Sunday 22 November / 3pm

Piano Greats: Mitsuko Uchida plays Schubert

Franz Joseph Haydn (1732-1809)
Variations in F minor

Musical lives rarely fall into neat chronological divisions. Haydn's long life (for his era) and reputation as a father-figure (he was Beethoven's teacher, and even Mozart called him "Papa") leads us to picture him as a man of the mid-Eighteenth century; a predecessor (emotionally and technically) rather than a contemporary of Mozart and Schubert. It's still too easy to forget that Haydn's late music postdates Mozart's – and that when he died, Schubert had already begin his musical training

These F minor keyboard Variations date from the summer of 1793, and Haydn's first return from London to Vienna. Two beloved friends were now missing from Haydn's social circle; Mozart, dead since late 1791, and Maria Anna von Genzinger, Haydn's platonic confidante, who'd died in January 1793 aged just 38. Bear in mind that the Variations were written for Mozart's former keyboard pupil Barbara ("Babette") von Ployer, and it begins to make sense that these searching double-variations should be cast in Haydn's tragic key of F minor. And that after the variations have run their course, this concise work (which Haydn modestly – perhaps with irony – dubbed "un piccolo Divertimento") should break into a *coda* of sudden, unexpected and overwhelmingly tragic emotion.

Arnold Schoenberg (1874-1951)
Six Little Piano Pieces, Op. 19

Leicht, zart – Langsam – Sehr langsame – Rasch, aber leicht – Etwas rasch – Sehr langsam

Consider what moderation is required to express oneself so briefly. You can extend every glance out into a poem, each sigh into a novel. But to express a whole novel in a single gesture, a joy in a single indrawn breath – such concentration is only possible in proportion to the absence of self-pity.

The preface that Arnold Schoenberg contributed to Webern's *Six Bagatelles* in 1924 might also serve to introduce his own *Six Little Piano Pieces*. The date was 1911; 19 February, in fact; at a time when critical hostility in Vienna was driving Schoenberg to fall back on his inner convictions. (And his outer convictions too; later that year he left the city for Berlin).

He composed the first five of these short, intensely concentrated pieces (each between nine and seventeen bars long) on that one February day. But on 17 June 1911 – one month to the day after the death of Gustav Mahler – he returned to the pieces and added a sixth: slow, intensely quiet and marked *mit sehr zarten ausdruck* (With very tender expression). He made it clear to his circle of friends and pupils that this was his tribute to Mahler – music (in his own words) that would "only be understood by those who believe that through sound, something that can only be expressed in sound can be said".

Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart (1756-1791)
Rondo in A minor, K. 511

"My kind of music is too popular for me not to be able to make a living", wrote Mozart to his father Leopold from Vienna in June 1781: "This here is a true piano-land!". Mozart's prowess at the keyboard made him a celebrity after he moved to Vienna in 1781, and he was famed as an improviser – the defining accomplishment for any 18th century virtuoso. When composing piano music, Mozart often sketched only the beginning, knowing that he'd be able to supply the remainder quickly and easily off the top of his head when the moment came.

Was this bittersweet Rondo in A minor originally improvised? Certainly, no sketches exist, and the Mozart scholar Simon Keefe leans towards the second possibility – that it was improvised on the spot by Mozart in Prague in January or February 1787 (he'd travelled there to capitalise on the triumph of *The Marriage of Figaro*) or at a concert in Vienna on 28 February that year, and written down shortly afterwards. In any case, Mozart entered it in his personal catalogue on 11 March 1787, and the manuscript score is unusually neat and free of corrections: as if the finished work had been polished down to the last detail by that teeming imagination.

Franz Schubert (1797-1828)
Piano Sonata in A major, D. 959

Allegro – Andantino – Scherzo: Allegro vivace – Rondo: Allegretto

I cannot learn whether he wrote these sonatas on his sick-bed or not; from the music I rather surmise that he did… However it may be, these sonatas seem to me to differ from his others in their greater simplicity of invention… It flows on from page to page, ever more musical and melodious…

The words of Robert Schumann, who discovered Schubert's final three piano sonatas in 1838. We know, as Schumann knew, that by the time Schubert completed the final draft of this A major Sonata in September 1828, he had only weeks to live. But there's little evidence to suggest that Schubert knew that he was sick – in fact, he'd enjoyed a successful year, with a lucrative and widely-discussed concert in March.

And yet, Schumann pinpointed something distinctive about this sonata: the quiet radiance that enfolds its outwardly playful first movement, and the haunted, otherworldly harmonic wandering of the *Andantino,* a movement that one eminent pianist has compared to "a composed hallucination". The *Scherzo* combines flashing lightness with genial directness (in the central trio section), and there are moments of darkness as well as warmth in the unfolding of the final *Rondo.* Whatever Schubert's mental state at the time of composition, this is the music of a composer who saw further and deeper than most.

Mitsuko Uchida

One of the most revered artists of our time, Mitsuko Uchida is renowned as a peerless interpreter of the works of Mozart, Schubert, Schumann and Beethoven, as well for being a devotee of the piano music of Alban Berg, Arnold Schoenberg, Anton Webern, and György Kurtág.

She was Musical America's Artist of the Year in 2022, Music Director of the 2024 Ojai Music Festival, and a Carnegie Hall Perspectives artist from 2022 to 2025. From 2016 to 2025 she was an artistic partner of the Mahler Chamber Orchestra and directed a multi-season touring cycle of Mozart piano concertos from the keyboard. Her latest recording, a recital of Beethoven's last three piano sonatas recorded live at Suntory Hall, was released in the summer of 2026.

Her 2026/7 season sees appearances with the Vienna Philharmonic and Riccardo Muti, including a pair of special concerts in Tokyo for the 40th anniversary of Suntory Hall; recitals in Berlin, Munich, Amsterdam, Vienna, London, Luxembourg, Berkeley, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia and New York; and further concerto performances with the Los Angeles Philharmonic and Esa-Pekka Salonen, the London Philharmonic and Vladimir Jurowski, the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra (also with Vladimir Jurowski), the Berlin Philharmonic with Gustavo Dudamel, and the New York Philharmonic (also with Gustavo Dudamel).

She has also enjoyed close relationships over the years with the Bavarian Radio Symphony, London Symphony Orchestra, the Chicago Symphony, Boston Symphony and The Cleveland Orchestra, with whom she has given over 100 performances at Severance Hall. Conductors with whom she has often performed include Bernard Haitink, Sir Simon Rattle, Riccardo Muti, Esa-Pekka Salonen, Vladimir Jurowski, Andris Nelsons, Gustavo Dudamel, Mariss Jansons and Jakub Hrůša.

Mitsuko Uchida appears regularly in recital in Vienna, Berlin, Paris, Amsterdam, London, New York and Tokyo, and is a frequent visitor to the Salzburg Mozartwoche and Salzburg Festival. She is an exclusive Decca recording artist, and her multi-award-winning discography includes the complete Mozart and Schubert piano sonatas. She is the recipient of two Grammy® Awards – for Mozart concertos with The Cleveland Orchestra, and for a *Lieder* album with Dorothea Röschmann.

Her recording of the Schoenberg Piano Concerto with Pierre Boulez and The Cleveland Orchestra won the Gramophone Award for Best Concerto, and her recording of Beethoven's *Diabelli Variations* won the 2022 Gramophone Piano Award. Other recent releases include *L'extase*, an album of songs by Debussy and Messiaen with Magdalena Kožená, and a recital of Beethoven and Schumann *Lieder* with Mark Padmore.

A founding member of the Borletti-Buitoni Trust and Co-Director of Marlboro Music Festival, Mitsuko Uchida is a recipient of the Golden Mozart Medal from the Salzburg Mozarteum, and the Praemium Imperiale from the Japan Art Association. She has also been awarded the Gold Medal of the Royal Philharmonic Society and the Wigmore Hall Medal, and holds Honorary Degrees from the Universities of Oxford and Cambridge. In 2009 she was made a Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire.