

GIVING VOICE

Beethoven, York Bowen,
Brahms, Medtner
27 April | 6pm
Tay Shu Wen, piano
YST Concert Hall, Free Admission

Programme Notes

BEETHOVEN

Piano Sonata No. 26 in E-flat Major, Op. 81a, *“Das Lebewohl”*

- i. Das Lebewohl
- ii. Abwesenheit
- iii. Das Wiedersehen

YORK BOWEN

Toccata in A minor, Op. 155

- Intermission –

BRAHMS

Three Intermezzi, Op. 117

- i. Andante moderato (E-flat Major)
- ii. Andante non troppo e con molto espressione (B-flat minor)
- iii. Andante con moto (C-sharp minor)

MEDTNER

From *Forgotten Melodies, Second Cycle*,
Sonata Tragica, Op. 39 No. 5

About the Performer

Shu Wen is a fourth-year Singaporean pianist studying under Professor Albert Tiu at the Yong Siew Toh Conservatory of Music. She is most inspired making music as a soloist and in collaborative ensembles. An exponent of local compositions, she has premiered pieces by composers including Tai Yun-Ming (*His Wings*) and Cliff Tan (*Lapis*). She has won numerous prizes, including the First Prize at the Asia Youth Piano Competition (Open Category) in 2016, and the Dakademy Scholarship Award (Best Performer) at the 7th Singapore Performers' Festival in 2018, following her performance of Schumann's *Abegg Variations*. Featured on the Virtual Young Artist Concert Series in the 2020 edition of Bowdoin International Music Festival, she also participated in 2021, where she studied with Professor Julian Martin. She has had the chance to work with renowned pianists, such as Arnaldo Cohen, Lars Vogt, Kirill Gerstein and Dean Kramer, in masterclasses. Recent notable collaborations and concerts include chamber concerts featuring Vaughan Williams Piano Quintet in c minor, Brahms Cello Sonata in E minor, Schubert's *Arpeggione Sonata* and Trout Quintet in completion. As a musician, she has a soft spot for making music inclusive for the community, and organized a multi-sensory concert, entitled "Deep Blue Sea", for children with autism spectrum disorder, together with her schoolmates, in 2018.

About 'Giving Voice'...

In my fourth year, I started thinking more about exploring outside the boundaries of standard repertoire, which seemed to only encompass certain composers. Here, in this recital, I am placing Medtner and York Bowen, who are less represented and less played, next to Beethoven and Brahms, who often form the crux of many programmes. In doing so, I hope for audiences, performers, listeners and critics to view their music as equals, giving and lending an avenue to their voices.

This foray outside of the box may just be a small one, but the process also guided me in finding my identity and giving my voice space to grow and develop. Here's wishing that everyone is given the opportunity to sing and speak in their own unique voice.

Programme Notes

Ludwig Van Beethoven (1770-1827)

Piano Sonata No. 26 in E-flat Major, Op. 81a, “*Das Lebewohl*”

If Beethoven’s *Pastoral Symphony* is the composer’s initial attempt at writing music that is “more the expression of feeling than painting”, then “***Das Lebewohl***” must be a refinement and continuation along that line of programmatic thinking.

It is well-known that this sonata, whose title translates into “The Farewell”, was written with Archduke Rudolf in mind, a patron and student of Beethoven’s, whose aristocratic status had him fleeing Vienna, as a result of Napoleon’s invasion. Completed from 1809-1810, the sonata references the Archduke’s forced evacuation, and details Beethoven’s emotional journey upon the loss of his good friend, who promised the composer with lifetime annuity.

The opening of the sonata outlines the infamous three broken syllables of the word “*Le-be-wohl*”, meaning “Fare-thee-well”. This beginning horn motif in the *Adagio* introduction forms the thematic basis for the entire work. Shoved into the business of departure, the motif is then inverted in the accompaniment figure of the left-hand under the turbulent right-hand octave leaps. A treacherous passage leads us into a more obvious restatement of this motif, before transitioning and metamorphosing into a lyrical and expressive version at the higher register. Thereafter, the music wanders into the minor mode and gets increasingly sparse and empty, before returning to the opening material. The coda is Beethoven’s final farewell, with the motif manipulated through displacement and fragmentation, before ending strongly.

The second movement is marked *Abwesenheit*, which means “The Absence”, and portrays the sad and dark emotions of Beethoven missing his dearest friend. Much of the piece is built on harmonies of the diminished seventh, along with appoggiaturas, conveying a sense of emotional loss, reinforced by sighs and stabbing *sforzandos*. A beautiful passage in the major key nostalgically reflects upon happier memories, before yet another bridge of sighs leads us into the last movement, *Das Wiedersehen* (The Reunion). This starts off with frantic energy on the dominant seventh, before rejoicing in a carefree and joyfully frolicking melody that is the main theme. The music reflects the optimism and positivity that Beethoven is feeling with the prospect of his friend returning. The development section is full of surprising harmonic shifts and textural imitation. Before the piece ends, the coda suddenly switches to B-flat major, and a *poco andante* section reminisces the journey with quiet and reflective contentment, before a final outburst ends the entire party!

York Bowen (1884-1961)

Toccata in A minor, Op. 155

In many ways, York Bowen's life and public musical recognition is similar to that of Medtner's. Despite being hailed by Camille Saint-Saens as "one of the finest English composers", much of his music remains unpublished and underplayed, and he faced many waves of discouragement.

Throughout the course of music history, the *toccata* has been a common form of music used to demonstrate and showcase the finger dexterity of keyboard virtuosos, exemplified in Bach's improvisational ones to the virtuosic ones by Schumann, Prokofiev and many others. Despite their often-sizzling display of fireworks, there is much to be enjoyed musically and compositionally as well.

While this *toccata* by York Bowen may appear simply as comprising manic energy and wild pyrotechnics on the outset, he bases much of the composition on the whole-tone collection and its augmented harmonies, providing a diverse range of harmonic colour. The motivic development and manipulation are multifarious – the 7-chord main motif that barges open the piece goes through a variety of transformation in textures and keys, interspersed with different sections of varying energy levels, providing a medley of variation and a heavily-unifying figure. Through the constant perpetual motion, we get brief moments of respite and light-heartedness.

What's interesting to note also, is that the piece was written in 1957, when Bowen was 73 years old. To think that he was able to conceive of a piece with that much energy and brilliance at that age and perform it in Wigmore Hall in 1958 is truly amazing and testament to his persevering spirit dedicated to music, in spite of all adversities.

Johannes Brahms (1833-1897)

Three Intermezzi, Op. 117

In these three pieces, Clara Schumann confessed that “I at last feel musical life stir once again in my soul, and I play once more with true devotion.”

Composed in the summer of 1892, at the Austrian resort of Bad Ischl, and written together with the *Fantasien* Op. 116, the set belongs to the last bit of piano music (Op. 116-119) Brahms wrote in his life, and can possibly be viewed as the epitome of them all. It was during this time that Brahms watched as his close friends passed on one after another; a probable reason behind the melancholy and grief heard here. Perfused with much introspection and poetry, the three intermezzi were regarded at times, by the composer, as “three lullabies for my sorrows”.

The first intermezzo, in E-flat major, was prefaced by the first two lines of Johann Gottfried Herder’s translation of the Scottish ballad, ‘Lady Anne Bothwell’s Lament’.

‘Balow, my babe, lie still and sleep!

It grieves me sore to see thee weep.’

The unforgettable falling tune is gently and slowly rocked in the middle of a repeated octave span, giving it an undeniably distinct lullaby feel. The central section delves into the dark troughs of the minor mode, plumbing the depths of darkness, before the return of the tune from the beginning gives us a halo-like glow of hope.

Following it is a beautifully fluid second intermezzo in B-flat minor, that seems to begin mid-sentence. It starts with a delicate and graceful falling figure of an arpeggio motif, melting through various changes in tonality, before landing on the warm and rich second subject in D-flat major, in a miniature sonata form. The return is smuggled back intimately, before building and culminating in an outpour at the high register, eventually losing energy to end sublimely.

The third intermezzo in C-sharp minor opens in *sotto voce* with a melody in sombre and bare octaves, which picks up a restless quality as the music moves along. This theme is then carved in a variety of ways, including as an inner voice against rich harmonic movement. The contrasting middle A major section gives a sense of rocking movement and fleeting bells, providing lightness and a gleaming quality. Thereafter, the return to the opening mood is rapturously dark and poetic, with fragments of the opening motif embedded texturally within, and the coda that rounds the entire work up is tragic and depressing.

Nikolai Medtner (1880-1951)

Sonata Tragica, Op. 39 No. 5

Lauded by Rachmaninoff in 1921 as being “the greatest composer of our time”, Nikolai Medtner remains an overlooked composer whose music is underplayed. Most of this was due to his unwillingness to sell his music to the rest of the world, hence much of it remained within the walls of Russia. Nevertheless, he contributed substantially to the piano repertoire, writing in a style similar to that of his older contemporaries, Rachmaninoff and Scriabin.

Sonata Tragica is from the second cycle of what he calls “Forgotten Melodies”, written between 1918-1920. Given Medtner’s strong affinity with poetry, the term “Tragica”, suggests the music’s relation with the darker struggles and tragedies that plague later parts of life. This contrasts starkly with the positive optimism of the preceding “*Canzona matinata*” (Morning Song), which Medtner insisted the sonata be played with.

The single-movement Sonata begins with five abrupt blows of fate¹, in the dark key of C minor, springing the music into an unstoppable forward drive. Right from the onset, Medtner’s spinning and manipulation of the motifs are already so economical – often the swooning main theme is apparent in the texture, either in augmentation or diminution, either as melodic or accompaniment figures. The passion and power in the music launches us into a continuous motion of thematic development, metamorphosing the main theme into a lyrical tune (“second” subject), making the sonata mono-thematic. Here, he quotes the middle section of the *Canzona matinata*, allowing the melancholic lyricism and tranquillity to continue flowing, before the dark and gloomy opening theme returns, where he showcases complete compositional mastery of complex counterpoint, before allowing the music to build to a highly spirited and fanfare-like close of the exposition on a positive note. The opening of the development is a recitative-like announcement of the main subject in the solo bass line, and the section builds to a cacophonous mass before arriving into the recapitulation that incorporates a cadenza providing uneasy respite. The coda that follows is breathless and unrelenting, bringing to mind the second movement of Scriabin’s Second Piano Sonata, before the music comes a full circle by ending with the same blows of fate with which the sonata began.

¹Nicolas Medtner: His life and Music. Barrie Martyn. 8. 1917-1921 Revolution. Published 1995 by Scholar Press.