

The Gerard Manley Hopkins

36th International Festival Friday 19th to Thursday 25th July 2024

Newbridge College Theatre Saturday 20th July 2024 8pm

HANS PÅLSSON



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PÅLSSON, ROTHKO and OTHERS

What makes a pianist great? What is art all about? Why do we need it?

I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions: tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on.

- those words of the great Mark Rothko (1903 - 1970) apply beyond painters, to every genuine artist, in whatever field, that of Music included; just as they did to Gerard Manley Hopkins - and to Mozart, Beethoven, Schubert and the others. Just as they do to Hans Pålsson, who rediscovers the deep music in its thrilling rawness. Rothko went on to say,

There is no such thing as good painting about nothing.

just as there is no such thing as good piano playing which focusses on technique alone: flash-playing concerned with the audience instead of with the music, maybe as far as throwing in a little keyboard-conducting for effect. In any discipline, art is, or should be, about something, about life. It should offer an insight into some aspect of the human experience; not coldly either, but filled with the emotion of discovery. This is why listening to a great pianist like Pålsson offers not merely some kind of objective evocation of an experience: it makes you part of the experience. That is, if you take the journey, open in mind and heart and humble in the presence of something special, something that can change you - even a little (which is a lot). As Hopkins puts it in his last poem, 'To R.B'.,

The widow of an insight lost she lives, with aim

Now known and hand at work now never wrong.

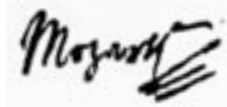
Sweet fire, the sire of muse, my soul needs this

'Sweet fire': a Pålsson concert always has it. 'Pictures must be miraculous' said Rothko: the same holds for a concert. Hold your breath: here comes Hans!



Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)

Sonata A major KV 331



A sonata usually consists of several movements, and is composed generally for one instrument. This sonata, was written in 1783, in his 27th year. A fruitful and successful year, following on his wedding to Constanze Weber in 1782: during it, Mozart composed *The Marriage of Figaro*, his piano concerto No. 12 in A major, the string quartet, and *Symphony No. 33*. He also travelled to Vienna, where he met the Emperor Joseph II and performed a series of successful concerts. Mozart's wife Constanze gave birth to their first child, a daughter named Rismonda, this same year. Nevertheless, his life, which had early on been so full of triumphs as a young virtuoso touring the courts of Europe, now began to take a downward spiral into poverty and he desperately tried to make ends meet. Most of his letters from this period were requests for money - but you would hardly guess it from this generally light and optimistic sonata: another reminder not to confuse art with autobiography: we remember Hopkins's gloriously affirmative *Resurrection* sonnet, written a few months before he died, at a time in Dublin when he was supposed to be depressed!

1: **Andante Grazioso** ('In a lively, manner')

The opening is beautiful. Somewhat introspective, it gradually brightens up and generally lifts, though not completely. Mozart repeats and then goes on to develop its simple motif, more melancholy at first but becoming more playful in manner. A lively ripple of notes suggests a brighter spirit, communicated by some energetic counterpointing between hands reminiscent of Bach (who was an influence). The composer introduces several inventive variations on his opening motif, before a brooding variant adds darker colour to the whole movement. Such delicate modulations of feeling demand from the pianist a corresponding fineness of touch, and one last, excited, flurry of notes needs a masterly technique to carry the sadness and playfulness alike of the writing in this *Andante*: surely a musician's music.

2: **Menuetto** ('Minuet pace' i.e. fairly slowly)

This second movement is thought-filled and sadder. Mozart begins with a simple and affecting melody and then goes on to develop it. He introduces an arpeggio-ripple effect similar to that of the first movement. Repetition plays a big part in this beautiful section as Mozart imbues the simple theme with a sadness barely held in control by the arpeggios. This minuet strips the music to its most poignant self, offering a look behind some of the almost-forced gaiety of the first movement, now allowing its introspection to predominate. There seems to be something of a conflict between darker and lighter moods - almost as if the composer were trying to lift his spirits and not allow the melancholy to take over. What next?

3: **Alla Turca: Allegretto** ('Lively, Turkish-band style; briskly')

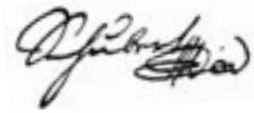
Mozart now seems to say, *Cheer up!* The brisk immediacy of the opening suggests as much, and he moves away from the sadness of the second movement with counterpointed runs at dazzling speed. The few delightfully cheery notes of its motif are now played-with in a series of inventive variations, a highlight of which is the interplay between left and right hands, involving flurries of arpeggios. A lively run across the keyboard is now repeated and enjoyed for its high spirits. Back comes the opening salvo, followed by decisive chording with both hands together. How, we wonder, will it end? Unexpectedly quickly, with no flourish and with a brisk, final two notes which seem to say, 'That's it!'. A work of art, being a journey inland into the spirit, is never simplistic: the complexity of this marvellous work comes as a reminder, and the quiet finish seems fittingly to encapsulate a richly inventive, emotionally wide-ranging and finally intriguing sonata.



Franz Schubert (1797-1828)

Four Impromptus op. 90 (D.899)

An Impromptu was a composition in which freshness and spontaneity were the impulse – so the name suggests an improvisation. Because Schubert composed quickly and because of his melodic gift, the Impromptu suited his genius. The four examples in this Opus are unsurpassed in their genre and hold place among Schubert's finest compositions. Hans Pålsson is one of the great performers of this Work so it is a special privilege to hear him play them this evening. They were written by Schubert in 1827, a year before he died – as Hopkins did – from typhoid fever.



No. 1 in C minor Allegro molto moderato ('Lively, moderately cheerful')

This is the most introspective of the Four Impromptus. Its declamatory opening soon gives way to a more subdued mood and leads into a quiet finish. It shows how inventive Schubert is in developing a coherent structure from a few notes, deepening towards the melancholic mood which comes to prevail. This first Impromptu contrasts very dramatically with the second, suggesting that Schubert may have intended the four works as a single musical suite – which is how Pålsson treats them.

No. 2 in E flat major Allegro ('Lively')

A tour de force of delicate virtuosity, this delightful Impromptu, with its cascades of notes and high spirits offers an immediate contrast to its predecessor – and to the one following. The flighty, butterfly-like, scatter of notes will also find an echo in the fourth Impromptu of this suite: another hint that Schubert intended all four pieces as a unit. Next, he repeats and introduces assertive chording with the left hand prominent. The motif returns again gently; is repeated and developed before a continuous triplet pattern appears and dominates. Some suggestion of exaltation is reached before the music descends into a more introverted mood, the triplets still in evidence but subdued. The main, now tragic, melody re-enters; is played higher - before the left hand asserts itself and there is a dramatic culmination, fortissimo. The melody re-enters and seems to carry the sadness of the world (and of the composer, now dying). It is repeated and ends, with a suggestion of tiredness and resignation. The writing calls for lightness of touch and perfect balance between right and left hands, a real test for any pianist. It perfectly illustrates the spirit of improvisation and fluctuations of mood which define what an Impromptu is.

No. 3 Andante in G flat major ('At a walking pace')

Not even Schubert has written anything more inspired. Imbued with what Wordsworth called 'the still, sad, music of humanity' this beautiful piece transcends the loneliness of individual experience and becomes a lament for us all. The melody is utterly simple, its intense sadness highlighted by the more agitated counterpointing by the left hand. The mood rallies a few times but the lament prevails, with a simplicity comparable to that of Tennyson's final poem, 'Crossing the Bar'. The achievement of such profound simplicity is the finest achievement of any artist. Those who have heard Pålsson play this Impromptu – on CD or in the concert hall – might well wonder if any other performer could match the depth of feeling which he reaches in it. With its suggestion, too, of the vulnerability of the composer, this piece is a reminder of how privileged we are to have such great artists as Schubert and Pålsson; and how much we need them to speak for us.

No. 4 Allegretto in A flat major ('Fairly lively')

Ripples of notes introduce this elegant finale. They rise and then fall, as Schubert seems to examine where he can go with their possibilities. A lovely melody - a charged, Schubertian one, not without a shadow of sadness - emerges via the left hand. The ripples move down and join in its development: a kind of challenge between the lighthearted frivolity of the earlier and the lower, more charged, implications of this second theme. Can there be a resolution? The drama continues as Schubert develops this slower air, poising it, one hand against the other. The music ripples away into a new and beautiful theme. This he develops for a while before playing it in a major key - it might seem as if the

sad experience of life has left little room for frivolity or happiness. Just as the mood darkens, that early skittishness pushes back in - though now in a minor key. There follows a lovely counterpoint between the two moods and the two hands. Dramatic, not without tension, the slow melody begins to predominate before the butterfly-like theme re-enters and the Impromptu reaches a definite, if unresolved, finish. Schubert is too honest, too much of an artist, to impose any kind of happy ending: the piece, like some of Hopkins's later sonnets, is a complex of feelings and tensions, and allowed to remain so.

INTERVAL
with wine reception
PART II



Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Für Elise version 1 (1810) Bagatelle in A minor Wo059
Poco moto ('Fairly quickly')

A handwritten signature of Ludwig van Beethoven in cursive script, written in black ink.

Interestingly, this tempo indication does not appear anywhere else in Beethoven. A bagatelle, in his usage, consists of a brief character sketch. He composed this one in April 1810. His hearing had deteriorated but he could still hear a little until 1812. By the age of 44 - four years after 'Für Elise' - he was almost totally deaf. As his hearing progressively deteriorated, Beethoven's pieces, we read, were pitched higher and higher: this might account for the relatively high pitch of 'Für Elise', which reaches above a top C.

It is widely acknowledged that the true dedicatee of 'Für Elise', was Therese Malfatti, a woman to whom Beethoven proposed in 1810 (unsuccessfully, as usual) when he composed 'Für Elise'. She also owned the manuscript. (Other researchers have suggested Elise could have been a German soprano named Elisabeth Röckel.) So 'Elise' was a disguise of sorts: musicians - and writers! - sometimes resort to such stratagems, for various personal reasons. Beethoven himself was never fully satisfied with the writing: he returned to it some years later and tried, unsuccessfully in his own eyes, to revise and refine it. This evening we have the unique opportunity to hear both versions of this popular classic performed - and to decide which of the two one prefers.

Für Elise version 2 (1823) Bagatelle in A minor Wo059

Molto grazioso ('Very gracefully')

While the manuscript Beethoven gave to its (anonymous) dedicatee has been lost since the 1860s, he kept his draft of the piece and returned to it probably in 1822 when compiling a set of 12 Bagatelles. "Für Elise" was to become No.12 and Beethoven, not fully happy with the earlier version, revised his draft in pencil along with other manuscripts he planned to include in the set. The project, however, never materialized and he abandoned the revised drafts.

The manuscript was found only a few years ago. Beethoven's pencil revisions feature some prominent changes. He shifts the left-hand accompaniment of the refrain to the right; he introduces a formal redesign of the last third of the piece with a few restored bars leading into the second section; and he adds a newly-sketched ending. He also re-introduces some unused material from his original draft - including variations on the refrain and a transition into the first couplet, still there from his copy of Version 1. Accordingly, some details are earlier and some later than those in Version 1 and 1810's 'Poco moto' has by 1822 changed to 'Molto grazioso - from quickly to more slowly - telling us that he now had a slightly different view of the piece.

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Sonata No. 25 in C major Op.53, 'The Waldstein'

Beethoven dedicated this composition to his friend and patron Count von Waldstein. Written in 1821, it was one of a group of three commissioned sonatas. The sonata form gave Beethoven a chance to express passing shifts of mood and moment, allowing full play to his expression of evanescent feelings. For reasons comparable with those leading Shakespeare to enlarge the scope of the Elizabethan sonnet, Beethoven developed the possibilities and corresponding technical demands of the sonata. With the Waldstein he utilized every one of the musical elements there are for a piano: key, form, rhythm, volume, harmony, speed and melody. He did so, not as some kind of exercise but to follow the waves of his emotion; hence its difficulty. We encounter the same difficulty in Hopkins's attempts to express the depth and volatility of his complex personality. Sonata No. 31 is considered one of Beethoven's masterpieces. It holds a special place among his sonatas for the way in which it moves towards a life-affirmation comparable with the Hymn to Joy of his Ninth Symphony.

1: **Allegro con brio** ('Lively and with energy'). In C major.

The start is brisk and sets the tone for the whole sonata with its repeated chord surrounded by arabesques of excited notes, demanding virtuoso playing. The composer's theme is introduced and developed in an excited, if slightly frantic, way. He returns to the theme and the delighted elaborations which surround it. The ten-note melody is examined again the way a jazz musician might elaborate on a tune. Beethoven at his most original; one can feel the spontaneity of his composing. The movement calms down but ends with a lively flurry of notes.

2: **Introduzione: Adagio molto** ('Introduction: very slowly'). In F major.

This 'introduzione' presents a complete change of mood: slow and introspective, by comparison with what has gone before. Beethoven now offers a more poignant melody, one full of sad resignation. The opening motif is repeated and developed a little, very slowly. An attempt to rise above the melancholy is overcome by a beautiful passage ending abruptly on what sounds like a question mark. A completely original hiatus: Beethoven being true to his complicated, contrasting, feelings, as always, in this very short, very intense passage. The finish is abrupt and undecided. What kind of resolution to these two preceding, contrasting, movements can the final one achieve?

3: **Rondo: Allegretto moderato** ('Circular i.e. with repeating themes; fairly lively'). In C major.

It brings us one of the one of the most life-affirming passages of music ever written! A new theme is announced, over a ripple of notes from the left hand. The heroic melody takes over, higher now but not without sad colouring: Beethoven is never one to simplify things. The positive feeling, the affirmation, gradually takes over in thrilling fashion as high runs of notes suggest a growing energy and optimism. A dramatic confrontation follows before the lovely melody comes again in rondo and is repeated higher against the voicings of the left hand. Resolution follows a few exploratory and excited runs up and down the keyboard in a passage demanding bravura playing. A change of chord and of pace predict some kind of conclusion as a new theme questions its way in. Some dialogue with a higher, more carefree, passage follows. A brief moment of tension and doubt emerges but the initial theme recurs strongly and is accepted by arpeggios of excited notes as doubt, agitation and sadness gradually yield to simple joy. This is highlighted by a few chords that make way for the delighted affirmation where the earlier sad melody is transformed into a racing acceptance of life: Beethoven's Heraclitean Fire equivalent, ending, as Hopkins's poem does, in a joy that is all the more convincing for having been hard-won,

...and

*This Jack, joke, poor potsherd, patch, matchwood, immortal diamond,
Is immortal diamond.*

This is why we need great music - and in Hans Pålsson a great artist to give it expression.

Concert Notes: Desmond Egan



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