

Frédéric Chopin [1810 – 1849]
Scherzo No. 2 in B-flat minor, Op. 31 (1837)

Meaning “joke” in Italian, scherzos are generally known for their humour and levity, typically appearing as the third movement within a sonata. Only with Beethoven did the scherzo sometimes gain a different expression: full of anxiety and unbridled energy, almost demonic. Chopin’s scherzos took on this drama while expanding the form, alluding to the dualism of sonata form or to elements of the rondo. The startling juxtaposition of terror and tragedy against elegance and lyricism carries through the work. The opening gesture, which Chopin described as “a house of the dead”, is answered immediately by thundering chords. Virtuoso figurations give way to a soaring melody in D-flat major, almost like a fantasy. A quieter chorale-like section follows, providing a little respite from the turbulence. The tranquility does not last, as the chorale transforms into a sombre theme in F-sharp minor. The mood becomes increasingly agitated by the triplet flourishes underneath, which lead to a bright passage of arpeggios in E major. Despite the title, the music spends little time in B-flat minor. The harmonic changes are as volatile as the contrasts in emotions. Schumann compared this scherzo to a Byronic poem, “overflowing with tenderness, boldness, love and contempt.”

Domenico Scarlatti [1685 – 1787]
Sonata in E-flat major, k. 474, Sonata in B-flat major, k. 551 (1756)

Scarlatti is remembered for some 555 keyboard sonatas, mostly written while he served as court composer in Portugal and Spain. This was before the multi-movement Classical sonata form emerged in the mid-18th century, and the Baroque ‘sonata’ loosely referred to any work that was played by a solo instrument. Scarlatti’s sonatas were miniature gems full of character and nuance. K. 474 is introspective and lyrical, with some rather innovative harmonic progressions for his time. By contrast, k. 551 is quirky and energetic, showing influences of Iberian folk music.

Clara Wieck-Schumann [1819 – 1896]
Sonata in G minor (1841-42)

- i. *Allegro*
- ii. *Adagio*
- iii. *Scherzo*
- iv. *Rondo*

Considered one of the most distinguished pianists of the Romantic era, Clara Schumann's qualities as a composer are often overlooked. This work was her sole attempt at writing a sonata and marked a turning point in her development as a pianist and composer. However, it was never premiered or published till 1989 and 1991 respectively, and she had left the final movement unannotated. As there are limited literature and recordings of the work, it presents challenges and opportunities for the modern pianist. At a glance, this work seems to share many parallels in structure to Robert Schumann's sonata in the same key. The music, however, exhibits a very individual personality from that of her husband's freneticism.

Clara Schumann strikes a balance between fiery passion and poised restraint. The suspenseful opening of the *Allegro* leads to intricate contrapuntal writing that shows the influence of Bach's fugues, Beethoven's symphonies and Mendelssohn's string quartets. The development section is reminiscent of Chopin-esque lyrical virtuosity, while showing Clara Schumann's innovative treatment of harmony and texture. The second movement is beautifully succinct and features a quotation of Robert Schumann's *Schlummerlied* (Lullaby). The next movement is probably the most fetching, enveloped by a sprightly *Scherzo* that contrasts the elegiac tone of the middle *Trio*. The lively, virtuosic *Rondo* bears thematic references to the *Allegro*, revealing Clara Schumann's mastery of formal design and her ability to shape charming details. It is a pity that the sonata has spent decades in a drawer, for it shows Clara Schumann's mastery of the piano.

Unsuik Chin [b. 1961]
Piano Etude No. 6 'Grains' (2000)

Born in Seoul, Chin spent three years studying in Hamburg with the Hungarian composer Ligeti. After settling in Berlin, she continued to write music that evoked a world between worlds: between Asian and Euro-American, between female and male, between present and past. Unlike the other works in tonight's programme, 'Grains' is not music as autobiography or self-expression. Rather, it is a projection of gestures, fantasy, and wit through iridescent sound. Various motivic ideas unfurl and evolve like fractal-style fragments, scattering across the extreme registers of the keyboard. The insistent G-sharp in the middle of the piano is the only constant element.

Thomas Adès [b. 1971]
Darknesse Visible (1992)

*In darknesse let mee dwell / the ground shall sorrow be
The rooffe Dispaire to barre / all cheerful light from mee
The wals of marble blacke / that moistned still shall weepe
My musicke hellish jarring sounds / to banish friendly sleepe.
Thus wedded to my woes, and bedded to my Tombe / O let
me living die till death doe come.*

Although Darknesse Visible was written in 1992, its melodic and harmonic material was derived from a much older source – the Renaissance. Adès describes the work as “an explosion of John Dowland's lute song *In Darknesse Let Mee Dwell* (1610), as quoted above. Patterns latent in the original have been isolated and regrouped, with the aim of illuminating the song from within. The ceaseless, single-key tremolo creates a surreal, shimmering texture. The sound is drawn out of the piano, eliminating the percussive nature of the instrument. The original melody is still recognisable, but displaced over the entire range of the keyboard, sometimes across three voices. The resulting effect is magical and exploits the modern piano's sonorities and the sostenuto pedal.

Robert Schumann [1810-1856]
Sonata No. 2 in G minor (1830-38)

- i. *So rasch wie möglich*
- ii. *Andantino. Getragen*
- iii. *Scherzo. Sehr rasch und markiert*
- iv. *Rondo. Presto*

“I am endlessly looking forward to the second sonata”, Clara wrote to Robert in 1838, “Your whole being is so clearly expressed in it.” Nonetheless she encouraged him to revise the last movement, as it was too difficult to play and for audiences to understand. Of Schumann’s three piano sonatas, the G minor is by far the most concise, and pianistically very demanding. Typical of his style and personality, the sonata combines frenetic intensity with moments of rapt tenderness. It claims our attention right away with the first chord. The opening theme, which is imitated in the bass, uses the partial descending scale that became Clara Schumann’s motto in many of his piano works, an expression of his yearning when they were unable to be together. Apart from a few brief moments of serenity from the second theme, the first movement is relentlessly forward-moving. Originally a song he had written when he was eighteen, the charming *Andantino* offers respite from the frenzy of the first movement. The *Scherzo* shows a little witty humour with its snappy rhythms and syncopation, with some nervous energy foreshadowing the next and final movement. In his writings, Schumann had commonly referred to himself as Florestan or Eusebius – imaginary personae he created that represented respectively the fiery, passionate side and the sweet, introverted side of his personality. This duality is most effective in the *Rondo*. The extensive use of broken octaves evokes his restlessness and often verges on insanity. Yet, the madness gives way to the magical and slower second subject, where the ‘Clara motto’ makes reappearances. Eventually, the music works up to a feverish climax and a dramatic pause over a diminished seventh chord. The ensuing cadenza whips up like a gust of wind, bringing the sonata to an electric end.