 2 and 4, Bayern 4, Radio *Suisse Romande*, Radio New Zealand and in the USA. Nicholas has performed over eighty separate solo and chamber programmes for the Hamburg for the Hamburg Chamber Arts Association and has appeared regularly in the Glasgow, Edinburgh, Aberdeen and Dundee Universities’ Recital series.

In 2008, a CD recording of the complete works for piano and the piano quintet by the distinguished Scottish composer Robert Crawford, released on the widely respected Delphian Records label, attracted very high praise in the media, including *International Record Review*, *The Scotsman*, *The Herald*, *Musical Opinion* and *The Gramophone*.

Recordings of contemporary two piano repertoire with the Lithuanian pianist Lauryna Sableviciute, and of the complete works for duet and two pianos by Mozart with the British pianist Andrew Wilde, are in preparation. Nicholas has a strong interest in new music and has performed and premiered works by many contemporary composers.

In chamber music, Nicholas has been a regular partner with the Edinburgh Quartet, performing with them a substantial part of the core piano quintet and quartet repertoire, and was a member of the Cantilena Festival Players, a live festival held on the beautiful island of Islay, from 2021-22. Nicholas recently appeared at the 40th anniversary of the Lake District Summer Music Festival, performing with the pianist Steven Osborne.

For nearly 30 years, Nicholas fulfilled a full-time academic career. He was a Senior Lecturer and Director of Quality Assurance for the School of Arts and Creative Industries at Edinburgh Napier University and Programme Leader for the Classical B.Mus degree. Since 2020, he has been a Principal Tutor at the Royal Conservatoire of Scotland and at the University of Edinburgh. He is also much demand as an examiner and adjudicator.