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ZEE ZEE

Thursday 15 February, 7.30pm
Djanogly Recital Hall

Trois Romances, Op 11

Clara Schumann

Faschingsschwank Aus Wien
(Carnival Scenes from Vienna), Op.26

Robert Schumann

Interval

Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel, Op 24

Johannes Brahms

Please ensure all mobile phones are switched off. Photographs and videos of the performance are not permitted.

There is a Sennheiser Infrared enhanced hearing system in the Djanogly Recital Hall, please ask for a headset from our front-of-house staff.

PROGRAMME NOTES

Trois Romances, Op.11

Clara Schumann (1819-1896)

Making her public solo debut at the age of eleven, Clara Wieck went on to become one of the most distinguished pianists of her day, in solo, chamber and concerto repertoire. Her father, Friedrich Wieck, was a renowned piano teacher, and carefully groomed his daughter for the life of a concert soloist. She made several tours of Europe as a child, and was admired by musicians as prominent as Mendelssohn and Liszt.

Robert Schumann came to study with Wieck in 1828, and Wieck viewed the growing affection between him and Clara with increasing alarm. His doubts about Robert's character and career prospects, combined with his belief that domestic responsibilities would ruin Clara's own career, led him to put every obstacle in their way that he could think of. They were finally able to marry in 1840, after a prolonged legal battle to proceed without Wieck's consent.

Her concert appearances became more sporadic after their marriage, but following Robert's death she abandoned composition, and devoted more time to performing, including several visits to London, and teaching, both privately and at the Leipzig and Frankfurt Conservatories; she became head of the piano department at Frankfurt in 1878. As well championing her husband's music, she was one of the first leading pianists to bring Chopin's work to a wider audience. She also played Brahms's music extensively when he was still establishing his reputation, and the two remained close friends until her death.

Her compositions are mostly for solo piano, but also include three groups of songs and a youthful piano concerto. In spite of her many appearances in chamber music – she played Beethoven's 'Archduke' Trio at the age of fifteen, Robert Schumann's Piano Quintet was a mainstay of her repertoire, and she had a regular duo partnership with the violinist Joseph Joachim – she produced just two chamber works of her own: Three Romances for violin and piano, Op 22, and her G minor Piano Trio of 1846.

Her Three Romances, Op.11, were written in 1838 and 1839, during a visit to Paris, and were published in Vienna the following year, with a dedication to Robert (a second set of Three Romances for piano, Op 21, followed in 1851-3). In this context 'romance' means a short, simple instrumental piece in a song-like style. .

1. E flat minor; Andante. This was the last of the three to be written, a flowing, somewhat melancholy piece, whose mood lightens for a while in the major-key central section.

2. G minor; Andante – allegro passionato – tempo wie Anfang (tempo as at the beginning). Robert Schumann published this separately in 1839, with the title 'Andante und Allegro', in a supplement to the music journal he edited. In the outer sections, the gently lyrical theme is continually nudged forward by the off-the-beat accompanying chords. The central section is quicker and sunnier in feeling, but it ends with hesitant, detached phrases which lead into the return of the opening music.

3. A flat; Moderato – animato. As Clara herself commented, this is "more a waltz than a nocturne." The central section is less of a contrast than those of the first two Romances, and when the opening music returns, the ending is understated and remarkably succinct.

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Faschingsschwank aus Wien
(Carnival Scenes from Vienna), Op.26

Robert Schumann
(1810-56)

Allegro
Romanze
Scherzino
Intermezzo
Finale

The late 1830s were a time of new chances and dashed hopes for Robert Schumann. In 1838, Clara Wieck – to whom Robert had become secretly engaged the previous year – enjoyed a superbly successful first visit to Vienna, and Robert made plans to establish himself in the Austrian capital so that they might eventually live there together. Full of optimism, he set off for Vienna in October 1838 (by the time he arrived he had lost his hat and torn his trousers en route!), and tried to make arrangements with local publishers and musical organisations. It soon became clear that such a relocation would be far more difficult than he had imagined; he was considerably less well-known than Clara, and his compositions were considered too esoteric and difficult for Viennese publishers to take an interest. He left in April 1839, the same month in which the battle with Clara's father truly began, and rapidly descended into drawn-out legal proceedings as the couple sought to gain permission to marry.

However, the Viennese sojourn was not a complete loss, and among several compositions begun during this period was *Faschingsschwank* – a piece which is rather more consciously popular than many of Schumann's early piano miniatures. Although 'Carnival pranks' is also the subtitle of *Carnaval* Op.9 (1834–5), here the party atmosphere is rather less kaleidoscopic, with swinging melodies that allow us to 'look' at the dancers for rather longer than the brief vignettes of *Carnaval* allow. The opening movement of *Faschingsschwank* is the longest, a boisterous opening chordal melody giving way to a succession of musical episodes and interruptions, including a slightly tipsy interjection from the *Marseillaise*. Even in this populist vein, however, there are some unusual dissonances and brilliant quick-changes from the rondo-like theme to more lyrical material. The *Romanze* seems positively heartbroken after such a jolly introduction, although there is some major-key consolation to be had in the midst of this yearning little movement. We are returned to the jaunty energy of the opening in the *Scherzino*; and then leave it behind for an impassioned *Intermezzo*, song-like in its lyrical intensity. (Since there is not an obvious narrative for *Faschingsschwank*, it seems likely that this mix of moods and textures was intended in part to appeal to amateur pianists of varying ability, as well as to listeners.) The *Finale* soon reveals itself to be not a simple character piece, but a sonata form movement with a beautifully lyrical second subject which seems redolent of late Schubert. And indeed, one of the highlights of Schumann's ill-fated Viennese venture was a meeting with Ferdinand Schubert, the composer's brother who had inherited so many of his manuscripts, and Schumann's discovery of the Great C Major Symphony which, thanks to his efforts, was given its first performance in Leipzig under the baton of Felix Mendelssohn in 1839.

By the mid-nineteenth century, interest among German musicians in the music of the Baroque period had gathered considerable momentum. For Brahms, whose sense of history often weighed heavily on his shoulders, the music of Bach and Handel, in particular, played a major part in consolidating his own compositional technique.

In 1854 he produced a group of piano pieces modelled on baroque dance forms – a pair each of gigue, sarabandes and gavottes. They were not published in his lifetime, but he went on to explore baroque models in the set of variations that forms the second movement of his B flat String Sextet, completed in 1860. The same year he arranged the movement for piano. Whether or not that was a conscious act of preparation, he composed the *Variations and Fugue on a Theme by Handel* the following year, intending it as a birthday present for Clara Schumann (the manuscript is headed 'Variations for a beloved friend'). He gave the first performance in Hamburg in November 1861; Clara gave the second a month later.

The theme is the Air which forms the basis of the set of variations concluding Handel's Suite in B flat, HWV 434, the first in the second book of his keyboard suites, published in 1733. Brahms' exploration of virtuoso keyboard technique is matched by his skill in uniting the different moods and textures into a convincing overall design. Handel's theme is in two halves, each half repeated (the so-called 'binary form' often found in baroque instrumental music), and the twenty-five variations follow this pattern.

In Variations 1-12, Brahms makes a feature of the contrast from one variation to the next – the delicate third variation followed by the more robust Variation 4, the flowing two-part counterpoint between the two hands in Variation 6, and the bouncy, playful No 7, the ninth variation's sustained lines and the capricious No 10, to give just three examples.

Following the gently ruminative twelfth variation, Variation 13 marks the half-way point, turning the theme into a solemn march, with occasional flourishes which hint at the Hungarian gypsy style Brahms loved so much. The remaining variations rely less on contrast, more on a smoother overall contour, from quick and lively to gracefully intimate, a progress interrupted only by the quietly frisky No 19. This, and Variation 22 with its high-lying figuration suggesting a musical box, pay additional homage to the French composer François Couperin (1668-1733), two of whose books of harpsichord pieces Brahms edited. The last three variations steadily increase the tension, preparing the way for the concluding fugue. Conceived on a grand scale, this is a nod towards both Bach, in its intricate textures, and Beethoven, whose own 'Eroica' and 'Diabelli' Variations culminate in fugues.

The result is one of Brahms' finest piano works. Even Wagner – figure-head of all that was revolutionary in German music in the mid- to late-nineteenth century – was impressed, saying that it showed "what may still be done with the old forms, provided that someone appears who knows how to treat them."

ZEE ZEE

Piano

An imaginative and electrifying performer, Zee Zee, is unique among the young generation of pianists. Described as “full of enthusiasm and glamour, radiating the vigor of youth” (Chinese Gramophone), her interpretations and communicative abilities have been praised as “taking us to another reality... bright, expressive and moving to the extreme” (Belgischer Rundfunk), while her creative maturity has been hailed as “a powerful, passionate and compelling representation of pure artistry” (Los Angeles Times).

In the 23-24 season, Zee Zee returns to the BBC National Orchestra of Wales, Ulster Orchestra, Borusan Istanbul Philharmonic, Tucson Symphony Orchestra, Wigmore Hall, and Macao International Music Festival, among others. She will play with the Armenian State Symphony Orchestra, Oxford Philharmonic, Szczecin Philharmonic, and at Concertgebouw, Prague Spring Festival, Parnu Music Festival, Minnesota Beethoven Festival, InClassica Dubai International Music Festival among others. She will also play the season-opening concerts of both China Philharmonic and Shanghai Symphony Orchestra.

Highlights in the recent seasons include the season-opening concert with the Estonian National Symphony under Neeme Järvi, with the Philharmonia orchestra at the Royal Festival Hall, and a tour in the UK under Paavo Järvi, Three times with the Hong Kong Philharmonic under Christoph Koncz, Paavo Järvi, and Yu Long respectively, as well as the complete piano concertos of Beethoven and of Saint-Saëns with the Shanghai Symphony Orchestra. She gave recitals at the Aspen Music Festival, Brevard Summer Music Festival, Lucerne Festival, Casa da Musica in Porto, Esplanade in Singapore, and Premiere Performance Hong Kong, among others.

In the past seasons, Zee Zee performed with leading orchestras worldwide including the BBC Symphony, BBC Philharmonic, BBC National Orchestra of Wales, London Philharmonic, Royal Liverpool Philharmonic, Philharmonia Orchestra, Belgian National Orchestra, Sinfonieorchester Basel, Tonhalle Orchestra Zurich, Borusan Istanbul Philharmonic, RTÉ Concert Orchestra, Macedonian Symphony, Warsaw Philharmonic, Janacek Philharmonic, Slovakia Philharmonic, Kristiansand Symphony, Turku Philharmonic, NHK Symphony, Hong Kong Philharmonic, Royal Bangkok Symphony, Los Angeles Philharmonic, San Francisco Symphony, Minnesota Symphony, Cincinnati Symphony, Seattle Symphony, Pasadena Symphony, Jacksonville Symphony, Pacific Symphony, Hawaii Symphony, among others. Zee Zee was a BBC New Generation Artist from 2013-2015 and performed at the Royal Albert Hall as a part of the BBC Proms.

Zee Zee has given a number of notable recitals, including at the Wigmore Hall in London, De Doelen in Rotterdam, Kennedy Center in Washington DC, Lincoln Center in New York, Vancouver Recital Society, and Hong Kong’s Premiere Performances, and has appeared at festivals such as MiTo Festival, the Gilmore Festival, Aspen Music Festival, Ravinia Festival, Brevard Music Center Summer Festival, Klavier-Festival Ruhr, Lucerne Festival, Biarritz Piano Festival and the SJE Arts Series in Oxford.

She regularly works with some of today’s leading conductors, including Marin Alsop, Jonathan Bloxham, Lionel Bringuier, Charles Dutoit, Alondra de la Parra, Domingo Hindoyan, Paavo Järvi, Neeme Järvi, Christoph Koncz, Michał Nesterowicz, Jun Märkl, Julian Rachlin, Yan Pascal Tortelier, Roberto Trevino and Xian Zhang.

A passionate chamber musician, Zee Zee is a founding member of the Z.E.N. Trio, alongside violinist Esther Yoo and cellist Narek Hakhnazaryan. The trio released their first album featuring works from Brahms and Dvorak in 2017, and the second album featuring Shostakovich, Babadjanian, and Rachmaninov in 2019, both under Deutsche Gramophone. They tour regularly throughout the world, including the first highly acclaimed tour in North America in October 2019 with presenters such as San Francisco Performances, The Phillips Collection, Vancouver Recital Society, a 10-concert-tour in Australia with Musica Viva in August 2022, and Europe tours in May & November 2024.

Zee Zee is the founder and the artistic director of the Z+ international music festival, which takes place annually in Spring in Shanghai. As one of the biggest and most acclaimed chamber music festivals in Asia, she is in charge of its strategy, vision, and programming, cooperating with the best musicians around the world while contributing to the local community. The Artists performing at the festival in April 2024 include Narek Hakhnazaryan, Clara-Jumi Kang, Sunwook Kim, Yura Lee, Ning Feng, Louis Schwizgebel, Julian Steckel, Esther Yoo, Haochen Zhang, and Diotima Quartet.

In October 2019, Universal released her first album under Deutsche Gramophone, featuring Ravel's Piano Concerto in G and Liszt's Piano Concerto No. 2 with Paavo Järvi and the Philharmonia Orchestra, the second one, a solo album <journey> under Decca Classics featuring works from Wagner, Schönberg, and Liszt is released in May 2022.

Zee Zee began her musical training in Berlin, Germany at the age of five and soon became one of the most sought-after young artists of her generation. Having completed her piano studies with Dan Zhaoyi at the Shenzhen Arts School, Zee Zee continued her artistic development under the mentorship of Nelita True at the Eastman School of Music and Yoheved Kaplinsky and Robert McDonald at The Juilliard School, where she won the coveted Petschek Piano Award. Zee Zee was awarded first prize at China's 1st International Piano Concerto Competition, the Gina Bachauer International Artists Piano Competition, and the Krainev International Piano Competition. She was also a prizewinner at the 2013 Queen Elizabeth Competition. She has studied at the Peabody Institute with Leon Fleisher and continues to receive guidance from Alfred Brendel. She is currently based in Berlin and New York.