

ASHLEY WASS, piano

7.30pm Oundle School Great Hall



32 Variations in C minor, WoO 80

Andante Favori in F major, WoO 57

Ludwig van Beethoven (1770-1827)

The 'Thirty-two Variations on an Original Theme' were written in 1806 and published in Vienna in the following year. The brief theme and the variations make up, in fact, a chaconne, a treatment of the traditional Baroque variation form in a manner characteristic of Beethoven in its use of novel textures, a wide range of the keyboard and innovative rhythms. The more extended final version of the theme opens with a passage in cross-rhythms, leading, in a triplet semiquaver right-hand sequence, to a chromatically decorated upper part and a conclusion that brings its own various surprises of dynamics, rhythms and texture.

Two years earlier, in 1804, Beethoven composed one of his most popular Piano Sonatas, the Sonata in C major, Op. 53, otherwise known as the 'Waldstein'. Upon completion, one of his colleagues

suggested that the slow movement, a graceful andante in F major, was too long, a notion he at first rejected but subsequently accepted. As a result, a new movement was written, and the original became a concert piece in its own right, to be known as the 'Andante Favori'. It is a beautiful miniature masterpiece and was frequently performed by the composer, to whose style of performance it was well suited, with its elegant gestures and lyrical melody.

Twelve Preludes for piano solo William Alwyn (1905-1985)

The 'Twelve Preludes' were composed in London between April and June 1958. At this time Alwyn was experimenting with short note groups each with a strong tonal centre. A different group of notes is used for each Prelude. Each of the Preludes conveys varying moods exploring different areas of piano technique. The first is dreamy and reflective, the second turbulent and dramatic with a subdued and mysterious ending; the third is simple and quiet, the fourth a study in rapid finger technique. The fifth is an elegy in memory of the New Zealand pianist Richard Farrell who was tragically killed in car accident. The sixth prelude is a very intense powerful study in rapid chordal writing, the seventh is meditative, suggesting the sounds of distant bells. The eighth is quiet and pastoral in mood, the ninth has an elusive nature drifting away to nothingness. The tenth is intended as a study in delicacy of touch, the brief eleventh is peaceful in mood and is based on three notes (Db, Eb and F); the twelfth is powerful and dramatic, bringing the work to a jubilant close.

Interval

Sonetto 47 del Petrarca Franz Liszt (1811-1886)

Sonetto 104 del Petrarca

Sonetto 123 del Petrarca

During the 1830s Liszt embarked on a series of travels through Switzerland and Italy with his mistress, the Countess Marie d'Agoult. A daily diet of Alpine splendour, art and literature provided a stimulus from which emerged the composer's first important original works: the first two books of 'Années de Pèlerinage' (*Première Année: Suisse and Deuxième Année: Italie*). As was typical of Liszt, many of these pieces appeared in a number of versions before being published in their final form, refined and clarified.

The three Petrarch Sonnets form the expressive core of the 'Deuxième Année: Italie' and must surely rank among Liszt's most beautiful creations. Originally composed as vocal settings in 1838, their transformation into piano solos of the utmost perfection was not completed until 1858. They are ultra-Romantic idealisations of the work of a 14th century poet - examples of the composer's remarkable talent for transfiguration and expressive speculation. Respectively they celebrate earthly love ('blessed be the day, the month and the year'), unrequited passion ('war I cannot wage, yet I find no peace') and divine radiance ('I saw on earth angelic grace').

Enigma Variations (arr. for piano by the composer)

Edward Elgar (1857-1934)

The puzzle of the title of the Enigma Variations, of which Elgar also provided a piano version, lies in the fact that he claimed that his theme would fit with a very well known melody, but rejected suggestions that this might be 'God Save the Queen' or 'Auld Lang Syne'. Others have suggested 'Rule Britannia', which might fit, if taken in fragments, but in general the enigma remains just that.

Each of the variations that Elgar offers is given the initials of one of his friends, and their identities are well enough known. Variation 1 is Elgar's wife Alice, a gracious woman of some determination; Variation 2 is the amateur pianist Stewart-Powell; Variation 3 is the writer Richard Townsend; Variation 4 is the solid country landowner W M Baker; Variation 5 is the son of the poet and writer Matthew Arnold, Richard; Variation 6 is the viola-player Isabel Fitton; Variation 7 is the ebullient architect Troyte Griffith; Variation 8 is the graceful Winifred Norbury; Variation 9, Nimrod, conceals the identity of Elgar's friend and publisher, Jaeger; Variation 10, Dorabella, is Dora Penny, a country neighbour; Variation 11 is the organist of Hereford Cathedral, Dr Sinclair, or, more exactly, his dog Dan, heard jumping into the river and paddling ashore; Variation 12 represents Basil Nevinson, an amateur cellist; Variation 13 is anonymous but probably conceals Lady Mary Lygon, with a reference to Mendelssohn's Overture 'Calm Sea and Prosperous Voyage' hinting at her voyage to Australia, and the final Variation 14 is Elgar himself.

Ashley Wass is recognised as one of the rising stars of his generation. Only the second British pianist in twenty years to

reach the finals of the Leeds Piano Competition (in 2000), he was the first British pianist ever to win the top prize at the World Piano Competition in 1997. Ashley Wass studied at Chetham's Music School and won a scholarship to the Royal Academy of Music to study with Christopher Elton and Hamish Milne. His concerto performances have included Beethoven and Brahms with the Philharmonia, Mendelssohn with the Orchestre National de Lille and Mozart with the Vienna Chamber Orchestra. Other notable engagements have included several visits to the BBC Scottish Symphony Orchestra and the Philharmonia, hugely successful debuts with the Hong Kong Philharmonic, Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra, BBC National Orchestra of Wales (a performance of Brahms 1st Concerto that was voted 'Best of 2004 - BBC Radio 3 Performance') and the BBC Symphony Orchestra, and numerous recitals throughout the UK and abroad. Ashley is also much in demand as a chamber musician and earlier this year toured the USA and Europe with violinist Sarah Chang.

Bar open before the recital and during the interval.

