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## Dublin International Piano Competition

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CLASSICAL

# Mood music

Sweet and romantic or stormy and terrifying, late, great piano works thrill *Paul Driver*

One may well think All About Piano, the French Institute's fifth annual celebration of the instrument, sounds a keynote for London music in general. There's plenty of piano about, for sure; and, before attending the two main recitals of this multifaceted Kensington weekend, I had under my reviewer's belt the excellent Wigmore Hall debut of the young French pianist Nathalia Milstein; the appearance there of the devastating two-piano duo of Leif Ove Andsnes and Marc-André Hamelin; and, at Milton Court, the second of three programmes in which Jonathan Biss intriguingly explores the idea of composers' "late style", an undertaking in which he does not confine himself to piano music, or even late works.

As he explained to us, including pieces from Volume VII of Jatekok (Games), by the still active (at 91!) György Kurtág, begs the question of whether they'll soon be seen as relatively middle-period productions, though playing the andante from the early F minor sonata by Brahms was a way of illuminating his farewell Op 119 Klavierstücke: both begin with a distinctive chain of falling thirds. Seguing into Op 119, Biss followed it with Op 118, and deeply affecting they were.

His opener, Schumann's Gesänge der Frühe, Op 133, was aptly chosen, not only because these five uncanny pieces are nearly Schumann's last piano composition, but because they seem an intricate response precisely to the music of the young Brahms. The strange hybrid of Chopin's Polonaise-Fantaisie, Op 61, close to his last work, and arguably his greatest, was beautifully handled. For his third concert (May 2), a study of late Schubert, Biss will bring on the tenor Mark Padmore for Schwanengesang.

The Andsnes-Hamelin duo is a keyboard partnership of titans. We know their separate brilliancies – Hamelin much given to the extreme virtuoso repertoire, Andsnes a devoted classicist – and at Wigmore Hall they combined with a sort of chemical finality. It was explosive indeed, their concluding rendition of The Rite of Spring in what I assumed was Stravinsky's piano-duo version redistributed over two instruments; and the encores of his Tango and

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Circus Polka were a delightful overplus. Earlier they'd given absorbing accounts of his Concerto for Two Pianos, along with Debussy's late, severe, indeed war-torn, yet enchanting masterpiece En blanc et noir (1915).

Late style in Schubert was ponderable alike in Milstein's recital and the one Barry Douglas gave at the French Institute, and it was the C minor Sonata, D958, in both cases. Milstein's appearance was part of her prize for victory at the 2015 Dublin International Piano Competition, and she revealed herself as the possessor of a superb technique and a true artist. Her Haydn F minor Variations and Rachmaninov Études-tableaux (Op 39) were highly compelling, and for the Schubert she found a lyrical-dramatic power at its most memorable in the sublime adagio.

To go beyond or behind sublimity, and take the measure of what Alfred Brendel, quoted in the Wigmore programme note, called this work's neuroticism, there was Douglas. His relentlessly driven, masterly yet stormily constructed account touched on the terrifying. In the rather deadening acoustics of the darkened Ciné Lumière, to an appreciative but not large audience, he offered the most movingly emotional pianism.

Why do we see so little of him in London, and in its main spaces? This was an unforgettable, if short, programme, romantically filled out with October and June from Tchaikovsky's The Seasons, Brahms's Op 117 intermezzi and – dispatched in a way that laid bare their outrageous difficulty even as he transcended it – Brahms's Paganini Variations, Book 1.

Not only Douglas made such an impression in this hall. In the festival's opening concert, Melvyn Tan showed himself to be another of our great but relatively neglected figures. Probably no one today conveys so comprehensive an insight into Liszt's B Minor Sonata. It was like hearing vivid performances of the past. His Beethoven – the Op 109 sonata – had unanswerable authority, and in between he played a work specially written for him: Jonathan Dove's étude-like Catching Fire (2016), a minimalism-style repetitive "workout", to use Tan's word. His encore, Liszt's concert étude Un sospiro, was captivating. 🍷