Schubert

Piano Sonata in A major D. 959

Piano Sonata in C major 'Reliquie' D. 840

Jonathan Biss

Jonathan Biss *piano*

Recorded live at Wigmore Hall, London, on 12 May 2009

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GYÖRGY KURTÁG

01	Birthday elegy for Judit *from Játékok*	01.42

FRANZ SCHUBERT

	Piano Sonata in C major D. 840 'Reliquie'	24.44
02	Moderato	14.45
03	Andante	09.47
	Piano Sonata in A major D. 959	39.59
04	Allegro	14.53
05	Andantino	07.24
06	Scherzo: Allegro vivace — Trio: Un poco più lento	05.03
07	Rondo: Allegretto	12.26

GYÖRGY KURTÁG

08	Announcement	00.10
09	Hommage à Schubert *from Játékok*	02.19

Total time: 69.03

DDD

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GYÖRGY KURTÁG (b.1926)

Birthday elegy for Judit – for the second finger of her left hand (from *Játékok*)
Hommage à Schubert (from *Játékok*)

FRANZ SCHUBERT (1797–1828)

Piano Sonata in C major D. 840 'Reliquie'
Piano Sonata in A major D. 959

To be asked not to applaud is one of the rarer requests made of an audience at the start of a concert, but in this characteristically thoughtful and intriguingly planned recital Jonathan Biss had good reasons to ask for silence, as he explained in an illuminating conversation we had subsequently. 'When I was preparing the programme', he says, 'I found that, because Schubert's C major Sonata begins in a mysterious, otherworldly way, applause is not necessarily the best way in to that world.' The C major Sonata D. 840, known as the 'Reliquie' and dated April 1825, was left incomplete and consists of only two movements, but it conveys an extraordinary sense of space and at the same time explores a complex web of harmony. In that regard, the sonata presents both contrasts to and similarities with György Kurtág's *Birthday elegy for Judit* with which the recital begins – contrasts in that the Kurtág is short and epigrammatic, similarities in that the spectrum of harmony is brimful of colour. Biss wanted the two to run together with only the briefest of pauses so that the mood would not be disrupted and would establish an appropriate atmosphere for the Schubert. As he remarks, 'It's very interesting how these kinds of pairings across the centuries work. It's not only that Kurtág responds to Schubert but also that the reverse is true. Somehow Schubert's music is changed and affected, and its chemistry is altered by sharing a platform with Kurtág. I find it very difficult to explain why it is that certain composers go well together. There are these weird alchemies that exist between composers, and Schubert and Kurtág make a very natural pairing. I also think that Kurtág, because he has such deep roots in the past and is the most sensitive of souls, is a natural partner for Schubert.'

The two Kurtág pieces that Biss plays in this recital – *Birthday elegy for Judit* and *Hommage à Schubert* – are both from the Hungarian composer's extensive

compendium of miniatures under the collective title *Játékok* ('Games'), music of great diversity and with a range of personal stimuli but with unifying qualities with which Biss completely identifies. 'What I can never get over with Kurtág's music', he says, 'is the ear for sound. It's unlike anyone else's and it's unbelievably sophisticated. I've never played for him, but I've heard him give master-classes both on his own music and on other people's, and I don't think I can think of another musician – performer or composer – who is as clear in his mind about what he's looking for in terms of sonority. That is one of the great joys for me in playing his music and listening to it. You have these sounds come out of the instrument that you wouldn't really have thought possible.'

Whereas Kurtág writes these pieces pianistically with the instrument's particular properties and sonorities in mind, Schubert has often been accused of writing 'against' the piano in his sonatas, in the sense that they do not always – as the familiar expression goes – lie easily under the hands. 'Certainly', Biss maintains, 'Schubert's music is not idiomatically written for the piano, and I don't think he ever particularly thought about the physical pleasure of playing the instrument when he composed. In the pieces by Kurtág – which are, after all, called 'Games' – he did have the idea of a kind of joy and physical experimentation with the instrument. With Schubert, I come back to that word otherworldly – and the instrument is the worldliest of considerations. I don't want to say he was above it, but maybe he was beyond it. There are certain composers whose music is difficult but where the writing is designed in such a way that the difficulty is showcased and the music sounds more brilliant than it is. Schubert is the exact opposite, and there are problems of making it sound well.'

Allied to the knotty problems of articulation in Schubert, there is also, I suggest to Jonathan Biss during our chat, the question of mastering, defining and communicating his broad structures, whether in the unfinished 'Reliquie' Sonata or in the full four-movement A major Sonata D. 959, composed in Schubert's last year, 1828. 'You've probably hit on the greatest difficulty of playing Schubert and playing it well', Biss responds. 'If you play it with too much rigour – or I'd say if you play it in a way that is unrelenting – then you miss so much of what is unique about his music. But at the same time these sonatas in particular are large edifices which take some holding together.' Biss cites specific examples of the way in which

Schubert can, as it were, let his mind drift, but in a constructive way. 'The first is in the exposition of the first movement of the C major Sonata, which has three themes, all so similar that they seem like explorations of the same one. The effect on the listener is that of the theme shifting is shape, taking a new form and constantly redefining itself. Another is in the middle of the slow movement of the A major, which, it seems to me, is the most powerful musical expression of a nightmare ever composed. The progression of ideas definitely makes a kind of sense, but it is certainly not linear. So this is another form of wandering – the willingness to give his imagination free rein.' There is a further instance of Schubert's unorthodoxy in the A major Sonata's first movement, where the entire development section, rather than drawing its material from the main themes, is based on a tiny figure that appears at the end of the exposition.

Biss's solution to these dilemmas and to capturing Schubert's highly individual style and world of sound is to 'address each work as a whole, with the idea that the piece unfolds in long paragraphs which are always headed to a specific point, but I also give attention to the small moments in the piece – seemingly digressions – which are so often magical. And while at first it sometimes seems that these small moments exist outside the structure, and even interfere with it, what I often come to realize is that they are central to the way the piece holds together. Because the proportions of these movements are so huge (the first movements of both sonatas, or the last movement of the A major, for example), there is room in them for moments in which we feel lost, or far afield, and these moments are part of what makes the climaxes feel so justified.'

So, as we listen to these two sublime, dramatic Schubert sonatas with their complementary Kurtág, we can do no better than to go with the flow and remember that, as Jonathan Biss says, 'Schubert's imagination is so unique that you never know what might engage him'.

Notes by Geoffrey Norris © 2009

JONATHAN BISS

Jonathan Biss has been described widely as a pianist who 'has the rare ability to make you sit up and take notice as if you were hearing a well-known piece for the very first time.' His four recordings for EMI Classics have ensured a wide appreciative audience and have earned him plaudits in the North American and European press. Following his debut recording of Beethoven and Schumann piano works, Biss was promoted to the main label at EMI. His first recording on contract of Schumann's *Fantasie*, *Arabesque* and *Kreisleriana* was awarded the *Diapason d'Or de l'Année*, in the 'Jeune Talent' category in November 2007 and his second recording of Beethoven sonatas, released in autumn 2007, received the Edison Award for Best Solo Recital Recording in June 2008.

Biss's most recent recording of Mozart's Piano Concertos Nos 21 and 22 with Orpheus Chamber Orchestra, with Biss both playing and directing the orchestra, has also received widespread critical acclaim. *BBC Music Magazine* awarded the disc 5 stars and wrote: 'These are altogether exceptionally fine accounts, with well-judged tempos … allied with playing that is unfailingly but subtly expressive. No matter how many versions of these great works you already have, you should definitely consider making room in your collection for this one.'

Biss is fast establishing himself as an artist at the very highest level and appears with the leading Orchestras in the USA including the Boston Symphony, Cincinnati Symphony, Chicago Symphony Los Angeles Philharmonic, Metropolitan Opera, National Symphony, New York Philharmonic, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh Symphony and San Francisco Symphony Orchestras. Similarly in Europe, he is invited by such orchestras as the London Philharmonic Orchestra, NDR Hamburg, Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra, Rotterdam Philharmonic Orchestra, Budapest Festival Orchestra, Leipzig Gewandhaus and the Deutsches Symphony Orchestra Berlin.

Jonathan Biss is also a committed recitalist and chamber musician. He represents the third generation in a family of musicians; his grandmother Raya Garbousova (for whom Samuel Barber composed his Cello Concerto), and together with his mother Miriam Fried, he has appeared in many of the principal chamber music societies in the USA. He is a regular visitor, too, to the recital halls and festivals in Europe, returning regularly to play in London's Wigmore Hall, Paris, Brussels and Salzburg (both in the 'Kammermusik in Mozarteum' series and in the Mozartwoche with the Kremerata Baltica).

Jonathan Biss has been recognized with numerous awards, including the 2002 Gilmore Young Artist Award, Lincoln Center's Martin E. Segal Award, an Avery Fisher Career Grant, the Andrew Wolf Memorial Chamber Music Award, and the 2003 Borletti-Buitoni Trust. He was the first American chosen to participate in the BBC's New Generation Artist programme, and in 2005 he received the Leonard Bernstein Award presented to him at the Schleswig-Holstein Festival in Germany.

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