Programme Notes

Chaconne J.S.Bach arr. Ferruccio Busoni (1866 – 1924)

The practice of presenting music of the past with an eye (and sometimes a very keen eye) on how the composer himself might have heard it is barely a century old. Before that time, it seemed natural, even beneficial, to present old music in line with current performing conventions: baroque choral works intended for performance by small, nimble ensembles were presented by vast choirs and orchestras employing instruments the original composers had never encountered, using heavily edited editions and in thoroughly romantic style. To do otherwise would not have entered the 19th century musical mind. Thus we find a very great musician such as Busoni feeling quite free to recreate large amounts of the music of Bach for the piano (his own instrument) completely rewritten in terms of late 19th century practice. Of the seven volumes of music of this type which he published, the version of the chaconne in D minor originally written for solo violin is almost the only one heard today.

‘Au lac de’ Wallenstadt’ & ‘Au bord d’une source’ Franz Liszt (1811 – 1886)

The inspiration behind much of the music we shall hear tonight is water. We begin with the acknowledged giant of 19th century pianism Franz Liszt and the first of his three collections entitled ‘Years of Pilgrimage’. Liszt’, an inveterate traveller, explained the thinking behind the series as a whole: “Having recently travelled to many new countries… and felt the phenomena of nature… I have tried to portray in music a few of my strongest sensations”. These two pieces come from ‘Volume 1: Switzerland’ composed between 1848 and 1854 and inspired by a visit some fifteen years earlier. The first describes a specific location, the second is simply a genre piece. Seeing himself as a musical representative of the romantic movement which was informing so much general artistic activity at the time, Liszt attaches quotations from leading literary figures of the day: to the first, from Byron’s ‘Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage’ – “Thy contrasted lake/ With the wild world I dwell in is a thing/ Which warns me, with its stillness, to forsake/ earth’s troubled waters for a purer spring” and to the second a line from Schiller – “In the whispering coolness begins young nature’s play”.

‘Waves’ Yuanfan Yang

Barcarolle No.1 in A minor Opus 26 Gabriel Fauré (1845 – 1924)

Barcarolle in F# Opus 60 Frédéric Chopin (1810 – 1849)

Originally barcarolles were songs sung by Venetian gondoliers but a number of composers have applied the name to any piece in a lilting compound time. Fauré composed no fewer than thirteen barcarolles spanning almost the whole of his composing career, but it is known that he only used generic titles of this sort at the insistence of his publisher; he would have been happier to refer to them simply as piano pieces, identified by their opus numbers. This, the first of the series, was composed in 1880 and premiered two years later by Fauré’s teacher and subsequently good friend Camille Saint-Saëns.

Chopin’s only barcarolle was written some three years before his death and is one of his last major compositions. That this was the period not only of the stormy breakup of his long relationship with the authoress Geoge Sand but also the ever tighter grip of tuberculosis helps to explain the wide spectrum of emotion encompassed in this single movement.

Carnaval Opus 9 Robert Schumann (1810 – 1856)

We are back on dry land with this early work by Schumann, composed at a time when, although muscular problems in his right hand had put paid to his original intention of becoming a virtuoso pianist, the compositions which were beginning to monopolise his time and energy were still nearly all for the piano. It is also the case that his works so far were all either single movements or collections of short pieces although in the year (1835) which saw the completion of ‘Carnaval’ he also produced his first piano sonata. Unlike Fauré, Schumann was only too keen to give his works descriptive titles which often helped to give overall shape to what might seem like a random collection of short pieces.

Superficially this is just what ‘Carnaval’ seems to be; twenty-one pieces hardly any more than two minutes in length. But below the surface Schumann uses several devices to weld these miniatures into a coherent whole. For one thing the titles he gives to the movements all converge in the idea of the masked ball (which often formed part of carnival celebrations) and those who might be found there: friends, acquaintances, colleagues (Paganini and Chopin make brief appearances), characters from commedia del’arte – all are found here in brief vignettes. But the rambling structure is further braced by the exhaustive use of a succession of four notes sometimes on the surface of the music, sometimes buried deep in the texture, sometimes ‘straight’, sometimes in altered form. It is, after all, a masked ball. There is an even more obscure unifying feature in that the four note motif is made up of the musical letters in his own name which also happen to spell the birthplace of his current girlfriend. But knowledge of all this is only of background interest – we should sit back and enjoy the fruits of an ever-fertile musical imagination at work through the medium of masterly keyboard technique.

Improvisation was once an indispensable part of the musician’s technique. Bach and Beethoven are just two figures from the past whom we know to have been highly gifted extemporisers; indeed Beethoven often included lengthy improvisations in his public recitals. Nowadays we are most likely to hear playing of this type either in the cathedral or in the jazz club. There are, however, exceptions to this general trend and tonight’s player is renowned for his skill in this field. So I can now lay down my pen…

That Edinburgh-born Yuanfan Yang was destined to make his mark in the musical world seemed more than likely when he achieved ABRSM Grade 8 piano with distinction at the age of eight. He went on to study at both the Royal Academy and the Royal College of Music and very quickly began a career which has taken him all round the world at first as participant in competitions (many of which he won) and increasingly as a performer, playing both as a soloist and in concerto performances with leading orchestras and conductors. He has also made his mark as a composer with several major works broadcast and recorded.