



## Igor Levit, piano

Friday 13 July 2019      20:00

Hindsgavl Festival

### Mendelssohn

Three excerpts from 'Lieder ohne Worte',  
(Op. 19b no. 1, 4, and 'Duetto' Op. 38 no. 6)

### Mahler

Adagio from Symphony no 10 (arr.  
Stevenson)

Intermission

### Schubert

Piano sonata no. 21 in B flat major, D. 960,

### Felix Mendelssohn (1809-1847): From 'Lieder ohne Worte', Op. 19b and Op 38 (1830 and 1838)

Altogether Mendelssohn wrote 54 *Lieder ohne Worte* (Songs without words), and they are all small lyrical snapshots of the romantic *zeitgeist*. Short character pieces with bitter-sweet atmospheres, melodious tunes and poetic language which go straight to the heart. They are, as the title suggests, related to the lied-tradition as we know it from Schubert and Schumann. But by leaving out the texts, Mendelssohn gives the movements a more abstract content.

*Opus 19b no 1* – one of Mendelssohn's most famous pieces – is full of twilight-atmosphere and pleasant melodies. *Opus 19b no 4* sounds like a four-part choir movement, almost without a pianistic accompaniment. *Opus 38 no 6* is a love duet with a deep man's and a light woman's voice.

### Gustav Mahler (1860-1911): Adagio from Symphony no 10, arranged by Ronald Stevenson (1911)

In 1911 Mahler had heartache. His marriage to Alma was breaking up after he discovered her affair with the architect Walter Gropius, and his incurable heart disease didn't help either. In this condition he outlined his *Symphony no 10*. He never finished it. But what he did finish, gives evidence of a composer in a terrible emotional state of mind. Mahler did not die a happy man.

The first movement is some of the most searching and expansive music that Mahler ever wrote. He seems to look into the future. Major and minor are on the brink of

disintegration, and the start of the movement in unison seems to be without any grounding whatsoever. The experiments culminate in a violent chord at the end of the movement, where nine tones out of the twelve possible are played at the same time. Atonality is just round the corner.

After Mahler's death, different musicologists tried to complete the symphony working from Mahler's sketches. That's the reason why we are able to hear *Symphony no 10* in its entirety. But there are other alternative versions of Mahler's swansong as well. One of them is Ronald Stevenson's version from 1987 for solo piano.

### **Franz Schubert (1797-1828): Piano Sonata no 21 in B flat major, D.960 (1828)**

On his deathbed, only 31 years old, unknown, unhappy and destitute, Schubert wrote at a handful of heavenly works. *Winterreise*, *Schwanengesang*, *the String Quintet in C major*, *Symphony no 9* and his last three piano sonatas. Words are not able to describe the celestial aura of these works. An incomprehensible spirituality, heavenly melodies, a sublime sense of the musical nuances and an eminent sense of form make Schubert's late works into high points in the music history. They transcend the human and create the impression that Schubert composed with one leg in the grave and the other in Paradise.

*The Piano Sonata in B flat major* was written in a frenzy in September 1828. Seven weeks later Schubert was dead. He knew very well that death was approaching, but at no point does the music sound hectic or frantic. Schubert

fought death by making time stand still in his music.

The sonata wasn't printed and performed for the first time until 1838, ten years after Schubert's death. The publisher dedicated the sonata to Robert Schumann, who admired Schubert's music because of its "*divine length*". And exactly the colossal (or divine) length of approximately 45 minutes makes the sonata hypnotic. The technical virtuosity is never what's important. The music is a lyrical state of mind to which you must surrender.

A heavenly main theme introduces the first movement. Simple and noble. A dark rumbling trill, a snake in Paradise, is lurking underneath. The theme develops, is heard in unexpected sound colours and alternates between major and minor without us hardly noticing. For 15 minutes the music flows naturally along as coming from a divine source.

The magic continues in the contemplative second movement. The intensity in the harmonic modulations is unsurpassed. The characteristic dotted accompaniment-figure which is heard all through the movement, contributes to the hypnotizing effect of the music.

After two slow movements the atmosphere is lifted in the elfin-like Scherzo. More tempo, more light and a delicate panache. The Finale theme is introduced by one note which seems to have run ahead. An original idea which is heard all through the movement, where the happy and yet remote theme is repeated again and again, until reality calls and the sonata ends with a lot of power.

*Text: Mathias Hammer*  
*English translation: Susanne Lange*

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## Igor Levit

Let one thing be absolutely clear: Igor Levit detests programme notes. He wishes them to be abolished, the sooner, the better. He can't bear the thought that while he's playing, some people are sitting in the dark, trying to read words which will lead their thoughts in one musical direction while he's playing something completely different. Because on stage, every performance is different.

But nevertheless – here are some facts: Igor Levit was born in 1987 in Gorki (now Nizhny Novgorod), but moved to Germany in 1995 with his family. His mother, who was a piano teacher, was his first teacher. She was a student of Heinrich Neuhaus, and in this way her son seems to be a “pianistic” great-grandchild of the same Neuhaus and a true scion of the great Russian piano school. But Levit denies this heritage entirely, despite its status in the eyes of the world. Except for his mother, his teachers have all been German, and he's not part of the Russian piano tradition.

So before we even start listening, Levit has already discarded all traditions which programme notes normally like to underline, and renounced all claims to be part of the Russian piano aristocracy. His debut on CD was with Beethoven's five last piano sonatas on a double-CD – something he should only have been able to do after a long life in the service of music. But not only does he get away with all these violations of tradition and decorum, they only consolidate his position as the young piano genius of today from whom you may expect everything, with or without piano.

So how do you end up in such an enviable position so quickly (besides having an

enormous talent and working like mad)? Well, you have to have luck as well. In this case the volcano Eyjafjallajökull played an important part in the launching of young Levit. As you may remember it erupted in 2010 and more or less stopped the international air traffic. At this time Levit – who was still a young student – was in China for the International Music Week. He couldn't get home and a lot of other pianists couldn't get out there, so he ended up with playing a lot of concerts, also taking over concerts for other pianist, including chamber music and lied-recitals. (Sight reading was a passion for Levit from an early age. Instead of practising he would grab a score from his parents' music shelf, and play everything - string quartets, symphonies, operas – on the piano).

The gods of PR also had the music critic from Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung be stranded during the Chinese Music Week. She heard all Levit's marathon- programmes, and back in Germany she wrote a long and praising article. Here the world could read about a young, unknown musician, who not only had everything needed to become one of the century's great pianists, but who actually already was one.

When Levit arrived in China, he was 23 years old, still a student, with no CD in his luggage, but with thousands of ideas of what he wanted to do with his life as a musician. One hundred thousand cancelled flights later he had that flying start, which probably will enable him to achieve all of them.

*Text: Ulrik Damgaard Andersen  
English translation: Susanne Lange*