CHAMBERFEST

STEPHEN HOUGH

In a previous season I placed Debussy and Chopin side by side in a sandwich-like programme, wanting to highlight the empathy between them in their love for and understanding of the sound of the piano. In this recital I'm trying for the opposite effect - for contrast, even opposition.

Debussy's triptychs are his piano sonatas, even if their descriptive, entitled movements stand alone as sensual paintings with mystical suggestions. The two German sonatas (Schumann's Fantasie is one in all but name and was conceived as a tribute to Beethoven) are abstract, classical forms. They are also, arguably, the two composer's greatest works for the instrument.

The Schumann begins with a wash of colour under which the right hand declaims its ardent melody but this is not an impressionist gesture. He may dream of spires but he is always conscious of the architecture of musical form, whereas Debussy seems so often to take delight in mere atmosphere for its own sake: incense floating in the air; the surprise of shimmering, sparkling colours.

And Beethoven … in this piece! All sophisticated pianistic veneer is stripped away in one of the most incendiary, elemental works ever written. If there is perfume here it is the scent of gunpowder. Three of the Debussy works on this programme contain the image of the moon in their titles, and perhaps the imaginative soul can discern a lunar glow shining on the lovers in the third movement of Schumann's Fantasie, but Beethoven shakes a mighty fist from Mars.

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