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Joanna MacGregor has appeared as soloist with many of the world's leading orchestras, and under the direction of eminent conductors such as Pierre Boulez, Sir Simon Rattle and Michael Tilson Thomas.

She has premièred landmark compositions ranging from Sir Harrison Birtwistle and Django Bates to John Adams and James MacMillan.

One of the world's most innovative musicians, she is committed to expressing musical connections through increasingly diverse and original programming.

During the Summer, she made her debut at the Mostly Mozart Festival in Lincoln Center, New York, while also appearing twice in the BBC Proms. series.

In the latter, she performed the Piano Concerto by British composer Hugh Wood, and Messiaen's Turangallila.

Last September, she curated and performed in a series of orchestral concerts at the Philharmonie in Luxembourg titled 'Aventure+'.

Earlier this year, she was made an Officer of the Order of the British Empire (OBE) in the Queen's Jubilee Honours.

She is currently Head of Piano at The Royal Academy of Music.

Season resumes in January with great works for piano

Virtuoso musician Joanna MacGregor previews next month's recital in which she performs works by Beethoven, Brahms and Bartók

Beethoven's thirty-two sonatas are a pianistic Everest. They are virtuoso, intellectually stimulating, and still surprising – sometimes even shocking.

They tell us not just about his development as a composer, but are inextricably bound up with him as a person: both as a visceral performer onstage, and as a complex, passionate and contradictory human being offstage.

When studying Beethoven, there's something rather obvious I always tell my students: look very closely at the score ... and keep looking! Beethoven wrote rather dangerous dynamics – sudden *sforzandos*, tender *pianissimos*, and *crescendos* or *decrescendos* where you least expect them.

His piano writing weaves orchestral textures, pushing at the boundaries of pianism; there's a whiff of brilliant improvisation, fantastic rhythm, and a love of silence to balance the very physical demands. We have to try and play like Beethoven, or very much in the spirit of Beethoven. Like Shakespeare, or Mozart, or Picasso, he not only knew what it meant to be human, but also dared to express it vividly.

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'*Pastorale*', of course, is an erroneous title awarded by Beethoven's first publisher to his Op 28 (1802), and it doesn't do justice to this richly subtle and lovely sonata. Unusually the first movement is in 3/4, and it starts with a dominant 7th harmony implying the 'wrong' key of G major – a common strategy with Beethoven.

What unfolds is a calm, almost philosophical, first movement, propelled by

a 'heartbeat' rhythm in the left hand. There is no traditional slow movement, but an arresting D minor funeral march, slightly austere, and very noble; it has a lighter, Schubert-like middle section before returning to the (hero's?) funeral music.

The Scherzo is brilliant thunder-and-lightening – a witty piece of radical composition using the building blocks of octaves, sixths and thirds – and the final Rondo built on a wonderfully cool bass line in a swinging 6/8.

Beethoven's listeners would have identified the left hand as a bagpipe drone, and as the musicologist Charles Rosen reminds us, '*the yodel forms in the right hand gives us peasants in the Tyrolean landscape.*' Coming from a slightly different era, to my ears this movement is irresistibly jazzy.

1926 was a great piano year for Bartók: he composed the First Piano Concerto, Nine Little Pieces, the Piano Sonata, as well as this extraordinary *Out of Doors Suite*.

Everything he wrote was deeply suffused with folk melody and rhythm,

not just from his native Hungary, but from Rumania and Bulgaria too; his enormous, six-volume teaching compendium, *Mikrokosmos*, finishes with six sizzling dances in Bulgarian rhythm.

Bartók was a fine pianist who curiously chose to play these pieces separately, rather than as a suite; he particularly enjoyed performing the fourth move-

London Mozart Players deliver something for everyone

Marlborough College, Memorial Hall
Sunday 4 November 2012

It is always thrilling when an orchestra with such fine credentials and history comes to the Marlborough Concert Series. The London Mozart Players are known for their detail and refinement as well as the high quality of their individual players.

The programme opened with Barber's *Adagio for Strings*. Coming soon after the devastation of Hurricane Sandy, this seemed a timely and poignant performance. Philip Dukes, in his role as conductor, produced an exquisitely paced, haunting and spacious performance.

Songs from the *Threepenny Opera* followed. The young singer, Ashley Riches, showed remarkably mature characterisation, with fantastic diction and use of the German language. His interpretation was spot on!

The instrumentation allowed the orchestra to explore some transparent textures but also driving jazz rhythms, both requiring immaculate ensemble playing.

The orchestra was boosted by some quite magnificent jazz piano playing by Jon Harpin, especially in the more exploratory *Mack the Knife*.

Robert Powell narrated in between each movement allowing us to follow the plot and enjoy translations of the texts. A great addition, to bring the music to life.

Aaron Copland's *Ching-a-ring Chaw* (from his *Old American Songbook*) closed the American first half with plenty of confidence and drive. A text full of partying and fun, passed down through the generations in the Minstrel tradition.

The second half contrasted beautifully with the mournful, pastoral feel of Dvorak's *Serenade for Strings*. Philip and the London Mozart Players rose to the challenge of the ever-changing colours of this great work. Sometimes requiring a great architectural view, sometimes charming and often tender and very personal, the performance took the audience on a journey full of yearning and desire.

Clare Toomer
Deputy Head of Music

Tchaikovsky [from Page 1, Column 3]

ment, which delicately etches the night's mysterious flutterings, rustlings and hootings. (The serene chorale passages predict the glorious slow movement of his late Third Piano Concerto, written nearly twenty years later). Other movements are quirkily eerie too: *Barcarolla*, with its watery dipping and weaving, and *Musettes*, with tone clusters and bagpipe chords, have snatches of tunes and lopsided rhythms, creating very specific atmospheres.

The first and last movements are bracingly percussive. It's now thought *With Drums and Pipes* is based on the children's folksong *Gólya, gólya, gilice*, while *The Chase*, with its fanatically galloping left hand and pounding octaves and ninths, brings the suite to a thrilling, breathless close.

Surveying Brahms' considerable output for piano, it's worth noting he wrote a great deal at the beginning of his career – three monumental sonatas, and big sets of variations on themes by Schumann, Handel and Paganini – and then a great deal at the end: cycles of 'fantasies', 'intermezzos' or simply 'piano pieces', which are tightly, motivically linked.

Unlike his orchestral, concerto or chamber music, which adhered to larger forms, he realised that his instrument – the piano – yielded a far more expressive range if handled with a greater freedom and intimacy.

The **Op 117 intermezzi** were published in 1892-3, as part of twenty late pieces (Op 116-119). The cliché of Brahms as a serenely melancholic composer in old age is challenged by many of these piano works, some of which are immensely powerful, and even angry.

'... in these pieces, I finally feel musical life re-entering my soul, and I play once again with genuine abandon.' Clara Schumann

The Op 117 set, however, is luminously emotional, introspective, and even dark. Clara Schumann, to whom Brahms always sent his new piano pieces prior to publication (and should perhaps be

considered their secret dedicatee) wrote in her diary that the *intermezzi* were 'a true wellspring of pleasure, everything – poetry, passion, rapture, intimacy ... in these pieces, I finally feel musical life re-entering my soul, and I play once again with genuine abandon.'

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*'Sleep softly my child
Oh gently sleep!
It grieves me so
To see thee weep.'*

Brahms studied and collected folk-song throughout his life. This song is found in the philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder's *Stimmen der Völke in ihren Liedern* (Voices of the Peoples in their Songs, 1773), a volume never off his composing desk.

The Waldstein sonata (1803-4), one of Beethoven's most amazing and audacious works, is dedicated to Count Ferdinand von Waldstein.

Driving, relentless energy propels it forward; an undertow of lyricism in the second subject is quickly subsumed by vitality, energy and aggression. The bridge leading from the development section back to the recap – a thundering growling, low in the left hand – is still one of the most amazing passages in classical piano music, opening the doors for all kinds of transcendental writing in the 20th century.

The **Waldstein** had a longer slow movement, but Beethoven wisely replaced it with a very spare, thoughtful

'introduction' to the last movement.

Both the *Adagio* and the final *Rondo* have spiritual, abstract qualities (aided by impressionistic pedalling effects), notwithstanding, the epic episodes and hair-raising, *prestissimo* coda.

Many pianists first learn the *Waldstein*, as I did, in their late teens or early 20s. It teaches you to build stamina and grit; it instructs you to be fearless in the teeth of overwhelming demands; and above all it commands you to attempt to be as heroically uncompromising as Beethoven. Never before was the piano made to sound as powerful, urgent and triumphant as it does here, in one of the greatest sonatas ever written. ■

Season 71 ~ still to come

Joanna MacGregor 13-Jan-13

Piano works by Beethoven, Bartók and Brahms

Southbank Sinfonia 03-Feb-13

Tchaikovsky – Capriccio Italien and Symphony no. 5 plus Mozart Clarinet Concerto (soloist: Julian Bliss).