

NOTES FOR THE CONCERT AT ST MARYS ON MAY 17TH 2008

Sonata No 7 in D Major Opus 10 No 3 by Beethoven

Beethoven wrote no fewer than 32 piano sonatas during his long career. Earlier this year Daniel Barenboim played all of them in a series of sell-out concerts at the Royal Festival Hall. Tonight you are going to hear just one – the Sonata No 7 in D Major. Written in 1798 and dedicated to Countess Margarete von Browne, it ranks as one of Beethoven's finest piano sonatas. That, at any rate is the opinion of Beethoven's first biographer and close friend, Anton Schindler. He thought that it was sublime, especially the long second movement 'largo e mesto'.

Paganini Variations Opus 35 by Brahms

In 1863, when he was 30 years old, Brahms took a simple theme from Nicolo Paganini's Caprice No 24 and based a series of variations on it. Many years later the Russian composer Rachmaninov used the same theme to create another set of variations - in fact one of them, the 18th, is still being played all over the world and is far better known than the piece that contained the original theme.

According to the *Classic FM Guide to Classical Music*, what you are about to hear is 'a tour de force, the nearest Brahms came to producing piano music of Lisztian sparkle'. Behzod will be treating you to a little 'Lisztian sparkle' later in the programme, so you can judge for yourself whether or not this assessment is valid.

Adagio in G Minor by Albinoni

Tomaso Giovanni Albinoni, who lived between 1671 and 1751, was a prolific composer and during his lifetime was generally regarded as being the musical equal of his illustrious contemporaries Johann Sebastian Bach, George Frederick Handel and Antonio Vivaldi. How ironic it is then, that nowadays his fifty operas and numerous concertos are largely ignored, while he is best remembered for a piece of music that he might not even have written!

Albinoni's much loved Adagio in G Minor certainly sounds as if it dates from the Baroque era, but it was in fact written shortly before Geoffrey Bowyer began teaching at Sunbury Grammar School. The story of how it burst onto the music scene is absolutely fascinating and well worth repeating...

For many years a number of Albinoni's scores were stored in the State Library of Saxony in Dresden, but during the Second World War the library was flattened in an Allied bombing raid and Albinoni's priceless manuscripts were destroyed ... or so it was thought. Several years later the composer Remo Giazotto came into the possession of what was said to be a fragment of an Albinoni trio sonata that had escaped the flames; and he used it to create the piece that Geoffrey is playing tonight.

The Adagio in G Minor first saw the light of day in 1958. A few years later the American pop group 'Doors' added it to their repertoire, thereby introducing it to a wider audience; then, in 1981, the Australian director Peter Weir used it to create a haunting atmosphere in the scene in his much admired film 'Gallipoli' where the ANZAC soldiers row ashore at dawn on April 25th 1915, many of them to their deaths.

Mephisto Waltz by Liszt

Liszt wrote three versions of the Mephisto Waltz No 1 – for solo piano, piano duet and orchestra – between 1859 and 1862. Like ‘Danse Macabre’, which you will be hearing later, it is programme music. In other words, it tells a story.

The story that Liszt chose to immortalise in his own inimitable way was plucked from the story of Faust – not the Goethe masterpiece, but a lesser known version by Nikolaus Lenau. The story begins with Faust and Mephistopheles chancing upon a wedding feast in a village inn. Mephistopheles, who is disguised as a hunter, picks up a fiddle and starts playing frenetic dance music. He then reduces the tempo to a languid waltz, and this prompts the young bride to start dancing with Faust. The poor girl is so beguiled by the beauty of Mephistopheles’ playing that she allows Faust to lead her into the woods. The intensity of Behzod’s playing will give you a pretty good idea of what happened next! It’s a scenario with which Liszt himself would have been all too familiar: he was renowned for his amorous escapades with other men’s wives!

Sonata in G Major HXVI:6 by Haydn

Joseph Haydn was one of the giants of the Classical Period and is often referred to as the ‘Father of the Symphony and ‘Father of the String Quartet’. The piece that you are going to hear tonight is thought to have been written in about 1760, when Haydn was in his late 20s, and published six years later. It is one of Haydn’s earliest piano sonatas and one of only two with a four-movement format (the rest have three).

Unlike Chopin, Mendelssohn, Mozart and Schubert, Haydn lived to a ripe old age. He spent most of his life in Austria, but came to London on two occasions in the 1790s and wrote several of his best known symphonies here. Those of you with long memories might remember Geoffrey Bowyer’s memorable production of another great Haydn masterpiece, ‘The Creation’, here at St Mary’s 40 years ago.

Danse Macabre by Saint-Saens/Liszt/Horowitz

When the original Saint-Saens version of ‘Danse Macabre’ was first performed in 1875, it featured a full orchestra. Soon afterwards the composer’s friend Franz Liszt transcribed it for piano, and many years later the virtuoso pianist Vladimir Horowitz tinkered around with it still further to produce the piece you will hear tonight.

Saint-Saens based ‘Danse Macabre’ on a poem of the same name by Henri Cazalis. Cazalis had latched onto a gruesome traditional tale and put it in a form more in keeping with contemporary tastes. According to ancient tradition, Death would visit a cemetery at midnight every Halloween, and call upon the dead to rise from their graves and dance for him. For the next few hours the skeletons would cavort around the graveyard, while Death played the fiddle. The merriment would continue until dawn, but when the sun’s rays began to appear the skeletons would stop dancing and Death would slink away.

When Behzod begins to play, you will hear the clock striking 12; then, in the final section, which is *pianissimo*, it is easy to imagine the skeletons slowly trudging back to their graves and Death reluctantly resigning himself to another year of boredom and inactivity!