

Hitchin Festival lunchtime concerts

20th July 2023

St Mary's Church, Hitchin

Recital of music by Chopin

Clifton Hughes, piano

Frederic Chopin was born near Warsaw, Poland in 1810, of half French and half Polish parentage, and he died in Paris in 1849. He was a poet of the piano – a lyric poet, for the most part, but sometimes a dramatic and even an epic poet. He got much of his knack of making the piano sing from his friend Bellini, the Italian composer famed for his graceful vocal writing, but he modelled his nocturnes on those of the Irishman John Field.

He showed early genius as a pianist, yet as a composer was largely self-taught, since his teacher of composition wisely recognised that to him the piano was a natural means of self-expression, so did not force him into a conventional mould.

He had a social instinct, loved company, and was much fêted for his abilities as a composer and performer. He was driven to England by the French revolution, and it was from a tour of Manchester, Glasgow, Edinburgh and London in 1848 that his final illness drove him back to Paris, where he died at the age of just 39. At his funeral, earth that had been given to him in a silver box when he had left Poland nearly twenty years before, was poured onto his coffin.

Chopin died before the iron frame piano was invented: what he played and wrote for was almost a harpsichord with hammers, so he would have anticipated a lighter sound, less sustaining power, and a different style of playing from what would come to be expected by later romantic composers such as Liszt.

PROGRAMME

Waltz in Ab. Op 34 no. 1 **(aged 25)**

One of the “Valses Brillantes” and amongst the longest of Chopin’s waltzes. Starting with a call to attention, it alternates dreamy, rocking passages with more dramatic runs and arpeggios. The Coda gets faster and builds up the tension then seems almost to fade away before the piece ends with two dramatic chords.

Polonaise in A: “Heroic”. Op 40 no. 1 **(28)**

For Chopin, the Polonaise provided an outlet for the pent-up national feeling of an exile from an oppressed fatherland. It is not so much a dance as a procession, full of gravity and courtly etiquette. It’s a bold and optimistic piece, much of it to be played *ff* or *fff*, but having a strangely anticlimactic ending.

Nocturne no. 18 in E Op 62 no. 2 **(35)**

Many people think of Chopin as the writer of happy tunes, such as many of the waltzes, but this nocturne has strange, angular writing and sliding harmonies, which must have raised one or two eyebrows amongst Chopin’s contemporaries. The imitation in the lower parts of the stormy middle section highlights Chopin’s admiration for the works of Bach.

Fantasia-Impromptu in C#. Op 66 **(24)**

Structurally the converse of the Nocturne, with dramatic outer passages surrounding a central lyrical section, whose tune was used in 1917 as a popular song: “I’m always chasing rainbows”. The Coda recalls this theme in the bass, and the piece ends quietly.

Clifton fell in love with this sonata from hearing it on his parents' 78rpm discs, in a performance by Percy Grainger, a notable pianist, but whom many people primarily know from his arrangements of the folk tune *Country Gardens!*

Allegro Mæstoso

The first movement is in fairly conventional form, with a chordal first theme and contrasting lyrical second subject, a chromatic development section and a recapitulation leading to a brief flourish at the end.

Scherzo – Molto Vivace

If *Scherzo* means *joke*, this is being played on pianists who haven't been practising their arpeggios! The restrained central section gives the player just time to check that all his fingers are still there before the fast section returns.

Largo

The extended melody at the beginning of the movement returns at the end with a rising base reminiscent of a *barcarolle* (Gondola song), and the gently rolling arpeggios in the central section are also redolent of waves lapping.

Finale – Presto non tanto

This movement is a rondo, with a theme composed of short rising motifs, which is presented several times, each time with a more complex accompaniment, and separated by brilliant scale passages. *Non tanto* means *not too much*, but it is difficult not to get faster and faster as the excitement builds up! The sonata ends with a *bravura* final flourish.

Clifton Hughes started learning the piano three months before his third birthday, playing at the Wigmore Hall in London at 3 and featuring in a cinema newsreel item: "Wonder Boy Pianist" when he was 4. He passed his Grade 8 examination at 11, broadcast on the BBC Home Service(Radio 4) at 13 (the Fantasie-Impromptu that he's playing today) and was awarded his ARCM performers' diploma at 16. When he was 14 he won a scholarship to study in London with the Russian concert pianist Julius Isserlis, grandfather of the cellist Steven Isserlis.

Clifton went to Christ Church, Oxford to read music, but emerged with a degree in Psychology, Philosophy and Physiology, which led him into the computing career that brought him to Hitchin exactly 50 years ago, in 1973.

Amazingly he didn't give his first solo piano recital until 1988, at Christchurch, Hitchin, and all but the first of today's pieces are taken from that recital, which is the event that inspired him to learn the Chopin Sonata. At her request he gave his 8 year old daughter Clare free rein to do a note for the programme, promising with some trepidation that he would print whatever she wrote. Here it is, verbatim:

Clare's version, aged 8...

Clifton Hughes loves playing the piano. He did his grade one when he was not very old! He loves tickling his children. He likes cuddling our cat called Tabitha. He loves having his back rubbed by any one who volunteers. He goes to work at Logica at Cambridge and sometimes brings home a computer to do some home work on. He always has to lay the table unless someone else volunteers. He goes to a choir called the Orpheus choir which is held at Benslow on Tuesdays at 8.00pm. He eats muesli on sundays and other cerials on Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays. When he was a boy he went to Green street school then he went to crownhouse school and then he went to Highwicomb Gramour school. Clifton Hughes was marred in west Reding Methodist church to a very pleasant women who was called Janet Brock but who is now called Janet Hughes. Clifton sleeps in the same bed as Janet. He doesnt like doing the gardening much. Somtimes he tackses the rest of the family with him to other contrys when he has to go for work. When he goes to a meeting in London he brings home food for us, such as crisps, chicken drum sticks, cakes, peanuts and other fancy things.