

Nicholas Ashton Piano Recital Reid Hall University of Edinburgh 4 November, 2025

Haydn Variations H.VII /6 F minor

Schumann Arabeske, op 18 C major

Schumann Kinderszenen (Scenes from Childhood) op 15

Schumann ABEGG Variations, op 1, F major

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").

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 Db 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 a special respect and devotion by the community of pianists as well as the wider music audience.

Robert Schumann: Variations on a Theme of the name ABEGG, op 1 (1830), F major

This was the first work of Schumann to be published and given an opus number, thus initiating an illustrious series of piano works, most of which have become central to the piano repertoire. There is some intricacy concerning the background of the theme (A, Bb, E G, G) which is formed from the surname of a young woman, Meta Abegg (which Schumann playfully dedicated to her as the "Countess Pauline d' Abegg"); her name, "Meta", is also an anagram of "Tema", the German for "Theme".

The work is an example of the kind of musical style with which the composer hoped to ingratiate himself towards well-to do, well-trained (and thus socially highly eligible) young female pianists, of whom there were a great many in Leipzig at the time.

The Variations require a highly polished and highly virtuosic technique, much lighter and more delicate than his later and larger works, rather more in the note-spinning manner of Hummel, Weber and Mendelssohn. Despite this similarity, this early work immediately displays Schumann's individuality, particularly in the contrasts between expressive lyricism and exuberant, sparkling brilliance, depicting the composer's fictitious characters, Eusebius and Florestan.

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.